

# Food for Thought: Multiculturalism, Femininity and Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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## Introduction

Literary and critical theory has recently occupied themselves with the politics of location and there is an increased consciousness about the identities and cultures being constructed through culinary categories. Women are the sites where the presence of one culture in thought and world of the other are negotiated. Home has increasingly become a contested site with the political making inroads into the guarded sanctity of this personal space. The process is best observed the world over in the growing community of diaspora with geographical location not only making them review their perception of home and homeland, but also making it imperative for them to view the alternative as at par with the native. (Jain107). Divakaruni's novels deal with the quest for identity – individual and communal – and an emotional completion achieved by their fusing. Another feature of her novels is that she weaves a realism, divinity and mysticism into the commonplace reality of her female characters. Her experience of immigrating “caused Divakaruni to re-evaluate her homeland's culture, and specifically its treatment of women” (Sofky 1997). She weaves elements of the Indo-American experience and magic realism, combining the realistic and the cosmic. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Nayantara, the pirate queen, also called Sarpakanya, the old-one's apprentice, becomes Tilottama in a journey which leaves her as Maya in the end. It is unknown what was or is the original nature of her spirit. She sails into amazing areas of experiences where transformations require more than time, distance, and desire. Women like Tilo, make diasporic journeys, and identify points in their search for identity. Divakaruni's novels are thus an adventurous expedition into the complex minds of women.

This paper is a reading of multiculturalism in Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*. The protagonist Tilottama (popularly called Tilo), owns a spice shop in California, USA. She supplies *masalas* (spices) for various Indian recipes, and possesses an intuitive ability to delve deep into the personal life of her customers and prescribe various spices as remedies for their troubles. Tilo prescribes a range of *masalas* to evoke the desired emotional responses from her customers and others, which may be looked at from the standpoint of trying to evoke “Indianness” in them and in the narrative. Though she has a mystic past, she owns a spice shop in California, much like other Indian immigrants. She suggests spices as remedies to problems, playing the role of a typical Indian agony-aunt for the immigrant community and much of an alternative-medicine professional who can read the physical and psychological problems of others and understands the importance of Indian *masalas*. Suggesting therapeutic spices becomes a search for herself, as the novel gradually ventures into the surreal world of Tilo in whose hands ‘the spices come to life’. Espin has opined that “although the contradictions involved in immigrant experiences (specifically for women) can lead to emotional or other problems, most immigrant women “manage to survive and emerge from the emotional struggle” (Espín 10).

The opening lines of the novel read: "I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone... But the spices are my love" (3). Tilo is "a" mistress of spices. So, there ought to be other mistresses too. Tilo uses the word "spices" in its plural form, considering them as a category while simultaneously belonging to each and every member of the family of spices. Interestingly 'Mistress' and love are juxtaposed here as she is in love with the spices but is also their mistress. Later she reveals: "If you stand in the center of this room and turn slowly around, you will be looking at every Indian spice that ever was – even the lost ones – gathered here upon the shelves of my store" (3). 'Store' is another important word because it is a metaphor of trade. It is a word not associated with love, but certainly with a 'mistress.' In a society that perceives adult women as sexual rivals, especially wives and mistresses, and in one that sees a mistress's function as disruptive rather than constructive, the lines appear out of place. So the word 'mistress' here can verily be modelled on the ancient Indian concept of the courtesan. Courtesans were highly talented gifted women, who in the past were seen as consorting with kings and royal members. They enjoyed fabulously rich life styles, being the custodians of culture and fashion. They enjoyed respect in the society as well. At the beginning of the narrative Tilo identifies herself with a community and not an individual. She does not give away her name. This reflects an unequal relationship of power and a partial exclusion at the socio-cultural level in the narrative. A stable identity is derived from localisation, of having a name, a definition, a home, a neighbourhood, a particular land. Tilo forges a complex relationship with her 'self' by owning a store, and becoming a mistress. She is the rooted *and* the rootless at the same time, in a de-territorialized community-culture, a pulsating signifier of her existence: her spice "shop" which lacks a consistent geographic space.

