

# Exploring Mythical Realism and Diasporic Identity in *The Mistress of Spices*: A Multifaceted Analysis

Anu. R<sup>1</sup>, & Dr. P. Deepa<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India.

Correspondence: Anu. R, Research Scholar, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: anurenjith205@gmail.com

Received: May 16, 2024

Accepted: July 18, 2024

Online Published: September 5, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n1p374

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n1p374>

## Abstract

In this research article, we delve into the intricate interplay between myth, magical realism, and the diaspora experience among Indian immigrants in the United States in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. Through a comprehensive analysis, the present study investigates how the narrative employs these elements to weave a tapestry of cultural identity, displacement, and otherworldly enchantment. The article uncovers the ways in which the protagonist, Tilo, navigates the complex realms of myth and magic while simultaneously grappling with the challenges of diasporic existence. By focusing on the novel's portrayal of a mystical Indian spice shop in California, we examine the transformative power of spices and the profound influence of cultural myths in shaping the immigrant experience. Tilo's journey reflects the broader immigrant experience which blends ancient traditions with contemporary challenges in a deeply human and magical tale. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, we offer a nuanced perspective on the novel's themes that enriches our understanding of the intricate connections between storytelling, cultural memory, and the Indian-American immigrant's narrative.

**Keywords:** Myth, Cultural Identity, Displacement, Immigrant Experience, Spices, Cultural Memory

## 1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, is a literary masterpiece that transcends the boundaries of genre and culture. As an acclaimed work of fiction, Divakaruni's novel artfully blends elements of myth, magical realism, and the immigrant diaspora experience to forge a narrative that resonates with readers on multiple levels. The present research article explores the intricate tapestry woven by the elements within Divakaruni's novel to shed light on how they collectively contribute to the creation of a rich and evocative literary landscape.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni takes us on a journey into the life of Tilo, a woman with extraordinary powers who tends to an enchanting spice shop in the heart of California. Within its walls, spices hold a magical significance that transcends their culinary role to become talismans that bring about profound transformation in the lives of those who seek their aid. Yet, the novel is more than a mere narrative of mystical occurrences; it serves as a reflection of the diaspora experience, a story of cultural displacement, and a testament of the resilience of a people's identity in the face of adversity.

In this article, we set out to unravel the interplay between myth, magical realism, and diaspora as it unfolds in the pages of *The Mistress of Spices*. Our examination seeks to illuminate the ways in which these three elements converge to create a narrative that is both captivating and thought-provoking and understand the myriad layers of significance attributed to the spices, the cultural myths that underpin them, and their role in shaping the immigrant experience.

The blending of myth and magical realism in the novel introduces an otherworldly quality that blurs the lines between the mundane and the supernatural. It invites readers to suspend disbelief and engage with a narrative that challenges their perceptions of reality. Divakaruni's narrative strategy brings forth a profound sense of wonder and awe, as the spices come to life with each spice possessing its own unique power and wisdom. Within this framework, Tilo, as *The Mistress of Spices*, personifies a complex and multidimensional character who navigates a world of ancient traditions, cultural myths, and the everyday struggles of immigrants living in a foreign land.

The immigrant experience in *The Mistress of Spices* is deeply rooted in the diasporic perspective, as the characters grapple with the tension between their cultural heritage and the necessity of adaptation to a new and unfamiliar environment. The novel explores the complexities of assimilation, an individual's identity, and the preservation of one's own roots. Tilo's role as the guardian of tradition and memory, as well as the keeper of cultural knowledge, highlights the significance of cultural continuity among foreigners living in the diaspora.

In the present article, we employ a multidisciplinary approach that draws from literature, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory to offer

a nuanced perspective on the novel's themes. By examining the intersections between myth, magical realism, and diaspora, we aim to enrich our understanding of the intricate connections between storytelling, cultural memory, and the immigrant narrative. Through this comprehensive analysis, we hope to shed light on the enduring relevance and appeal of *The Mistress of Spices* and its contribution to the exploration of cultural identity, displacement, and otherworldly enchantment within contemporary literature.

## 2. Myth and Spices in *The Mistress of Spices*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skillfully employs myths within her novel to emphasize the profound influence of culture, tradition, and environment on the human experience. Myths, rooted in culture, tradition, and religion, serve as narratives that extend beyond mere stories; they carry deeper, often symbolic meanings. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni adeptly explores how these myths underscore the significance of a community's cultural and traditional fabric. These myths also inspire individuals to confront and resolve the myriads of internal and external challenges that life presents.

Within the novel, Chitra Divakaruni reimagines Indian myths associated with spices to offer a rich historical tapestry. For instance, she mythically portrays red chili as the offspring of the Fire God, turmeric as emerging from the ocean during the churning of the ocean milk by the Asuras and Devas in pursuit of the universe's precious treasures, fenugreek as sown by Shabari, the world's oldest woman, and fennel as having been consumed by Sage Vasistha after vanquishing the demon Illwal to ensure that the demon would never return to life.

In this manner, Divakaruni's use of these spice-related myths adds layers of cultural and historical depth to her narrative, illustrating how these tales echo the enduring role of culture, tradition, and the environment in shaping the human experience.

The people of India carry their rich cultural legacy and traditions with them wherever they venture, a testament of their resilience in any circumstance. India is synonymous with a profound and diverse cultural heritage. (Vimal & Pillai, 2024) Hindu mythology holds mythological values for a wide array of elements that extends beyond gods and goddesses to include all living things. The most marvelous thing in Hindu mythology and Hinduism is the deep-rooted belief that nature is the true divinity, a reverence that pervades the lives of all Indians.

