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Peregrination of Culture through Spices & Herbs: A Study of Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

Diasporic writers peregrinate their native culture to the other parts of the world through their works and build a bridge between their homeland and new abode. Decade back diasporic literature is dominated by nostalgic emotions of homelessness people but now it presents a different and positive picture of people who adapt new change easily. They are successful in establishing a relation between two cultures by negotiating with the new cultural space. The sense of homelessness and genuine pain with which every immigrant suffers from has been minimized through various platforms of social networking. Diasporic writers use fiction because it provides them an ample space to portray their fictional characters in new land facing the different problems in different situations. Chitra Divakaruni, through her strong narratives, grasps the crucial moments of life and portrays such dynamic character that exhibits the true culture of her home land. Divakaruni wonderfully projects the generic qualities of the spices and herbs and merges it with the fictional elements that serve the purpose of the narrative. The Mistress of Spices works as a channel to broadcast the precious value of Indian spices and herbs and its healing properties to the world. Divakaruni beautifully blends Indian spices and herbs in the story of The Mistress of Spices and tries to globalize the significance of this ancient therapy method of Ayurveda which is deeply associated with Indian culture.

Key-words: Culture, Diaspora, Herbs, Spices, Literature

Indian Diasporic writers have been at the center stage from the last two decades chiefly because of the theoretical formulation being generated by their works. They have been using their work to create a bridge between their homeland and their new abode. They write in relation with the culture of their homeland and at the same time they adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land. The characters portrayed in their writings live on the margins of two cultures and create a secure place in between. Nevertheless, the sense of homelessness from which each immigrant suffers from, is genuine and intense but in recent times it has been seen that this pain has been minimized and made less intense through social networking and sense of solidarity.

This aspect is beautifully shown by Bhikhu Parekh who states:

the Diasporic Indian is “like a banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only the way he increasingly comes to feel at home in the world.”(106)

Thus, diasporic literature in a broader perspective, can be seen as such a literature that helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing the global and even spreading universal peace.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known name in Diasporic literature. She knits the fabric of her fiction with the thread of Indian culture to exhibit different shades of Indian life like food, dress, rituals, language and religious practices etc. and through this she successfully leaves an everlasting impression of Indian culture on the reader's mind. This study tries to highlight the priceless knowledge of Indian spices and herbs for healing which is an essential feature of Indian culture. This ancient and valuable knowledge of Indian Ayurveda is skillfully taken by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices*. Indian culture is deeply rooted in the mind of immigrant writers and Divakaruni is not an exception to it. She is deeply associated with her roots and her love for her native land is easily perceivable in her works. She promotes her Indian culture in her writings and tries to project some valuable facets of her native land. As an ambassador, she projects her own culture and helps to enhance its comprehensibility. Culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies. It is a way of life of a group of people- the beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed from generation to generation. People live their life according to the set norms they carried from their ancestors and derived benefit from the ancient knowledge of their sacred scriptures. Knowledge of Indian Ayurveda is very profound and its healing properties are worldly recognized. This knowledge is documented and presented in this tale in a wonderful and impressive way that can be understood by most of the readers. *Mistress of Spices* works as a channel to broadcast the precious value of Indian spices and its healing properties to the world. Though India is known globally as a land of mysticism and yogic culture,

this novel adds a new dimension to its image by imparting the deep knowledge of Ayurveda. India is a great country known for its unity in diversity. This country stands apart for its knowledge and information in all spheres of science, mathematics, medicine, technology, astronomy, food and much more.

Further, all this is made accessible to the world at large through the medium of literature. Divakaruni delves into the deep oceans of her imagination and memory to bring out some different and unique pearls to display a different picture of her native land by this tale.

The story of *The Mistress of Spices* revolves around the life of Tilo and her skillful use of spices.