### **The multicultural element in the novel**

The novel gradually unfolds different characters in front of us. Tilo through her intuitive visions sees what the characters desire in their lives and uses therapeutic *masalas* in each individual's life without the person realizing it. Most of the problems Tilo encounters seem to emerge from the domain of the family. Indians suffer from a dependency complex (Kakar 89) with sometimes the bonds of the family being so strong that even the loosening of that bond, not to mention an actual break, may be a source of psychic stress and heightened inner conflict (Kakar 91) as is evident through the characters in the novel. This, however, makes the narrative more "Indian" even though situated in America. It is out of this Indianness that Tilo feels for Ahuja's wife:

Child-longing, deepest desire, deeper than for wealth or lover or even death [...] handful of turmeric wrapped in old newspaper with the words of healing whispered into it, slipped into your grocery sack when you are not looking. The string tied into a triple flower knot, and inside, satin-soft turmeric the same color as the bruise seeping onto your cheek from under the dark edge of your glasses (16).

Tilo's heart also yearns in pain for Ratna, another immigrant woman who suffers routinized torture at her in-laws. Tilo feels:

Fenugreek, I asked your help when Ratna came to me burning from the poison in her womb, legacy of her husband's roving. And when Ramaswamy turned from his wife of twenty years to a newer pleasure (47).

Personally, her selection of the *masalas* as a means to generate the right kind of emotions in people is reflective of gender oriented undercurrent especially when she wittingly works within the domestic aesthetic praxis. At the level of the socio-politic the spice-shop becomes a diasporic space where identities are repeatedly constructed and deconstructed by the changeability of the one experiencing diaspora as a constant psychological flux between the host land and the homeland; between the land of domicile and the consequent re-adjustment of one's relations with the place one calls home by habit. This psychological phenomenon of repeated negotiation of identity makes the spice shop in the narrative and by extension, the diaspora an extremely volatile space. The store transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people (Bhabha 143). Supriya Chaudhuri and Rimi B. Chatterjee state that:

The physical realities of migration and resettlement produce two types of psychic accommodation. One, which may be labelled as nostalgia, where the land left behind is equated with the food that can never be recovered. In the other – which may be labelled as cosmopolitanism – a dazzling array of global cuisines greets the gourmet traveller in the great cities of the world (xiv).

For traumatised people displaced historically, those who have lost touch with the material inheritance of a thriving and happy past, food becomes a form of preserving the roots. Feasting and plenitude become part of a cumulative narrative of a golden past, a story which compensates to a small extent for the loss of ancestral roots, property, and social and economic security (Chakravarty 126). Crumpacker opines:

Food memories, most of them forgotten or blurred, are a mystical heritage, long since digested and gone, but still lingering in our souls. Personal food, ethnic food, family food, the food of the culture in which we grew up, the food our mothers gave us – this is the eating that determines who we are, what we love, what disgusts us, and makes us feel better (xii).

In the novel *Tilo*, through the spices endeavours to play the role of an agony aunt for the Indian community and often resorts to a tradition of collective memories and ideologies to assist the people in the present. Parekh comments that the tendency to equate multiculturalism with racial minorities and as promulgating a subtle racism is missing the point. According to him the concept is a far more encompassing one. He makes the argument that multiculturalism is “not about minorities” but “is about the proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities”, e.g., “the principles of justice” must not come from only one or some of the cultures but must be arrived at “through an open and equal dialogue between them” (Parekh 13). The spices in the novel achieve exactly this and that is our area of exploration. The everyday lives of the female characters – the relationships they forge, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, all of these underline the syncretic and vibrant nature of the Indian culture and the complexities that are born with an American encounter.

### **Complex problems, combination of spices**

Ahuja's wife and Ratna face problems from their husbands. Geeta on the other hand has to confront the wrath of her own family for choosing the life of an apparent independence, where a woman can choose her own spouse and enjoy a live-in relationship. Slowly, the problems start getting more complex, and *Tilo* has to take

recourse to an amalgamation of spices to heal rather than relying on individual spices as she had done previously. When she confronts Jagjit's case; Jagjit, a young Sikh boy who is constantly threatened by racist white boys; Tilo feels: "And here is cinnamon, hollow dark bone that I tuck unseen in your turban just before you go. Cinnamon friend-maker, cinnamon dalchini warm-brown as skin, to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it's not so bad... And for the others with the pebble-hard eyes, cinnamon destroyer of enemies to give you strength, strength which grows in your legs and arms and mostly mouth till one day you shout no loud enough to make them, shocked, stop" (p. 39). Cinnamon is thus considered the spice which will increase acceptance and will help a boy like Jagjit to be assertive. The chapter "cinnamon" has an elaborate reference to *Lanka* or the red chilli which hints at the turn of events to come. Thus, in the chapter Tilo weaves a paean to *Lanka*. The solution to Jagjit's problem through the use of *masalas* is binary in nature: one developing acceptance (through cinnamon) and another, retaliating, pushing back (through the red chilli). The direction of the narrative is indicated by the choice of spices:

Let me tell you about chilies... The dry chili, lanka, is the most potent of spices. In its blister-red skin, the most beautiful. Its other name is danger... I lanka was born of Agni, god of fire. I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this Wand earth... Chili, spice of red Thursday, which is the day of reckoning. Day which invites us to pick up the sack of our existence and shake it inside out. Day of suicide, day of murder. Lanka, lanka. Sometimes I roll your name over my tongue. Taste the enticing sting of it. So many times the Old One has warned us against your powers. "Daughters, use it only as the last remedy. It is easy to start a flame. But to put it out?" That is why I hold on, lanka, whose name the ten-headed Ravana took for his enchanted kingdom. City of a million jewels turned at the last to ash. Though more than once I have been tempted... In the inner room of the store, on the topmost shelf, sits a sealed jar filled with red fingers of light. One day I will open it and the chilies will flicker to the ground. And blaze. Lanka, fire-child, cleanser of evil. For when there is no other way (37).

While stating the competency required to handle the spices, Tilo says that the *lanka* grows at the epicentre of the magical spice island, where she was an apprentice receiving instruction from the Old Mother, within the bosom of a sleeping volcano. Till the third level of apprenticeship, none is allowed to work the chilli. Tilo also remarks that the presence of *lanka* is like an ever looming danger as any day it may provoke one to take it out of the jar and use it. *Lanka* thus, becomes symbolic of the violence, inner tensions dormant in all of us. To ward off the tension, Tilo moves through the history of the spice. According to Rogobete, tracing and interpreting a food's story is also about mapping a cultural geography; a food is both a product of particular times and places, and part of the process of globalisation. Like "any good biography or travelogue," a food's story reveals a "much bigger story." Rogobete, (2007). Tilo narrates the rich heritage of chilli, its illustrious past. Simultaneously, she tries to explain the present-day use of the spice and how, in the future, it can be of help to the community. She thus acts as a historian, accommodating novelty, while retaining some continuity with the aesthetic as understood in the past (Dickie 55-56). Traditions often have to be reclaimed and reinvigorated as part of modernity to establish and

identify their continuity. At the same time, the legitimacy of modernity depends on how it conforms to tradition (Ramakrishnan 6). Tilo's grand history of the chilli and its importance in today's scenario supports the argument. The paean to *Lanka* reflects on the fact that historically, there has been no rupture completely between the traditional and the modern in Indian thought. Collective hopes, desires, fears and beliefs have been passed down from the past and still continue to influence the thought processes of Indian communities in a manner that is almost lost in the West. Mundane objects like spices are exotic in history and are yet capable of leaping out any moment from history into the consciousness of the present. Soon after the paean to the red chilli, comes up Haroun's case. Haroun, a Kashmiri Muslim, has migrated to Oakland, California and works there as a cab driver. He gets into an argument with local white folk and is mercilessly beaten. To quote Homi Bhaba, "the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting" (44). Tilo prescribes *Kalojire* for Haroun and all other Indian brothers in trouble, but everything becomes a failure. As Mendoza and Shankar (2003) point out, "assimilation remains an option; even a recommendation" as many contemporary immigrant and native American writings present a suspicious attitude towards Americanization. They challenge the myth of the American Dream, exposing racism affecting the immigrants and the challenges they face in their quest to "make it."