In this narrative, Tilo, short for Tilottama, is a character with a remarkable back story. She was once celebrated as the most graceful dancer in heaven. In Indian mythology, Lord Brahma serves as the creator of the universe. Lord Brahma had cautioned Tilottama that should she never fall in love with a mortal failure to which she would be destined to endure seven lives filled with affliction, deformity, and leprosy. Despite Brahma's warnings, Tilottama defied his admonitions by transgressing the divine laws. As a consequence, Tilottama descended to Earth where she endured immense suffering.

The Old One, a character in the story, provides counsel and forewarning to Tilo. The Old One advises Tilo to envision her fate as that which emanated from her arrogance and disregard for the laws established for the Mistresses of Spices. Yet, just as the legendary Tilottama breached her commitment to Lord Indra, Tilo similarly breaks her vows to the Old One. As Tilo departs from the island, The Old One bestows upon her a knife, symbolizing the treacherous path she must navigate as a Mistress of Spices; the knife also serves as a reminder of the promises she chose to break.

In this manner, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narrative not only explores the enduring cultural resilience of the Indian people, but also delves into the depths of Hindu mythology to showcase the complex interplay between tradition, mythology, and the human experience.

The central theme of the novel revolves around the enchanting and magical healing properties of various spices. The protagonist, Tilo, harnesses the potency of numerous spices, including cinnamon, fenugreek, and turmeric, to achieve remarkable results. For instance, peppercorn is portrayed as having the unique ability to unveil a person's hidden secrets; such an ability adds an element of mystique to the narrative.

At the outset of the story, Tilo introduces the concept of turmeric; a position that emphasizes its significance. Turmeric plays a pivotal role in Ayurveda, one of the earliest holistic healthcare systems originating in India over three thousand years ago. Ayurveda is founded on the principle that the equilibrium of mental, physical, and spiritual well-being is essential to a person's overall health. Ayurveda's primary objective extends beyond treating illnesses to proactively promoting health. Customized ayurvedic treatments are tailored to address specific health concerns. Notably, turmeric, according to WebMD, is recognized for its antibiotic properties, "shielding individuals from bacterial infections and insect larvae." (Key, 2024) While it is commonly used in culinary applications to enhance color and flavor, turmeric also offers substantial medicinal benefits. Tilo asserts that turmeric possesses the capacity to enhance one's physical appearance and potentially eliminate age spots and imperfections.

In alignment with Indian mythology, each spice is associated with a designated day; turmeric is associated with Sunday. Turmeric is used in various rituals, such as sprinkling it on the heads of newborns and the coconuts used in religious ceremonies (puja). It is also rubbed into the borders of new clothes to bestow blessings. In a moment of enchantment within the narrative when Tilo holds the spices, turmeric's essence is personified and communicates with her, revealing its mythological origins as the spice that emerged from the ocean milk churned by the Devas and Asuras, existing between the time of the poison and the appearance of nectar in the grand churning for the treasures of the universe. In this way, the novel masterfully weaves together the mystical attributes of spices, the rich heritage of Ayurveda, and the intricate connections between mythology and the everyday use of these ingredients, thereby imbuing the story with a sense of wonder and magic.

Tilo, the novel's central character, attributes profound significance to turmeric by dubbing it the "armor of sorrows," and a symbol of

potential rebirth. As an act of compassion and hope, Tilo bestows turmeric upon Ahuja's wife, Lalita, who is grappling with the challenges within her marriage for Ahuja's marriage to undergo a transformative renewal.

Cinnamon, referred to as the "friend maker" spice, is heralded for its role in combating heart disease due to its rich acid content. In early civilizations, it was believed to bestow the power to overcome adversaries. Recognizing its potential for healing and harmonizing, Tilo gives cinnamon to Jagit. Jagit, a young boy who is the only Punjabi student in his school, is overwhelmed by fear and isolation amidst his classmates.

On Tuesdays, fenugreek's designated day, fenugreek takes on a pivotal role. In the realm of Ayurveda, fenugreek is employed as a medicinal remedy to address a range of ailments from asthma and hormonal imbalances, to supporting a healthy metabolism. Fenugreek's remarkable significance is historically tied to Shabari, a revered figure in Hindu mythology. "Shabari, an elderly woman ascetic featured in the Hindu epic Ramayana, was known for her unwavering devotion to Lord Rama, which ultimately led to her receiving his divine blessing and grace" (Vijayan, 2021).

These moments in the narrative illuminate the depth of symbolic and healing properties associated with spices. They underscore the novel's exploration of how these natural elements are not just ingredients but also agents of change, resilience, and transformation that shape the destinies of the characters they touch. Tilo beautifully describes the essence of fenugreek: "Put it in water, and it will bloom free. Bite into the swollen kernels between your teeth, and taste its bitter sweetness. It carries the flavor of water weeds in a wild place, resonates with the cries of grey geese" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 47).

In an act of empathy and support, Tilo decides to share fenugreek with Ratna who feels mistreated by her husband. The gift of this spice serves as a source of solace and comfort to Ratna and brings warmth and cheer into her life. Another compelling instance unfolds when Tilo encounters an American visitor, Raven, who frequents the spice store every Friday. Guided by the wisdom of The Old One who revealed that a specific spice is meant for everyone, Tilo feels a profound connection with this visitor. Tilo then embarks on a quest to find a spice that resonates with his unique essence. Tilo thereafter finds asafetida, a remedy that holds the promise of kindling love, echoing an ancient myth. These moments underscore the novel's exploration of the profound connections forged through the language of spices. They reveal how these spices not only flavor food but also carry the potential to heal, mend, and foster profound human connections to add depth and magic to the characters' lives and experiences.