She is born as Nayan Tara, a name that signifies ‘star seer’, an unwanted child in a poor family in south India. Her birth is considered a burden by her parents. She wanders unattended the whole day in the village. As she grows up, her parents realize her special powers to foresee things. She can see things that others can’t see and with the help of this power she helps people to find their lost articles. She can also presage dangers and calamities. As her name spreads far and wide, sea pirates attack her village and take her with them. They gain more treasure with her talent to fore see things and call her *Bhagyavati* (the harbinger of good luck). She manages to escape from their clutches with the help of serpents and reaches an island. She meets an ageless old woman there and becomes one of her pupil. All the girls there call the old lady ‘the first mother’ or ‘the old one’. This old woman teaches girls different kinds of art. Nayantara learns the art to control spices and their curative nature from the old one. She is a very quick learner amongst all the other girls on that island. After the completion of their training the ‘Old One’ gives a new name to every girl and assigns a specific task to them which suit their nature. The old one also asks them to choose a place for work. Nayantara chooses her name herself, Tilo, and she chooses to be the ‘mistress’ of spices in Oakland. The Old One is happy for her but worried too as Tilo is rebellious and impatient by nature. She tells Tilo that she needs to follow some rules after taking the role of a spice healer. The Old One says that she should not pry into other peoples’ lives, not to touch them, not to leave the store and not to use the power of spices for her own purposes. After passing through the Shampati’s fire, Tilo shifts into an old woman’s body. She gains a new face, new identity of a magical woman who can do wonders with spices. Her real self-hides under the veil of an arthritic old body and she moves to Oakland to run her ‘Spice Bazar’.

The plot of *The Mistress of Spices* is well-knit and grasps the attention of readers at the very outset because of the metonymic name of each chapter that hints at the generic qualities of spices, origin as well as their powers and their use in the text. Divakaruni, while describing the importance of spices, also states how spices play their role in solving the problems of human beings - physical as well as mental. Tilo, the spice healer, treats people who come to her store.

Her trainer, Old One has trained her that ‘different spices may help us with different troubles, and for each person, there is one special spice. (P.71) Tilo rubs sandalwood powder on the palm of Haroun to give him relief from his haunting memories. She also gives a black pepper spice to

Daksha to make her firm to say 'no' to her family that follows the patriarchal system. She gives Kesar and Gita's grandfather almond powder to sweeten their words and thoughts; lotus root powder to Hameeda to enhance love. This unique relation of spices with human lives and their connection with Hindu mythology give the novel a magical touch. The writer treats spices as non-human characters that possess supernatural powers.

The first chapter is titled '*Tilo*' a name derived from Til and the further thirteen chapters are named as *Turmeric*, *Cinnamon*, *Fenugreek*, *Asafoetida*, *Fennel*, *Ginger*, *Peppercorn*, *KaloJire*, *Neem*, *RedChilli*, *Makardwaj*, *Lotus Root*, and *Sesame*.

Describing the significance of spices for this novel, Divakaruni told UCTV in an interview:

"The spices are very important in this book, as characters they have personalities of their own, different sections of novels are named after them, these are the sections where they play an important part, and they develop a relationship with Tilo and speak to her show their love and anger." (Divakaruni)

Divakaruni never leaves her roots and with this work, she tries to globalize the significance of ancient therapy method of Ayurveda which is associated with Indian culture. Divakaruni has portrayed her leading character, Tilo, as a spice healer on the basis of her strong acumen of Indian spices.

Tilo, the heroine of the novel, has 'every Indian spice' (03) at the shelves of her store.

"The spices are my love...They are the ones I work with...every Indian spice that ever was - even the lost one's - gathered here upon the shelves of my store...I say there is no other place in the world quite like this. (04)

Tilo comes from the 'land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers'.(03) She knows the implication of every spice and how to use it.

"I know their origins, and what their colors signify and their smells. I can call each by their true-name it was given at the first when earth splits like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers...you have forgotten the old secrets ... (03)

The Indian subcontinent has long been regarded as a 'land of spices. The author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni hails from India and has very cleverly picked up a variety of Indian spices which besides flavoring, coloring or preserving food, are used for their medicinal/healing properties. The generic qualities of the spices are merged with the fictional elements that serve the purpose of the narrative.