Such challenges are not always resolved through tolerance and a defensive approach. Tilo casts a spell for the wellness of every Indian in America: "I will split once again tonight *kalojire* seeds for all who have suffered from America. For all of them and especially Haroun, who is hurting inside me, whose name each time I say it pulls my chest in two. I will lock the door and stay up all night to do it, through dimness the knife rising and falling steady and silver as holy breath. So that when he comes tomorrow evening (for tomorrow is Tuesday) I can hand him the packet and say, "Allah ho Akbar, may you be safe, in this life and always... I will whisper into air purifying prayers for the maimed, for each lost limb, each crushed tongue. Each silenced heart. (173)

She soon realizes that *kalojire* cannot stall violence. "Kalojire wasted once again, what apology can I offer you? I can say only what you know already. It is too late for you to work your power. One spice alone is left that can help Haroun now". (231) Incidentally she associates *kalojire* with *Ketu* (a dark planet) in the system of *navagrahas* (spices are also associated with planets in the novel). *Rahu* and *Ketu* are considered not as planets proper but as nodes of the moon and thus important. Interestingly the spice associated with Haroun is the spice of the planet *Ketu*. In Indian astrology, there are two dark planets. A healer should have a sound knowledge of astrological fields; the workings of the planets in our lives. Foucault described discourse as an entity of sequences of signs in that they are announcements. This includes, language, talk, visual representations, and cultural beliefs and norms (Ussher 232). Discourse refers to a set of shared belief-systems and practices, which are used in everyday life in order to construct meaning and interpretation about reality. Discourses are constitutive of subjectivity, and that the meanings of objects and events are inseparable from the way in which they are constituted within particular discourses (Ussher 238). As the mistress of spices, Tilo, somehow manages to choose a marginal spice ruled by a shadowy

planet for the Kashmiri Muslim immigrant Haroun. Two things are important here, first, *Ketu* though a *navagraha*, is a marginal planet and is the last one in the schema of planets. Second, the planet is often associated with negative tendencies and apprehensions all of which find reflection in Haroun's case. As Haroun repeatedly fails, Tilo suffers from diffidence in her own looks and physical being. Here the socio-political gets interwoven into the personal. Into her narrative comes a dangerously handsome American man and Tilo soon experiences the agonies of losing her heart to him. It is not as if Tilo is unaware of her precarious situation. She even mentions at a point of time:

A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves" (69). I scrub my one American outfit in the sink with a bar of chemical-smelling Sunlight soap. Night passes, each minute dripping like wash water from the hung-up clothes. Neem dust dries and pulls at my skin. My scalp itches. Spikes of ritha hair poke at my face... Yet when I have bathed and dried myself, I feel on my face the same crumpled skin, around my shoulders the same locks, coarse and gray as the shon jute women weave into sacking... For you, for him, where do you separate the desires... My spells were not given for myself to use (189).

What is interesting is to see that while she still relies on Indian *masalas* to accentuate her beauty, the apparels she chooses are American. Here she arrives at a critical juncture in the narrative where she must choose between her identity either as 'the mistress of spices' or has to set out into an unknown world without her magic. Her very identity as a mistress also hints at the concept that one cannot relinquish power one has not held. She is not a wife but a 'mistress' of spices, however creative a power the spices may give to her. "O spices... Can I not love you and him both. Why must I choose" (190), she asks in desperation. She is not afraid to enter conflagration and consuming in Shampati's fire (261), a definite penalty for deviant mistresses as she has already entered her fire in love. Dick Hebdige, in addressing the subculture of punks in the United Kingdom posits that a dominant culture incorporates any alien culture through two forms: the commodity form and the ideology form (90-99). If we extend Hebdige's definition of incorporation through commodity and ideology and apply it to the condition of immigrant lives within the narrative space in the novel, we find, as Hebdige argues, the first form - commodity - turns difference into something to be purchased. That is to say Indian *masalas* are affordable commodities; including its people who also come cheap and no matter how you treat them you will escape the clutches of law. This creates tensions in certain individuals who extend it to a convoluted idea that anything and everything Indian is affordable because Indianness, like valuable herbs and spices, is reducible to the category of consumable items. The second form discussed is ideology that is representing people belonging to the diaspora in a way which does not make them appear as "the other" but a part of the dominant culture. The role of home and host cultures indefining the diaspora's sense of belongingness to a definitive and stable space cannot be overstated. The diaspora's identity is thus generated out of the collective imagination of a community that has evolved from the migrant's contact with the host-land cultures and the distancing from a familiar homeland culture and its established knowledge-systems. This finds expression in a twisted way in the narrative where routine violence emerges as a

