

# Spices of Survival: Ethnomedicine and Female Healing in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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## Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* offers a rich imaginative space where indigenous knowledge and spiritual healing intersect with modern urban life. This paper explores how the novel re-creates traditional Indian ethno-medical practices through the figure of Tilo, a healer trained in the ancient lore of spices. The narrative's magical realism becomes a metaphor for the continuity of tribal and folk medicinal wisdom, where every spice functions as both cultural memory and curative force. By linking Tilo's healing art to the broader indigenous pharmacopeia of Ayurveda and folk medicine, the paper argues that Divakaruni reclaims the authority of female healers as custodians of ecological and emotional balance. The study further investigates the tension between traditional ethno-healing systems and Western biomedical rationality, revealing how healing in the novel symbolizes resistance to cultural dislocation and gender marginalization. Drawing on concepts from postcolonial ecofeminism and ethno botanical studies, the paper concludes that *The Mistress of Spices* transforms the act of healing into a narrative of survival, identity, and reclamation of indigenous epistemologies.

**Keywords:** Ethnomedicine, Indigenous Healing, Ecofeminism, Postcolonialism, Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*

## Introduction

*The Mistress of Spices* bridges myth, magic, and immigrant experiences, emphasizing the enduring significance of traditional Indian healing practices. Tilo, a mystical spice mistress trained in the ancient arts of herbs and spices, addresses ailments of the body, mind, and spirit, functioning as both healer and cultural custodian (Divakaruni 23). The novel demonstrates how ethno medicine operates as a form of **cultural preservation** and **female empowerment**, providing solutions for diasporic challenges while sustaining heritage. This paper will explore the intersections of traditional Indian healing practices, feminist narratives, and postcolonial discourse within the context of Divakaruni's novel.

The study argues that Divakaruni's narrative illustrates the **interconnectedness of ethnomedicine, diasporic identity, and personal transformation**, highlighting the ways in which traditional knowledge adapts to modern contexts. Healing is both practical and symbolic, serving to navigate alienation, restore balance, and reinforces cultural memory.

## Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a **tribal ethnomedicine perspective**, emphasizing the holistic, community-centered,

and culturally embedded aspects of healing. Tribal and indigenous healing systems treat the body, mind, and spirit as interdependent, integrating herbs, rituals, and spiritual guidance into therapeutic practice.

Three key dimensions guide the analysis:

1. **Cultural Preservation** – Traditional healing practices maintain continuity of cultural knowledge and identity across generations and diasporic contexts.
2. **Holistic Healing** – Treatment addresses physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, emphasizing interconnectedness.
3. **Diasporic Adaptation** – Indigenous knowledge is adapted to meet the challenges of migration and cultural dislocation.

Tilo embodies these principles, bridging Indian traditions and the immigrant experience while preserving the ethical and spiritual dimensions of tribal ethnomedicine.

### **Ethnomedicine and Healing in the Indian Context**

Ethnomedicine in *The Mistress of Spices* emphasizes **integrated, holistic care**. Spices serve multiple purposes: turmeric purifies, cinnamon alleviates homesickness, cardamom restores emotional balance, and cloves protect against negative influences. Tilo observes, “Each spice has its own voice, and it knows which heart it should touch” (Divakaruni 23), illustrating the dual physical and emotional functions of ethnomedicine. Healing in the novel is relational. Tilo carefully monitors the emotional, spiritual, and cultural circumstances of her customers, tailoring remedies that address their individual needs. When a young man experiences alienation in America, Tilo prescribes a specific blend to reconnect him with his heritage, while guiding him toward emotional resilience. Healing is thus **context-specific**, addressing the holistic wellbeing of both body and spirit while reinforcing cultural identity.

Diasporic environments amplify the significance of ethnomedicine. Immigrants often face **cultural dislocation, isolation, and nostalgia**, and Tilo’s spices provide both therapeutic and symbolic support. The practices she maintains in her shop serve as conduits for cultural continuity, preserving ancient knowledge within a modern, urban landscape.

### **Analysis of *The Mistress of Spices***

Tilo is a liminal figure, navigating the mystical and mundane, the traditional and modern, India and America. Her mastery of spices allows her to mediate between the worlds of her customers and her own cultural heritage. Cinnamon soothes homesickness, turmeric cleanses, and cardamom restores emotional stability. She reminds her customers, “A spice can heal the body, but it must also heal the soul” (Divakaruni 45).

The novel foregrounds female agency. Despite her magical constraints, Tilo exercises autonomy, ethical judgment, and spiritual authority. She empowers others to confront emotional and cultural challenges while maintaining her own responsibilities. Her interventions are subtle but transformative, guiding individuals to self-awareness, reconciliation, and personal growth. Narrative structure reinforces the integration of healing with daily life. Divakaruni blends magical realism and ordinary events to show that ethnomedicine persists dynamically, addressing both tangible ailments and the emotional complexities of immigrant life. Tilo’s influence exemplifies that agency and empowerment often manifest in ethical action, guidance, and nurturance, not just overt rebellion or defiance.

### Tribal Ethnomedicine and Cultural Survival

Divakaruni emphasizes the role of ethnomedicine as a tool for cultural survival. Tilo preserves, adapts, and transmits ancient knowledge through her meticulous care of spices and her attentiveness to the needs of her community. Each act of healing sustains cultural memory and fosters connections across generations, even within diasporic contexts. Healing is also adaptive. Tilo modifies traditional practices to meet the realities of life in America, illustrating that ethnomedicine is flexible, resilient, and responsive. Immigrants' struggles with identity, isolation, and cultural displacement are addressed through symbolic and practical uses of spices. Healing becomes a vehicle for both personal resilience and cultural preservation, demonstrating the enduring relevance of indigenous knowledge. Empowerment, particularly for women, is central to the novel. Tilo's expertise allows her to wield authority, guide her customers ethically, and assert her presence in a world where women's roles are often constrained. Through her interventions, Divakaruni shows that ethnomedicine is not only a healing practice but also a means of cultural continuity, self-realization, and empowerment.

### Conclusion

*The Mistress of Spices* illustrates the dynamic interplay between ethnomedicine, female agency, and diasporic adaptation. Tilo's mastery of spices enables her to heal the body, mind, and spirit, while preserving cultural knowledge in a new environment. The novel portrays healing as a form of resilience and empowerment, emphasizing the continuity of tribal and indigenous practices in the face of migration and cultural transformation.

Through Tilo's journey, Divakaruni underscores that traditional knowledge is both adaptable and essential, offering solutions for physical, emotional, and cultural challenges in the diaspora. Spices become not only instruments of healing but also symbols of heritage, identity, and empowerment, demonstrating literature's capacity to preserve and transmit ethnomedicinal wisdom across contexts.

### Work Cited

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