Wednesday's designated spice fennel has a dual role in the narrative. Tilo, recognizes the distress of Lalita Ahuja's wife who had misplaced her turmeric, offers her fennel as a source of solace and rejuvenation. Fennel is celebrated for its refreshing aroma and its capacity to invigorate the senses. Tilo advises Lalita to take a pinch of fennel after each meal and encourages Lalita to share some with her husband. This gesture is rooted in the belief that fennel has the unique ability to soothe an individual's anger after a meal.

Furthermore, there is a myth associated with fennel that finds its roots in the story of Sage Vashistha, the revered guru of Lord Rama and the chief priest of the Suryavansha. Sage Vashistha was renowned for his wisdom, selflessness, and dedication to peace. Sage Vashistha and his wife Arundhati settled at bank of river Beas and started Gurukula, a residential school that nurtured thousands of students. In this myth, the narrative recounts that fennel played a significant role in vanquishing the demon Ilwal. When two individuals simultaneously consume fennel, it is believed to have the power to act as an equalizer that can transfer strength from one person to another.

Tilo's presentation of fennel to Lalita reflects Tilo's belief in Lalita's innate strength, resilience and capacity to defend herself. Tilo's act is emblematic of how spices are more than just culinary ingredients; they carry rich symbolism and mythical significance that fosters connections between characters and their shared histories.

Tilo, at a certain point in the narrative, undergoes a transformation during which she is concealed from view; ginger is then applied to restore her original appearance. Ginger, known for its widespread culinary use in Indian curries, holds a significant place in Ayurveda for its therapeutic properties particularly in treating digestive ailments. However, Tilo defies the Mistress's orders and uses ginger for her own purposes. Tilo consumes ginger and discovers that it bestows upon her a more youthful appearance.

As her love for Raven deepens, Tilo becomes increasingly entranced and eventually employs spices once more in her quest to become the most beautiful woman in the world. However, this time, Tilo seeks the intervention of the king of spices. In this instance, the spice remains silent and does not respond to her requests because Tilo has flouted and disrespected the rules of the island. In response, the spice delivers a laughter-infused warning that reminds Tilo of the profound desire she once held for the island to the extent that she was willing to throw herself from the granite cliffs if the First Mother had denied her (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 261).

These moments described in the narrative reveal the intricate relationship between the novel's characters and various spices. The moments exemplify the consequences of disobeying the island's rules and the pivotal role spices play in the characters' lives, both as a source of transformation and a means of expressing desire and longing.

The spices in the novel, while possessing genuine medicinal qualities that are relevant to everyday life, also bear a magical dimension that serves as catalyst to resolve familial issues, instill courage, and represent rebirth. These magical aspects are intertwined with mythological allusions that imbue the narrative with layers of meaning. Additional spices, such as the lotus root symbolize lifelong passionate love, while sesame is considered a protector during long journeys. The spices' significant roles in the story underscore the need for responsible usage as their misuse can yield perilous consequences. These legends, folk stories, and the enigmatic qualities of spices collectively contribute to the unmistakably Indian essence of the novel.

However, it is essential to note that the island's most crucial rule dictates that when the Mistress is involved in any prohibited conduct, the spices turn against those who were supposed to benefit from their magic resulting in a series of troubles for anyone who entered the spice shop. Tilo's failed magic causes distress to individuals like Jagit, the schoolboy, Lalita, an ordinary Indian woman, Geetha, and other persons.

In response to Lalita's plea for help, Tilo beseeches the spices for help. She prepares a concoction of pounded almond and chyavanprash which is imbued with qualities of inner strength and physical power, and places the concoction outside the door for the wind to carry it to the women's house where Lalita awaits (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 273).

Afterwards, Tilo embarks on a new life to reconcile with the spices and the First Mother and adopts the name Maya. In her own words, "In the old language, it can mean many things. Spell, illusion, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 317).

The narrative beautifully illustrates the dual nature of spices, their connection to myth and tradition on one hand, and the obligations required of their users on the other hand, to ultimately showcase the transformative power of these mystical ingredients. The term "Maya," rooted in Sanskrit, finds extensive discussion in the teachings of God Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. In essence, "Maya" embodies the concept of illusion, a fleeting and deceptive idea of perfection that individuals perpetually pursue as they journey through life in their unending pursuit of the unattainable. No one ever seems to find contentment; they continually chase the elusive mirage of perfection. Tilo's transformation into Maya signifies her recognition that absolute harmony is an elusive ideal, and that suffering and turmoil will eternally coexist with tranquility, joy, and prosperity.

While many may erroneously believe that spices are solely for culinary use, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses her novel to portray the medicinal and magical potential inherent in different spices by deftly incorporating myth to amplify the intrinsic qualities of various spices. Consequently, myth assumes a pivotal role in the novel. Ancients crafted myths for each spice by offering a vivid narrative that effectively conveyed the spices' medicinal attributes. These myths and mystical elements, rather than plain theory, readily capture readers' imagination and attention. Divakaruni employs myth as a compelling tool to explore the multifaceted qualities of spices, underscoring how storytelling and cultural lore can enrich our understanding of the world around us.

### 3. Magical Realism in *The Mistress of Spices*

According to Flores, "Magical realism is a literary style that expresses emotions rather than evokes them, aiming to uncover mysterious aspects of life..." (Flores, 1955, p. 187). Magical realism within the context of *The Mistress of Spices* serves as a powerful literary device that encourages readers to perceive reality through the lens of imagination as it intertwines elements of magic, myth, and religion. It challenges conventional notions of existence and human behavior by prompting an exploration of the extraordinary within the ordinary.