The Latin name for **turmeric** is *Curcuma Longa* that comes from an Arabic word *Kurkum*. In

Sanskrit, it is called 'Haridhara' (the golden one). Turmeric is highly valued for its healing properties, preservation characteristics, and spiritual qualities. Turmeric, also named Halud, is yellow in color as the 'colour of daybreak' and 'it is placed on the heads of a newborn for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at the puja, rubbed into the borders of new and even wedding saris. It is rich in properties as if it is 'rubbed on the skin it erases, blemishes and wrinkles, it sucks away age and fat and gives the skin a pale golden glow'. Tilo uses turmeric to heal the wound of her customers. She keeps turmeric powder in the bag of Lalita with some praying words to help her in her suffering.

Cinnamon or Dalchini is a pleasantly aromatic mid-brown spice obtained from the inner bark of Cinnamomum tree. It is a wonderful drug plant. It improves serum glucose, lower fasting blood glucose and reduces Triglycerides thus helping diabetics. Tilo tucks cinnamon stick into Jagjit's turban to help him make friends in his school and to gain strength. She wants him to be a

"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" (40, MOS)

Fenugreek is a small, annual plant with leaves consisting of three small oblong leaflets. The leaves and seeds are used as an aromatic spice and a healer too. It contains antioxidants and powerful nutrients. It is a small speckled seed was first sown by Shabari, oldest woman in the world. It tastes bitter but renders the body sweet again, ready for love. Tilo used this spice to cure Ratna who is suffering from poison in her womb, Binita, who has breast cancer.

Asafoetida is a sulfurous, onion-smelling, hard resinous gum spices obtained from the erudite of root-stock of Ferula asafoetida plant. The word 'Ferula' means carrier; 'as' means resin and 'felid' is an offensive odor. It is of wonderful medicinal importance. It is used in Hysteria, loss of appetite, ulcers, flatulence, respiratory disorders, anti-helminthic activity probably because of its nasty pungent smell. In *The Mistress of Spices*, it is referred to as 'an antidote of love' (74, MOS).

Fennel is a mild flavored, sweet aromatic seed spice from the Mediterranean. It provides relief from anemia, indigestion, respiratory disorder etc. if a pinch is taken after every meal; it freshens the breath and helps indigestion. It gives mental strength for what must be done. It even cools the temper. It also uses to improve brain function. Fennel is the spice Tilo gives to Ahuja's young wife who is in dire need of mental strength because of Ahuja's untoward behavior.

Ginger spice is obtained from the underground, palmately digitate rhizomes of an herbaceous perennial plant. Golden ginger is used by healer Charak to relight the belly fire. It is an Asian spice that has a unique ability to relieve nausea and pain, therefore, is taken by the healer (Tilo) herself as a hot concoction. It also enhances bones health and strengthens the immune system.

Black pepper/ peppercorn is a flowering vine, cultivated for its fruits which are usually dried and used as a spice for seasoning and also for medicinal purposes. It helps to improve digestion by stimulating the secretion of digestive juices and enzymes, relieves peptic ulcers. It also relieves cold and cough fights infections and improves perspiration. It has anti-oxidant properties also. In *The Mistress of Spices*, it is used to understand the hidden desire of Native American as it has the ability to sweat secrets from you. Tilo gives of this spice for Daksha and tells her to boil it and drink and learn to say 'No' and to speak for oneself which is so hard for Indian women.

Kalo Jire or Black cumin seeds are extremely beneficial in protecting our body against a wide variety of disease. It keeps our heart healthy control high blood pressure, fights cancer, keeps our liver healthy and also helps in reducing weight. Overall it brings a condition of general wellbeing. This is the probable reason for Tilo sprinkle the seeds "for all who have suffered from America" (173), and especially to Haroun for his safety.

