

Spices as Vessels of Memory of Homeland in “*the Mistress of Spices*”

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1. Introduction

This research paper examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays diasporic themes in her works especially in the context of *The Mistress of Spices*. Her writing often reflects the multifaceted experiences of Indians living abroad in both Eastern and Western settings, featuring characters who attempt to preserve their vibrant Indian culture through elements such as storyline, language, imagery, and character portrayal. The paper also brings attention to the challenges faced by women as they attempt to define their identities within the diasporic context. This paper particularly in the context of the novel *The Mistress of Spices* shows that how spices play role in finding the identity of Tilo and also connect her with her homeland.

The story begins with a woman named Tilottama, who introduces herself as a *mistress of spices*. Yet her expertise extends far beyond spices; she is well-versed in metals, minerals, earth, sand, stones, gems, and even fiery liquids. She acquired this knowledge while living on the island. The opening chapter, titled ‘Tilo’ presents her narration, where she explains that despite all she has learned, the spices are what she cherishes most.

She knows where every spice comes from, the colors they bear, and the scents they release. From amchur to saffron, all spices answer to her. When she murmurs, they reveal their secret, enchanted powers. She carries the inherited wisdom passed down through Indian women for generations — like how soft vanilla beans soaked in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist can ward off the evil eye.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, spices become powerful vessels of memory, carrying with them the scents, colors, and sensations of the homeland that characters have left behind. For Tilo, each spice is more than an ingredient—it is a living fragment of India’s past, preserving stories, traditions, and emotions embedded across generations. When she uses them to guide the people who visit her shop, the spices awaken their buried recollections: childhood kitchens, ancestral rituals, forgotten landscapes, and the comforts of a culture they long for yet cannot fully return to. Through these sensory triggers, the novel shows how migrants reconstruct identity and belonging; the spices serve as bridges between their present lives in America and the India they remember, desire, or grieve. In this way, spices are not just tools of healing but intimate repositories of cultural memory and the homeland’s enduring presence.

Spices in *The Mistress of Spices* function as sensory anchors that root immigrant characters to the landscapes they have crossed oceans to leave behind. The mere touch or aroma of turmeric, asafoetida,

or cardamom can unlock long-suppressed memories—of mothers cooking in open courtyards, of festival days fragrant with sweets, or of the monsoon-damp markets where these spices were first encountered. These memories arrive not as distant recollections but as vivid, embodied experiences, blurring the boundary between present and past. Through these moments, the novel shows how migrants carry their homeland not in objects or photographs but in the sensory worlds that remain alive within them.

Moreover, the spices enable characters to make sense of their dislocation. In the unfamiliar terrain of America, where identities feel fractured, the spices become cultural companions that restore coherence. For many visitors to Tilo's shop, the spices help them remember who they were before migration—with its losses, silences, and compromises—allowing them to reconnect with versions of themselves shaped by heritage and tradition. This process of remembering becomes a form of healing, a way to reclaim agency in a world where they often feel invisible.

For Tilo herself, the spices are a living archive of India's collective memory. Each spice "speaks" to her, carrying centuries of women's knowledge, myth, and ritual, suggesting that memory is not merely personal but communal. Through her connection with the spices, she embodies the cultural continuity that migration threatens to sever. Her role as mistress is thus not only magical but custodial: she preserves diasporic memory and offers it back to those who have forgotten or been forced to forget.

Finally, the novel uses spices to highlight how memory can be both comforting and burdensome. While some characters find solace in the recollections the spices evoke, others feel the ache of nostalgia sharpened. The spices remind them of the distance between who they are now and the lives they once imagined. In this tension, *The Mistress of Spices* captures the complex emotional terrain of diaspora—where longing and loss coexist, and where memory is both a refuge and a reminder of exile.

Keywords: Spices, memory, identities, culture, homelands.

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