In Tilo's journey, she undergoes profound austerity and a life characterized by discomfort and deprivation. She is required to take a vow of celibacy, relinquish physical pleasures and embrace the guise of an elderly woman. The essence of magical realism emerges as Tilo describes her physical form as an oxymoronic combination of youth encased within the appearance of an old woman. What makes this manifestation particularly intriguing is the fact that even her clients, those who seek her magical remedies, remain oblivious to her genuine age and her extraordinary powers. As she reflects, "They do not know, of course. That I am not old, that this seeming body I took on in Shampathi's fire when I vowed to become a Mistress is not mine... The eyes, which alone are my own." (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 5).

Through this enchanting narrative technique, Divakaruni invites readers to question the boundaries between reality and the magical by urging them to look beyond surface appearances and embrace the extraordinary within the ordinary, a central theme in the world of magical realism. Tilo's transformative journey extends to another realm after her purification process within the "Shampati fire." The myth of Shampati holds a special place in Indian mythology; it is recognized as the "bird of myth and memory." This mythical bird, despite being consumed by flames, is reborn from its ashes, mirroring the transformative paths of both Tilo and Raven. This myth serves as a symbolic reference that infuses a layer of realism into the narrative's magical elements. Herein, the incorporation of myth assumes a pivotal role in heightening the magical realism in the narrative.

Tilo relocates to an Indian spice shop in Oakland, California, where she embarks on a mission to share the power of Indian spices. Her unique ability to foresee the future, particularly in the context of a marginalized minority group from her homeland grappling with homelessness, sets her on a transformative journey. Her vision foretells Haroun's impending accident, reflecting another distinctive aspect of magical realism: the capacity to predict the future through visions and witness these events come to fruition.

Upon foreseeing Haroun's accident, Tilo takes a spice that is blue and black, known as "kalojire," a teardrop-shaped spice which exudes a raw and wild scent reminiscent of tigers. The spice is employed to alter Haroun's fate (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 32).

The novel commences with a striking sentence that resonates with readers: "I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work with others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone...but the spices are my love" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 3). This opening encapsulates the essence of the narrative by introducing readers to the enigmatic and enchanting world of magical realism that unfolds within the story.

The novelist, in introducing Tilo as a character named after the nourishing spice 'til' or sesame seed, invites readers to embark on a journey to another realm. It is essential to note that the novel is structured into fifteen chapters, with each chapter bearing the name of a spice. These spice names, such as "Turmeric," "Cinnamon," "Fenugreek," "Asafetida," "Fennel," "Ginger," "Peppercorn," "Kalo Jire," "Neem," "Red Chilli," "Makaradwaj," "Lotus Root," and "Sesame," are familiar ingredients in Indian cuisine and have been intricately

woven into Indian daily life.

Both the first and final chapters are named after the protagonist, with the first chapter titled "Tilo" and the concluding chapter titled "Maya." This choice of titles underscores the central theme of transformation that unfolds throughout the narrative, as Nayan Tara evolves into Bhagyavati, then Tilo, and finally Maya, with the spices serving as catalysts for this metamorphosis.

While the novel may outwardly appear to be structured like a cookbook, with chapters named after spices, the true magic lies in how these spices are employed. *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, is the guardian and conductor of the spices. She communicates with them and wields their powers to heal, protect, and nourish. Divakaruni emphasizes the mystical connection between Tilo and the spices by showcasing how they respond to her through an enchanting form of sorcery.

One of the magical realism elements in the novel is the concept of the "calling thought." Whenever the protagonist faces a challenging condition, she turns to the leader, from whom she learned the art of harnessing the power of spices. The Old One describes the "calling thought" as follows: "The calling thought can draw to you whoever you desire, a lover to your side, an enemy to your feet. It can lift a soul out of a human body and place it raw and pulsing in your palm. When used imperfectly and without control, it can bring destruction beyond imagining" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 18). "Calling thought" is an element that adds to the sense of magic and mystery that pervades the narrative and reinforces the profound connection between Tilo, the spices, and the mystical world that they inhabit.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo enjoys a close relationship with a multitude of snake friends who serve as her protectors to guard her from the threat of pirates. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws upon the folklore of her youth, which included tales of speaking serpents and the existence of a slumbering city beneath the ocean. However, in this novel, Divakaruni reimagines and transforms these folkloric elements. The instances where the snakes converse with Tilo exemplify the presence of magical thinking within the narrative. Herein, the concept of "the talking of snakes" is presented as a natural and accepted phenomenon, with Tilo engaging in dialogue with them. This portrayal falls within the realm of "fantasy," a facet of magical realism. Divakaruni characterizes the speaking serpent as a fantastical creature, a common figure in mythological narratives. The speaking serpent embodies a distinct type of magic, symbolizing the innate beauty of the natural world. It operates beyond the bounds of logic and bestows blessings upon mortals.

Tilo's initiation involves a purifying process on the "Island of Spices" which was overseen by a strict "First Mother" who imparts Tilo with knowledge and subjects Tilo to various tests. Tilo is directed to find her place in the American Dreamland, a pursuit that is fraught with challenges. Tilo's intervention for Jagjit, the young Punjabi boy, involves placing a cinnamon stick in his turban. Cinnamon is recognized as a "Friend Maker," a "Destroyer of enemies," and a bestower of strength, not only to the body but also to the power of speech. Jagjit subsequently gains the courage to confront acts of wrongdoing and violence against him. The magical intervention provided to Jagjit underscores the allure of spices and their transformative abilities and makes cinnamon an enticing choice for many around the world.