Neem, *Azadirachta indica*, a tree native to Indian subcontinent is known worldwide for its medicinal properties. Practically all its parts are used as medicine. The leaves have been demonstrated to exhibit immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, antihyperglycaemic, antiulcer, anti-malarial, antibacterial properties. Tilo uses the paste of neem leaves for her skin to cleanse, disinfect and to beautify.

Red Chili is a fruit of capsicum plant belonging to the potato family, are a rich source of vitamin A and C. Excessive use of this spice cause burning sensation. Divakaruni has used this spice as a very potent powerful one. It has the power to destroy the entire city as it comes from Lanka, a sign of danger. Born from Agni (god of fire), it is the cleanser of evil

Makaradwaj is an ayurvedic medicine with herbal and mineral ingredients also referred to as sulfide of Mercury. This can be taken only under strict medical supervision as self-medication can cause harm. It is a wonderful drug used in anti-aging and aphrodisiac treatment. It improves the strength of heart and immunity. Makardhwaj is referred to as the conqueror of time by Divakaruni. It is the spice which Tilo uses to beautify herself.

Lotus root helps in long passionate love life. **Dhania or Coriander** seed is used for clearing sight. When you soak it and drink the water it purges you of old guilts. **Amchur** is used to heal the taste buds and bring back the love of life **Mahamul** is the root spice and it is used to enhance fortune, to bring the success of joy and to avert ill luck. **Tulsi** is the basil plant of humility. It is the curer of ego. It slakes the craving for power, turns the thoughts inwards and away from worldliness. **Hartuki** is shriveled seed in the shape of a womb - helps mothers to bear the pain that starts with birthing. Astringent leaf dried dark on the stem is used to reduce mistrust and avarice. Powder of **almond** and **kesar** to boil in milk, to drink at bedtime to sweeten your words and thoughts and to remember the love buried under the anger. **Sandalwood** is known for its cooling properties. It is used to soothe the mind, to forget the pain and it is good for skin also.

Divakaruni has done a lot of research on Ayurveda and incorporates all that information in her novel. In one of her conversations, she says that:

“I have been interested in the traditional ancient Hindu system of medicine, for a long time so I did a lot of ayurvedic research as well. At Berkeley and in the Bay area, there are a lot of ayurvedic practitioners and you can get a lot of books as well. So I did do a lot of Ayurvedic research. Some of it came out of, again, the folklore of Bengal, the ways in which spices were used in my home when I was growing up, not for cooking but for medicinal purposes. There are some good luck spices. You have certain ceremonies where you would use certain spices to bring good luck and avert the evil eye—the mustard seed to avert the evil eye and the haldi, which is auspicious.” (Seshachari, Neila, 2001)

The deep analysis of spices has helped Divakaruni to present the identities of her characters as magical and strong. Inderpal Grewal also finds *The Mistress of Spices* “an exotic aesthetic” comprises of Hindu mysticism and ancient wisdom with India associated from ages. He comments on the use of spices in the novel:

“This narrative of ancient and modern [...] sutures the world of late twentieth century cosmopolitan travel and cuisine with American cultural feminism’s new translational spiritualities that enable non-western goddess. Exotic power is empowerment, and feminism and exoticism are first demarcated and reconciled. Exotic spices enable women to become feminist subjects by using their magical and healing qualities to fight patriarchal Indian traditions” (2005:77).

Divakaruni infuses the age-old knowledge of spices and herbs in this story to add a new ingredient in the flavor of culinary fiction. (1997). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni’s use of the healing properties of spices and herbs for human suffering gives an alive character even to the spices. In writer’s own words, “The spices are used for more than flavorings. They have magical power in their own, and they provide remedies for physical maladies as well as curses for spiritual ills.”

Literature is great because of its universality. It does not deal with the any particular society or a particular community but it is for whole human kind. Diasporic writers have developed a flair for expression and in their wonderful narratives they exhibit different and good shades of their native land culture. Art is not only for art sake but it is for life sake and a good piece of literature will accomplish this motive and give benefit to the whole world.

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