

Spicing the Subaltern: Food, Gender, and Resistance in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

Mishail Sharma

University of Delhi.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) offers a nuanced narrative framework for examining the intersections of food, identity, and subalternity within the diasporic Indian context. This paper explores how the novel utilises the language of food, particularly the symbolism of spices, to construct a gastrosubaltern consciousness in which culinary practice serves both as a means of empowerment and as a tool of regulation.

Through the character of Tilo, the narrative reimagines the spice shop as a liminal space that mediates between cultural memory and assimilation, tradition and modernity, and silence and speech. This paper argues that Divakaruni transforms spices from mere culinary ingredients into epistemological and political instruments that express the silenced experiences of migrant women. By navigating the boundaries between gendered servitude and spiritual mastery, Tilo's relationship with food challenges patriarchal and colonial narratives that dictate dietary practices. The novel's examination of the politics of purity, healing, and desire further illustrates how food mediates caste, class, and religious hierarchies, thereby extending the discourse of gastrosubalternism into transnational contexts.

Drawing on postcolonial feminist and food studies frameworks, this paper interprets *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) as a text that decolonises the kitchen, transforming culinary knowledge into a mode of resistance and reparation. In doing so, the novel positions food as both an affective and political medium through which marginalised voices reclaim agency and renegotiate belonging within Indian and global cultural imaginaries.

Keywords: gastrosubalternism, food politics, feminism, diaspora, resistance.

Introduction

Food has increasingly been recognised as a critical site through which literature negotiates power, identity, and marginality. Far from being a neutral element of everyday life, food functions as a cultural text that encodes hierarchies of caste, gender, class, race, and religion. As Sidney Mintz argues, food must be understood as "a social fact," shaped by historical processes of labour, empire, and inequality (3). In Indian contexts, especially, food practices have served as regulatory mechanisms that govern social inclusion and exclusion, determining who may eat what, with whom, and under what conditions (Appadurai 15).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) situates food at the centre of diasporic Indian life, transforming spices into agents of memory, care, discipline, and resistance. Set in Oakland, California, the novel follows Tilo, a woman trained in a mystical culinary tradition that enables her to heal immigrants' suffering through Indian spices. Although the spice shop appears to be a benevolent space of healing, it is also governed by

strict ethical laws that restrict personal desire, mobility, and autonomy. Within this narrative, food functions simultaneously as a source of power and a mechanism of control.

This study examines *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) through the lens of gastrosubalternism, which highlights food as a central site for the production, regulation, and articulation of subaltern identities. Drawing on Subaltern Studies, feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and critical food studies, it argues that Divakaruni employs culinary epistemologies to convey marginalised experiences that remain unspoken within dominant discourses. The novel demonstrates that food can function both as an instrument of oppression and as a medium of resistance, particularly for women navigating diasporic precarity. Through close textual analysis, this paper shows how *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) reimagines the kitchen and spice rack as politically charged spaces for negotiating subaltern agency.

Subaltern Studies, particularly in Ranajit Guha's work, emphasises how elite historiographies erase the agency of marginalised groups, leaving them silent within dominant narratives (Guha 45). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicates this framework by asking whether the subaltern can truly speak within systems that structurally silence them (Spivak 287). Gastrosubalternism extends these concerns to the realm of food, examining how culinary practices participate in the production and regulation of subalternity.

Food has long served as a powerful marker of social difference in India. Arjun Appadurai's work on Indian cuisine shows how commensality, purity, and dietary codes reinforce caste hierarchies and religious identities (Appadurai 18). Food thus becomes an instrument of what Michel Foucault calls "biopower," a means of governing bodies through everyday practices rather than overt violence (Foucault 139). Who cooks, who eats, and who serves are deeply political questions.

Culinary Authority and Disciplinary Law

From the novel's opening pages, Tilo establishes her authority through food: "*I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work magic with what I cook*" (Divakaruni 3). This declaration positions culinary knowledge as a form of power that transcends scientific or institutional frameworks. However, this power is strictly regulated by an inflexible set of rules imposed by the First Mother, the matriarchal authority who initiates Tilo into the mastery of spice.

The laws governing the spices are absolute: "*The spices must never be used for yourself. You must not touch another human being. You must not leave the store*" (Divakaruni 43). These injunctions transform culinary practice into a disciplinary regime. Tilo internalises these rules, confessing that "*the rules of the spices were etched into my bones*" (48). Her obedience reflects what Pierre Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence, the internalisation of domination as ethical necessity (Bourdieu 170).

Food thus becomes a site of paradox. While spices grant Tilo authority, they also demand self-erasure. Her identity is defined solely by service to others, echoing gendered expectations placed on women within patriarchal systems. From a gastrosubaltern perspective, Tilo's power exists only insofar as her autonomy is denied. In diasporic contexts, these food politics are further complicated by racialization and capitalism. As Krishnendu Ray notes,

immigrant cuisines are often celebrated and consumed even as immigrant bodies remain marginalised and precarious (Ray 12). Divakaruni's spice shop exists precisely within this tension. It preserves cultural memory while risking commodification.

Gastrosubalternism facilitates an interpretation of *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) that reveals how food mediates power across gendered, racialised, and transnational contexts. Culinary practices become sites where subaltern subjects are both disciplined and able to develop strategies for survival and resistance.

The Spice Shop as Liminal Space

The spice shop functions as a liminal space in Victor Turner's sense, sited between cultures, identities, and moral orders (Turner 95). Tilo describes it as "*a place where the past and present meet, where the old world flows into the new*" (Divakaruni 21). For diasporic subjects, the shop offers sensory access to memory. When customers inhale the scent of spices, "*their eyes soften with remembering*" (24). Yet liminality does not guarantee liberation. The shop also confines Tilo, both physically and symbolically. She is forbidden from leaving, touching, or desiring. The space that sustains the community simultaneously imprisons its caretaker. This contradiction mirrors the condition of the gastrosubaltern subject, central to communal survival yet denied agency and mobility.

Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies is particularly relevant in this context. Spices circulate emotions such as longing, grief, and hope, binding individuals together through shared sensory experience (Ahmed 11). However, Tilo herself is excluded from these affective exchanges. She facilitates healing but is unable to participate in relational intimacy, which reinforces her subaltern position.

Food work has historically been feminised and devalued, even as it remains essential to social reproduction. Carole Counihan argues that women's identities are often constructed through food practices that simultaneously empower and constrain them (Counihan 7). Tilo embodies this paradox. Her authority derives from culinary knowledge, yet her body and desire are subject to intense regulation.

The women who visit the spice shop reveal different forms of gendered suffering. One abused woman pleads, "*If only there were something I could put in his food so he would not raise his hand*" (Divakaruni 89). Here, food becomes a tool for negotiating survival within violent domestic structures. Tilo recognises the limits of her power, admitting, "*I give them spices, but I cannot give them freedom*" (97).

This moment echoes Spivak's claim that the subaltern woman's voice is often mediated rather than directly articulated (Spivak 304). In Divakaruni's novel, women "speak" through food—through turmeric, fenugreek, and chilli—rather than through open rebellion. Yet this mediation is not insignificant. As Tilo observes, "*Sometimes a pinch of turmeric is all the power we are allowed*" (102). Culinary practice becomes a means of endurance, solidarity, and partial resistance.

Diaspora, Nostalgia, and Culinary Memory

For immigrant communities, food often functions as a repository of memory. Tilo notes that her customers come to the shop because “*in this land where everything smells of metal and speed, they want the scent of home*” (Divakaruni 31). Spices evoke a sensory homeland that resists the erasures of migration. However, nostalgia is politically complex. The spice shop risks commodifying longing, transforming cultural memory into consumable objects. Tilo herself questions this dynamic: “*I wonder if I am selling comfort or illusion*” (34). This tension aligns with Krishnendu Ray’s critique of ethnic food as both a means of cultural survival and a capitalist spectacle.

Divakaruni avoids romanticising tradition by presenting food as adaptive rather than static. Spices must adjust to new contexts, just as immigrants must. The shop thus becomes a site of negotiation rather than preservation, complicating binary oppositions between tradition and modernity. Tilo’s desire for Raven represents a decisive rupture in the narrative. When she touches him, she confesses, “*In that instant, the spices screamed*” (Divakaruni 181). The rebellion of the spices externalises the violence of an ethical system that demands self-denial. Tilo begins to question the morality of obedience: “*What kind of goodness asks you to erase your own heart?*” (187).

Michel Foucault’s notion of ethical self-fashioning is crucial here. Ethics, for Foucault, emerges not through submission to imposed rules but through reflective engagement with desire and responsibility (Foucault 262). Tilo’s transgression is not merely personal; it is political. By choosing desire, she rejects a sacrificial model of femininity that equates goodness with self-erasure. Her declaration, “*For the first time, I choose myself*” (192), marks a significant transformation. Food no longer functions solely as a disciplinary tool but becomes a site of ethical negotiation. From a gastrosubaltern perspective, this moment signifies resistance: a refusal to allow culinary obligation to dictate identity.

The burning of the spice shop symbolises the collapse of rigid culinary hierarchies. Tilo describes the destruction vividly: “*The jars burst, releasing their scents like last cries—chilli, clove, coriander*” (Divakaruni 203). Fire, often associated with purification, here enables transformation rather than punishment. Through destruction, Tilo is released from absolute obedience. She chooses a new name and a reconstituted identity, reflecting: “*I will still cook. But now, I will decide how and for whom*” (210). This moment reclaims culinary practice as a choice rather than an obligation. Food becomes, as bell hooks describes, a “site of possibility,” where marginalised subjects negotiate dignity and belonging (hooks 63). The kitchen is transformed from a space of enforced service into one of ethical agency.

Resistance in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is subtle rather than overt. It operates through everyday acts such as choosing a spice, breaking a rule, or redefining care. These micro-resistances accumulate, enabling alternative modes of belonging. The novel’s final assertion, “*Spices are not masters. They are companions*” (Divakaruni 214), reimagines culinary ethics as relational rather than authoritarian. Through this re-signification, Divakaruni decolonises food, reclaiming spices from colonial histories of exploitation and patriarchal systems of control. Culinary knowledge emerges as embodied wisdom, capable of expressing subaltern experience beyond the limits of speech.

Conclusion

The Mistress of Spices (1997) offers a compelling literary meditation on the ethics and politics of food in diasporic Indian life. Through the lens of gastrosubalternism, the novel shows how culinary practices shape subaltern identities, mediating gender, power, and resistance. Food functions as both a mechanism of discipline and a medium of transformation, enabling marginalized subjects to negotiate agency. By embedding subaltern voices within sensory and affective registers, Divakaruni allows food to communicate where language is insufficient. The novel ultimately reimagines the kitchen as a contested political space, where identities are not only regulated but also reconfigured through everyday acts of care and resistance.

Works Cited

1. Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.
2. Appadurai, Arjun. "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1988, pp. 3–24.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard UP, 1991.
4. Counihan, Carole. *The Anthropology of Food and Body*. Routledge, 1999.
5. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. Anchor Books, 1997.
6. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1985.
7. Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Duke UP, 1999.
8. hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2009.
9. Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Penguin, 1985.
10. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders*. Duke UP, 2003.
11. Ray, Krishnendu. *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*. Temple UP, 2004.
12. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.
13. Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine, 1969.