In the novel, Lalita, known as Ahuja's wife, embodies the struggles of many individuals trapped in violent relationships and unhappy marriages. Tilo intervenes to address Lalita's issues by utilizing "fennel" to provide her with a means of escape from a life marred by domestic abuse and violence. As the novel draws to a close, Lalita expresses her gratitude in a note that illustrates her determination to fortify herself with inner strength and mental resilience. Lalita leaves an offering outside her own door for the wind to carry to the "woman-house" where Tilo awaits (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 273). In this poignant moment, magical realism is accentuated by the symbolism of one of the Earth's elements and wind energy further underscores the transformative power of the spices.

A pivotal moment in the story emerges when Tilo has feelings for Raven, whom she affectionately refers to as "My American." Raven is drawn not only to her physical beauty but also perceives her supernatural abilities and her true essence beyond her outward appearance. He entrusts Tilo with his own story. He is convinced that she can help him unlock the hidden potential he yearns to access. Raven's actions imbue Raven's character with a mythical dimension.

Tilo finds herself torn between her desires and her obligations as a mistress who is bound by a duty that dictates she prioritizes others' needs over her own and refrains from indulging in personal pleasures. In her pursuit of rediscovering her hidden passion and desire, symbolized by the union of two loving souls, she employs "makaradwaj," a spice known as "The King of Spices" or "The Conqueror of Time." Makaradwaj transforms Tilo's physical form and makes her exquisitely beautiful; a transformation that echoes the magical realism found in fairytales, particularly reminiscent of Cinderella's tale. Tilo's metamorphosis, from an aged form to a sensual, mystical, and spiritual Apsara donning a white dress gifted by Raven, exudes an enchanting aura and evokes a floral fragrance. The fleeting nature of Tilo's transformation is captured in the words, "By tomorrow night, Tilo, you will be at the beauty's summit. Enjoy it well. For by the next morning, it will be gone" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 263). Raven, awe-struck by her beauty, is left virtually speechless and declares, "I had not dared to dream such beauty. I do not dare to touch it" (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 280).

Tilo's transformative and enchanting moment epitomizes the interplay between magical realism and the evocation of deep desires and longing within the narrative. The transformative effect in this moment is undeniably magical; it represents the phenomenon of Magical realism. As Tilo seeks to plunge into Shampati's Fire to purify her body, akin to the idea of Sita's "Agni Pariksha" in the Ramayana, she finds herself in Raven's embrace. This pivotal moment serves as a dramatic turning point in the narrative by suggesting that the spices have pardoned Tilo and granted her the freedom to chart her own life course as she desires.

At the novel's conclusion, Raven bestows upon Tilo a new name, "Maya," a term with Hindu origins that signifies the everyday world of

desire, suffering, and joy; an illusory realm and a place of inevitable sorrows from which humanity endeavors to escape. In this context, "Maya" personifies not only magic, but also the essence of magical realism itself that encapsulates the interplay between reality and enchantment that permeates the narrative.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents spices as dynamic and sentient characters that transcend their mere culinary roles. Divakaruni delves into the metaphysical essence of Indian spices by delving beyond the boundaries of science and infusing them with mythical, magical, and historical significance. The spices are not passive ingredients but take on a tangible, perceptible, and expressive relationship with Tilo, the novel's protagonist. They explore the sociocultural aspects of the narrative by offering an insight into Tilo's mental landscape.

Throughout the novel, the spices exhibit a wide range of behaviors. They communicate, sing, reprimand, love, caution, and occasionally exhibit irritation toward their mistress Tilo. The spices act as active participants in Tilo's personal decisions, akin to foreign entities, by ensuring that she does not exceed the boundaries prescribed for a mistress. Initially, Tilo grapples with a sense of helplessness and feels confined within the realm of spices.

Tilo possesses an intimate understanding of the spices, including their origins, colors, and aromas. She can address them by name, and she is aware of the ancient secrets that were once known to mothers but have been forgotten over time. The spices with true power hail from her birthplace, India, a land steeped in ardent poetry. Each chapter of the novel is named after a specific spice, unveiling their unique strengths and origins; a presentation enhances the novel's appeal, captivates readers and urges them to delve further into the narrative.

Tilo confronts and resolves diverse challenges faced by her clients by employing the spices as potent tools for healing and transformation. The spices, infused with symbolism and meaning, transcend their utilitarian roles and emerge as pivotal elements of the narrative that enrich the reader's experience.

#### **4. Navigating the diaspora in *The Mistress of Spices***

Within the tapestry of duty and desire, and conflict and resolution that weaves through the lives of Indians living in the diaspora, our exploration highlights the intricacies of diasporic existence. It sheds light on the challenges faced by the diasporic community who strive to find equilibrium in a cross-cultural milieu while reconciling the competing facets of their lives.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni symbolically portrays spices, as a cherished artifact of India, a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination." (Divakaruni, 2013) Our study delves into the author's portrayal of an altruistic character like Tilo, who grapples with harmonizing her identity amid the shifting priorities in her life. Tilo's journey oscillates between duty and love.

In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo embodies the essence of diasporic identity. Divakaruni hails from India but resides in Oakland. As Michele Verna notes, "Indians constitute a significant segment among the global diaspora due to their historical legacy of colonial migration. However, the Indian diaspora has ventured to various parts of South East and far Eastern countries even in pre-colonial times, spreading religious beliefs, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. Immigrants in these urban centers make substantial contributions across diverse sectors." (Verna, 2012) In larger cities, immigrants often distance themselves from their ancestral past by adopting new identities. In a foreign country, they reconstruct their sense of home, with the fluidity of their identity rendering them transnational. Migration, once initiated, becomes a continuous journey. They transition from one city to another, carrying their homes with them. Consequently, the concept of home becomes a perpetually mobile entity, suggesting that home can be constructed anywhere at any given moment. "Indians residing in America must assimilate into their new environment for survival." (Beg, 2021) Tilo, the central character amongst these diverse individuals, strives to provide them comfort until she becomes ensnared by self-desires. Tilo endeavors to serve as connection between two distinct cultures and an intermediary who helps immigrants reconcile with their new lives by acting as a harmonizer in their newfound surroundings. Various other characters also cross paths with Tilo, each navigating their unique journey of life change in America.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is an intricately woven narrative, rich in diasporic nuances, that offers profound insights into the protagonist's sense of duty within a foreign land. Tilo, the central character, assumes the role of a spice mistress at the "Spice Bazaar," among her many other identities. However, her love for Raven does not diminish her commitment to others, reflecting her unwavering sense of responsibility.

