

## Food and Culture in Reference to the Novel *Mistress of Spices*

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### Abstract

As C.S Lewis points out “Eating and reading are two pleasures that combine admirably”. Food has so much to do with Culture in the first place. Food and culture go hand in hand. Food retains Cultural identity and it can be associated with Self Identity. It is necessary in defining family, class and ethnic identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *Mistress of Spices* brings out the cultural authenticity of India through the spices.

**Keywords:** chitra banerjee divakaruni, food and culture, identity

### 1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni provides new dimensions to the Contemporary Literature. She aims at educating people about the problems of Indian Immigrant Women and also exposes the culture of Indians to the Readers around the globe. Through her works, one will be able to understand the way that a women feels being an immigrant. She predominantly writes about the Indian women in America. Despite suffering so much in the whole new place, Divakaruni has established her literature on a large basis and have been acknowledged for her writing and have received so many awards. There are so many women writers like Divakaruni who through their novel have made the world know of their existence.

In *Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives the food a different perspective. Food in the novel represent the authenticity of India. Divakaruni spiced up the novel by adding magical elements to the food. The unique feature of Indian food is the combination of spices which also has the medicinal properties. Indians have used these spices even before 3000 years, which has been recorded in the Sanskrit texts. Indians incorporate foods into so many things of their daily life. (Ali, Jabir 2007) Indian people use Red chillies and salt to cast away the evil eye.

People use turmeric in a very auspicious way, every good festival would have turmeric in some way or the other. All these spices construct an indigenous pattern of its own (Bodenlos, Jamie and Bernadette Wormuth 2013).

*Mistress of Spices* is a story of a young lady named Tilo, who runs a spice store at America. She has been trained as mistress of spices who has magical command over the spices. Each of the chapter in the novel has the reference to the spice. (Ceisel, Christina 2018) The spices are blended with emotions and personalities of the characters in the novel. Tilo

Uses the spice to heal and comfort the people, but she is also able to see the consequence of the spice when it is used in a wrong way (Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee 1997).

Being a Bengali, Divakaruni uses all the spices used in the Bengali cuisine. Biter, sour, sweet, salty and pungent are the five main tastes that is taken care in a traditional Bengali lunch.

I am a Mistress of Spices.

I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island.

But the spices are my love.

I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky from amchur to zafran, they bow to my command.

At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers.

. . . They all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot. (Divakaruni 3)

Through these lines we are able to see that she identifies herself with the spices. (Forero, Oscar 2009) Tilo strongly believes that every spice has unique properties and it is designed for an individual. Indian household can't stand a day without these spices.

Food can also be associated with memory. Food is seen as an effective trigger of memories. When we eat a particular food, the taste and the smell brings back some memory. (Golait, Ramesh and N.C. Pradhan 2006) Some happy and some sad. Even the place or the setting can also be associated with some memories and emotions. Food is also considered as a part of religion (Gronow, Jukka 1997).

“The art of putting together food is a magical thing and it is done right it has power to soften the most hardened heart. My mother always said that when you work with what you love, you work with magic. However if the ingredients are incorrectly administered, or if you work with bad intentions it can bring the most disastrous results” (The Hundred Shades of White)

Food is adopted a very important role in the literature where they are denote the culture of the particular place. Culture plays a very important role in life of a person. Culture defines the person as a whole. The way

He/her is brought up is also decided by the culture. India is a country which is rich in culture. We as Indians have our own rich traditions and customs. Despite being well educated and modernized. There is still, so many traditions which has been passed to them generation after generation.

As a human being matures from childhood to adulthood, the preference of food changes as one grows. Like baby food that is made easy for digestion are the fables and folktales that have lighter subjects have a greater impact in exhibiting the culture of a particular place. People moving to the other parts of the world generally carry a lot of spices and masalas to stock them up for months. (Khare, Ravindra, 1976) Despite moving to a foreign Land, people find it really hard to survive without the spices which is unique to our place. These spices carry the richness of India. Divakaruni brings out her native Bengali culture, its rich traditions, customs, practices in most of her novels. (Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas 2012) Most of the South Asian diasporic writers include references to the native food and consider it as an intrinsic part of their ethnic culture and one piece of their culture that they can easily carry with them to the new country.

Hence, food are used to convey the culture that slides smooth into the system. As one grows, food changes from liquids to solid food as the grown up adult would chew and digest the solid food without any need of breaking it down; fiction serves as wholesome food that is broken down by the system of mind into smaller fragments (Lewis C.S 2022).

Food and by extension recipes passed down through generations, contain complex cultural influences. These nuances are unique to geographical locations. For example even within the country of India, rice-based South Indian cuisine significantly differs from flour-based North Indian type. (Nair, Preethi 2010) Culture finds its expression in the literature, language, music, rituals and additionally food habits of a region and ethnicity. Food, for Indians, carries strong nostalgic connections with one's roots. By forging a bond with the homeland, food essentially becomes one of the aspects of identity.

### 3. Conclusion

Clearly, Food and culture go hand in hand in reference to the novel *Mistress of Spices*. The author explicitly introduces identity to play a major role in order to bring out the connections to who we are through her traditional means of using spices. No matter where we go, the food of our native place is always special and one can't deny it. Her aims exposes the challenges faced by the Indian Immigrant women and how they make the world a better place through their existence right now. Without a doubt, Divakaruni brings out a solace in relation to Food and Culture and wraps up the connections to define Identity.

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