system of action against immigrants who in turn resort to violence as the only solution. Slowly the problems Tilo faces, become tougher, as for example, Jagjit gets involved in a drug racket and Haroun and Mohan are mercilessly beaten up in a violent racist attack. *Kalojire* the spice she selects for helping Haroun has already been wasted multiple times. Tilo remarks: "Doubts and more doubts crowd the cage of my chest, clawing and crying for release. But I think of Haroun's face, and behind him Mohan with his blinded eye, and behind him all the others, a line of injustice that stretches beyond the edge of eternity... The seal is easier to break than ever I had thought. I reach in, feel the papery rub of the pods against my skin, the impatient rattle of the seeds... O Lanka who has been waiting so long for a moment like this, I pour you onto a square of white silk, all except one which I leave in the bottom of the jar. For myself, for soon I will need you too. I tie the cloth ends into a blindman's knot that cannot be untied, that will have to be cut open. I hold the bundle in my hand and sit facing the east, where storms arise. I begin the transforming chant."

Irritation is triggered by such external incidents. This can be interpreted as camouflaging profound feelings of hurt and anxiety. Once again Tilo must reject the mantle of the sacrificing woman, the fantasy of the ideal femininity, and cast as pell with the spice of violence, against the backdrop of losing her own 'self.' Divakaruni, through Tilo, puts into print the woman creator's deepest fears: the fears of entrapment in 'her' store that confines and corners her life, and simultaneously a fear of male sexuality and duplicity. C. James Trotman (2002) argues that multiculturalism is valuable because it "uses several disciplines to highlight neglected aspects of our social history, particularly the histories of women and minorities and promotes respect for the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten" (113). *Lanka* helps Tilo to close the gap between the past and the present so that she can move boldly into the future without any fears. *Lanka* achieves the same for Haroun who starts life anew. Thus, the spice emerges as the salvation for Haroun. Tilo tries it out for herself, the fire of *Lanka* against Shampati's fire. *Lanka* emerges as the spice to rebel rather than reconcile. While Haroun gathers the courage to face the situation head on, Tilo gets a vision of the First Mother, in the spice island, who had warned her about Shampati's fire in case she uses the spices for herself. The exchange of words is important: "Tilo you should not have broken open the red jar — " "Mother it was time." " — should not have released its power into this city that has too much anger in it already." "But Mother, the anger of the chili is pure, impersonal. Its destruction is cleansing, like the dance of Shiva. Did you not tell us this yourself?" She only says, "There are better ways to help those who come to you." "There was no other way," I say in exasperation. "Believe me. This land, these people, what they have become, what they have done to — . Ah, rocked in the safe cradle of your island, how can you understand?" (235)

It is really interesting to observe that the imagery of being incinerated in Shampati's fire is akin to the Indic tradition of being burnt at one's husband's pyre. It is also suggestive of the reclamation of purity through fire, as Tilo does not burn away into ashes. Rather, with new courage and novel priorities Tilo begins another new journey with her dream man, this time with yet another cosmic name for herself — Maya.

The novel examines the processes involved in alienation of a community from its host-nation. Subliminal layers of ideatic perspectives in the narrative point to the

manner in which the author presents alternative concepts of the self, community and nation women and men, weaving the socio-political with the personal. Knowledge of spices, food-memories help Tilo move beyond the existence bound by limitations of modern knowledge systems. When seen against the essential national discourse, the subjective and arbitrary aspects of everyday life also acquire the halo of the heroic and the homogenous. Both destinies affect, and in turn are affected by each other. Power and desire, contest and consent, aggression and acceptance have a multicultural praxis in the narrative. Divakaruni elegantly “builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community” (Merlin 207). Diverse people’s diverse problems are solved by diverse spices. Bhattacharya says, “immigrants do not simply accept the ‘melting pot’ roles expected of assimilated Americans” – instead they continually redefine their sense of identity (66) and such identities are continually constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (Brah8). The novel is a site to explore how characters manoeuvre their identities. “As migrants crossborders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries.... One’s life and roles change...with them, identities change as well” (Espín241). “Although such experiences are stressful, they also provide opportunities for creating a ‘new’ identity” (Ramakrishnan, 2011).

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