Tilo treats all individuals equitably by extending her care to everyone, and diligently upholds her duties. Her deep-seated sense of responsibility tempers her impulses to ensure that her dreams are fulfilled with caution. Placed in Oakland by the choice of the enigmatic "First Mother," Tilo caters to a diverse community. Customers seek her out to purchase spices for both practical and metaphysical purposes, with some looking for culinary seasonings while others seeking remedies for their problems.

For Tilo, this act of providing spices is not just a mundane task; it carries profound significance. She regards her role as sacred, a responsibility bestowed upon her by the "First Mother." She has solemnly promised not to forsake her duty by viewing any violation of this promise as a desecration. Despite experiencing the ebb and flow of life like any other ordinary individual, Tilo does not allow her personal desires and pleasures to overshadow her commitment to alleviating the sorrows of others.

The guidance of the "First Mother" serves as a constant reminder for Tilo to prioritize duty over desire. Such admonition points out the primacy of serving humanity and mandates that her own desires should not eclipse her obligations. In response, Tilo wholeheartedly commits herself to this creed, stating, "I will not falter, Mother... My heart is brimming with a fervor for the spices, my ears resonate with

the music of our symbiotic dance... I have no need for the affection of a mere mortal man. I hold this belief steadfastly” (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 45).

Tilo's unwavering commitment serves as a poignant reminder of the sanctity inherent in our life's endeavors and any deviation from this path is considered profane. This fundamental principle is why Tilo dedicates herself to an uplifting cause to selflessly serve society for its betterment. People seek solace in her presence by bringing her their troubles and dilemmas, and Tilo, in turn, endeavors to find them solutions. In certain instances, she employs the mystical properties of spices to alleviate their problems.

Among Tilo's diverse clientele is a first-generation immigrant and his granddaughter, Geeta. Geeta was born and raised in America. The pairing of lifestyles (Indian and American) represents a struggle between ancestral culture embodied by the grandfather, and the American culture in which Geeta had been raised. The stark incompatibility between these two cultural paradigms fuels conflicts between grandfather and granddaughter. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the inherent tension in shaping cultural identities is palpable.

Geeta's upbringing in America sharply contrasts with the cultural norms her grandfather embodies; an incongruity that leads to friction. In an Indian context, Geeta's lifestyle would likely have been confined by patriarchal norms. The clash between these cultural realms is undeniable. However, the extent to which these individuals truly accept one another's cultures remains a subject of mystery and apprehension. At one juncture, Tilo eloquently articulates the complexities surrounding their cultural dynamics: “American, it is good you remind me, Tilo who was at the point of losing myself in you. You have loved me for the color of my skin, the accent of my speaking, the quaintness of my customs which promised you the magic you no longer found in the women of your own land. In your yearning you have made me into that which I am not .... Perhaps I have done the same with you. But how can the soil of misconception nurture the seedling of love?” (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 309).

The passage highlights the intricate interplay of cultural identities, misunderstandings, and the challenges of cultivating genuine love in an environment where misconceptions often abound. Tilo's narrative delves deep into these complexities by emphasizing the need for a profound understanding of the multilayered aspects of cultural identity.

Jagjit's poignant story in *The Mistress of Spices* mirrors the challenges faced by young immigrants in a foreign land. As the child of Punjabi parents in America, he grapples with the daunting task of adapting to a new culture where he has had to learn his first English word: "idiot." In addition to a language barrier, he becomes a target of bullying and mockery by his peers at school. His "shy-eyed" demeanor and his distinct appearance, characterized by his turban and long, uncut hair, make him vulnerable to ridicule.

Jagjit's plight is deeply heart-wrenching as he is subjected to humiliation and emotional distress. Despite the pain he experiences, he endures it in silence by biting down on his lips to suppress his tears. The intense humiliation and torment Jagjit faces prove to be discouraging and leads him to withdraw from attending school.

It is Tilo, the compassionate spice mistress, who intervenes to help Jagjit overcome his isolation and mistreatment. Tilo selects cinnamon as a remedy for Jagit due to its remarkable qualities which include fostering friendships and endowing individuals with the strength to stand up against their adversaries. With a sense of purpose and empathy, Tilo expresses her wish for Jagjit: “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'... 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.” (Divakaruni, 2006, p. 42).

Tilo's powerful gesture illustrates the transformative impact that kindness and understanding can have on the lives of young individuals who grapple with the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and coping with the harshness of their environment. Jagjit's story is a reminder of the importance of compassion and support for those navigating the complex journey of immigration.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni effectively conveys a message that the United States is a nation that embraces individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds. As an immigrant herself, Divakaruni likely draws from her own personal experiences to illuminate this theme. The character of Jagjit, a young Punjabi boy who arrives in America with his family, serves as a poignant example of the immigrant experience.

Jagjit's narrative showcases the multicultural tapestry of America, particularly within its urban centers, where people from various cultural backgrounds find acceptance and opportunities for cultural exchange. The novel underscores the inclusivity of American society by emphasizing its capacity to accommodate and celebrate diverse cultural identities.

Jagjit's transformation, which reflects the common immigrant journey, illustrate how he encounters the challenges of adapting to a new culture and contends with the realities of bullying at school. Through determination and resilience, Jagjit undergoes a profound personal transformation that symbolizes the power of embracing one's new cultural environment.

Divakaruni's portrayal of America as an inclusive and accepting nation reinforces the notion that despite the complexities and challenges of the immigrant experience, the United States can be a place of opportunity and belonging for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The novel provides a rich tapestry of characters that represent different facets of the Indian diaspora in America by encompassing individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. It highlights their struggles to adapt to a new culture, cope with the pressures of preserving their native identities, and vent their emotions and problems. The novel's vivid portrayal of these complexities underscores the

challenges faced by immigrants in forging their identities in a new cultural landscape. Overall, *The Mistress of Spices* delves into the multifaceted nature of the immigrant experience by offering a glimpse into the diasporic sensibilities and the intricate process of cultural adaptation and highlighting the richness of America's multiculturalism.

The physical body serves as the primary expression of one's identity and it is often the initial basis on which individuals are judged, whether in terms of their height, weight, or other physical attributes. This physical identity includes aspects such as skin color and appearance, all of which shape how individuals are perceived. For immigrants, this physical distinction is magnified due to the presence of distinct ethnic features that set them apart from the broader American population. *The Mistress of Spices*, authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, artfully and repeatedly addresses the implications of these physical distinctions by illustrating the impact of the diasporic experience on immigrants' well-being and self-identity.

The novel excels in examining the consequences of the diaspora experience on the immigrants' physical appearances. The characters in the story face a spectrum of challenges related to their physical appearances and attributes that reflect the complexities they face in their adjustment to a new cultural environment. Divakaruni adeptly employs these physical aspects as powerful tools for conveying the profound effects of the diasporic journey on her characters' identities.

Furthermore, the novel consistently emphasizes the role of physical appearance in shaping one's identity by highlighting the significance of the body as a central element of self-recognition. This thematic exploration remains a vital component of the narrative throughout the book.

In essence, *The Mistress of Spices* scrutinizes the impact of physical appearance on individual identity with a particular focus on the challenges faced by immigrants who go through the diasporic journey. The profound examination of identity and physical attributes in the novel emphasizes the enduring relevance of this theme throughout the novel.

### **5. The Jagged Path in the Diaspora in *The Mistress of Spices***

"Writing must arise from our knowledge and emotions, but its ultimate purpose is to transcend these personal boundaries and connect with people across time, space, and memory, even those who have never lived the way we have. What other purpose does literature serve? If our goal is solely to document the specifics of a culture, it's reasonable to assume that sociologists or anthropologists could accomplish this task more effectively." (Divakaruni, 2012) However, writing in the context of the postcolonial generation goes beyond merely presenting a story; it also offers a framework for articulating and defining experiences. "The diasporic experience of immigrants in the United States is laden with challenges and difficulties, both at the collective and individual levels. Rather than conforming to the assimilationist ideals of the "melting pot," immigrants constantly reevaluate their own identity" (Lamor, 2011).

To understand the immigrant experience, it is invaluable to employ literature that provides specific narratives and instigates discourse. As Gayatri Spivak suggests, "a literary critic negotiates with narratives." (Spivak, 2014) Narratives serve as representations of everyday life, even in fictional settings. Consequently, it is crucial to explore the narratives that exist within Indian writing, and the experiences, challenges, and multiple viewpoints of Indian-American immigrants. Such an approach reminds us that, as literary critics, when we focus on the text and delay immediate sociological applications, we gain a more profound understanding of narratives rooted in individual experiences.

### **6. The Significance of Spices in *The Mistress of Spices***

The title name of the chapters in Divakaruni's novel convey names of spices; a trait which elucidates the unique powers and origins of these spices and adds a captivating element to the story to engage a reader's curiosity. Within these chapters, Divakaruni addresses a myriad of issues that women experience and utilizes spices to address these concerns. Her focus remains on emotional fulfillment which subsequently leads to spiritual contentment, as opposed to physical gratification or the mitigation of diseases. Individuals grappling with social disturbances often encounter isolation, alienation, and internal conflicts that necessitate resolution. The process of reconciling these internal conflicts can be arduous. Tilo, in her role as a guardian of the spice store, emerges as a quasi-goddess who aids individuals in resolving their dilemmas. Her devotion to these challenges transcends her limitations and the constraints of her solemn vows to establish her as a custodian of people's joys and sorrows.

Turmeric, known as "halud," represents a symbol of hope for rebirth. Turmeric holds cultural significance in Indian society. When applied to the skin, it not only removes blemishes, wrinkles, age marks, and fat, but also bestows a delicate golden radiance to the complexion.

Cinnamon, known as "dalchini," operates as both a destroyer of enemies and a facilitator of friendships. It imparts strength to the arms, legs, and mouth. Shabari, the oldest woman in the world who planted the first fenugreek seed, used it to rejuvenate her body and make it ready for love. "Fenugreek," the spice reserved for Tuesdays, carries a fresh taste akin to a river breeze, planting desire in a narrative that has become barren. It renders the body once again welcoming to love and is believed to have been initially discovered by Shabari, the world's oldest woman. Coriander seed or "dhania" when soaked and consumed is harnessed to enhance vision and cleanse one of lingering guilt.

"Amchur" is employed to rekindle one's zest for life and rejuvenate dulled taste senses. "Mahamul," the root spice, is a harbinger of good luck, a promoter of joy, and a safeguard against misfortune. "Tulsi," the basil plant of humility, quells the thirst for power, redirects thoughts inwardly and away from materialism, and acts as an ego suppressant.



"Hartuki," a shriveled seed reminiscent of a womb, aids mothers in enduring the pain of the birthing process. An astringent leaf, darkened on the stem, helps diminish distrust and avarice. "Black pepper," when ingested or boiled, loosens the throat. Black pepper also empowers individuals to assert themselves by saying 'No' and to ensure they are heard—an aspect often challenging for Indian women.

The powdered mixture of almonds and saffron boiled in milk, consumed before bedtime, sweetens one's thoughts and words while unearthing buried love beneath layers of anger.

"Fennel," the spice attributed to Wednesdays, embodies the essence of an average middle-aged person. It exudes the scent of impending change and boasts a hue as earthy and gloomy as its fallen leaves. Consuming a pinch of raw, whole fennel after each meal improves digestion and freshens breath. It imparts mental strength, cools tempers, and fortifies individuals to digest their sorrows. Fennel also acts as an equalizer, transferring power from one individual to another when consumed simultaneously by two individuals.

### **7. Benefits of using spices in *The Mistress of Spices***

In *The Mistress of Spices*, each chapter is named after spices commonly found in Indian kitchens, such as cinnamon, turmeric, and fenugreek. India's diverse climate allows for the cultivation of a wide variety of spices that are integral to Indian cuisine. Spices are not only essential in Indian cooking but are also highly valued in many other countries.

The use of spices offers several benefits. Bay leaf oil contains antifungal and antibacterial properties. Cardamom helps control bad breath and aids in digestion. Star anise fights bad breath and can be used for diabetes management. Saffron is utilized for allergy relief. Mustard oil is suitable for body massages and promotes healthy hair growth.

According to Jayshree Singh, a "human being has the power of recreating a paradise in our life through our own constructive action." (Singh, 2019, p. 309) Tilo, the novel's protagonist, employs various magical spices to aid her clients in finding solutions to their problems. Spices serve a dual purpose; they are not just for culinary use, but spices also offer solace to Indian immigrants who frequent Tilo's store and are grappling with homesickness and feelings of alienation. Tilo consistently provides support to her customers by helping them address their issues and meet their needs.

### **8. Conclusion**

In summation, *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a captivating blend of mythical realism and a profound exploration of diasporic identity. Our multifaceted analysis delved into the novel's various dimensions to shed light on its cultural richness, character depth, and the intricate web of themes woven throughout the narrative.

The novel's mythical realism is evident in the magical role of spices it presents which are personified as characters with unique powers and origins. Each chapter is named after a spice, serving as a window into the cultural significance of these spices while concurrently addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of the characters in the novel. Tilo, the central character, emerges as a mystical figure and a guardian of both spices and the people who seek her assistance. The use of spices as a narrative device allows Divakaruni to infuse the story with a touch of magic and symbolism and adds depth and complexity to the narrative.

Altogether, the novel explores the intricacies of diasporic identity, particularly among Indian immigrants in the United States. It paints a vivid picture of the challenges, conflicts, and the quest for identity faced by individuals torn between their cultural heritage and the allure of a new homeland. The characters, such as Geeta, Jagjit, and Haroun, represent the diverse experiences and dilemmas of immigrants adjusting to a multicultural society.

The juxtaposition of mythical realism and diasporic identity creates a rich tapestry in *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni skillfully intertwines the magical elements of Indian folklore with the struggles of diasporic life to highlight the transformative power of culture, identity, and human connections.

Ultimately, our multifaceted analysis demonstrates how the novel transcends cultural boundaries, extending beyond a narrative of significance to the Indian diaspora to a work that touches on universal themes of identity, human connection, and the power of storytelling. *The Mistress of Spices* invites readers to embark on a literary journey that weaves together the mystical and the real, the old and the new, and the personal and the collective, in a truly enchanting and thought-provoking manner.

### **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks to my supervisor Dr. P. Deepa for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the research process. She helped me in writing the research paper and also assisted me till the completion of the paper.

### **Authors contributions**

Anu. R is the first author. He analyzed the text, collected secondary materials and drafted the paper.

Dr. P. Deepa is the second author. She reviewed and proof read the final draft.

### **Funding**

Not Applicable

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

the work reported in this paper.

**Informed consent**

Obtained.

**Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

**References**

- Basu, S. (2013). An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Medha Journal*.
- Beg, M. S. (2021, February 28). Diasporic Sensibility in *Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *The Creative Launcher*, 5(6), 229-234. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.5.6.32>
- Divakaruni, C. B. (2006, January 1). *The Mistress of Spices*.
- Flores, A. (1955, May). Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction. *Hispania*, 38(2), 187. <https://doi.org/10.2307/335812>  
<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/19/spivak-gayatri-chakravorty/>
- Key, A. P. (2024, March 13). *Antibiotics: Everything You Should Know*. WebMD. Retrieved from <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/what-are-antibiotics>
- Lamor, L. (2011). *Fractured Identity - The Jagged Path of Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices*. Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. Retrieved December 1, 2023, from <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/108/Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty - Postcolonial Studies>
- Singh, J. (2019, April 8). *Spices' Action with Internal World -The Mistress of Spices by*. ResearchGate. Retrieved December 18, 2023, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332268305>
- Vijayan, V. (2021, December 13). *Story of Shabari - Vrinda Vijayan - Medium*. Medium. Retrieved from <https://vrindavijayan.medium.com/story-of-shabari-5a521ae0eabb>
- Vimal, A., & Pillai, S. R. (2024). Examining Sociocultural Dimensions of Metropolitan Youth Culture in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone, Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(5), 1299-1307. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1405.02>
- Zupancic, M. (2012, January 10). The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 6(2), 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpr023>.