

## SPICES ACROSS BORDERS: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF FOOD REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY DIASPORIC FICTION

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**Abstract:** Cross-cultural interactions make identities fluid and in diasporic fiction where one hangs between two worlds belonging to none, food becomes one of the prominent socio-cultural markers affecting and creating life. Food, beyond its overtly materialistic characteristics stand for many a thing we are often unaware of. It is not just about eating or energy supplement but more about connecting lives, people, culture, traditions, and differences. Terry Eagleton draws a subtle connection between eating and writing while A.K. Ramanujan posits that food comprises of an alternative system of signification contributing to the literary world. Food is the trope through which women conceive, materialize, and experience their identity stories. It can even be considered as a transgressive symbol for women writers, writing about food seems to cross the threshold, the boundaries of kitchen. Cooking and sharing meals become significant avenues for passing down heirloom, often an honest endeavour to make younger generations know the importance of traditional dishes. Not only that the characters negotiate their dual identities with food. On one hand a strong repugnance to native food and on another hand parents' compulsion on having them make them negotiate this double standard behaviour. Women writers' growing interest in food narratives give them a space where they can substantiate their individuality and arbitrate the relationship of food with their ethnicity. Food fiction establishes a cross-cultural bonding between generations moving towards transnational perspectives embracing diversity. Not only this, food is rich in sensory experiences and its expressions can evoke strong emotions. Food can be an expression of joy, longing, nostalgia, sorrow contributing to the emotional depth of the narrative.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural, Diaspora, Food fiction, Tradition, Writing, Transgression, Women.

**Introduction:** In diasporic women fiction, food becomes a dynamic and multifaceted element that renders taste to the narrative through strong aroma of emotions, culture, belongingness, and resilience. Food becomes a tool for character development linking connections and excavating themes like identity and memory. Food plays a significant role in describing the conflict and fusion of Bengali and American cultures in the protagonists' life. Food becomes the medium for bridging the cultural gaps between nations and a mode of connection, tradition, and nostalgia. Food acts as a universal language allowing different cultures to communicate and connect with each other. Shared meals become a trope for cultural translation facilitating understanding and mutual kinship. By sharing and understanding each other's culinary taste, characters use food as a transnational weapon to break down barriers, stereotypes contributing to a more nuanced understanding of diversity in cultures. The

communal dining fosters a sense of unity, permitting individuals to laud diverse cultures through the act of breaking bread together.

**Research Methodology and Objectives:** The research methodology would be to employ close reading of the texts to see how food is used as a cultural bridge and as a transnational weapon to identify closeness between cultures and cultural assimilation and adaptation. A cultural studies framework would also analyse the socio-cultural context described in the novels to see how food reflects, challenges, or negotiates with the cultural norms and subjectivity within the diasporic environment. The comparative analysis tool can also help to find out the analogies and differences between foods from different topography and show how it acts as a transnational weapon.

The objective of this study would be to excavate the representation of food putting emphasis on its symbolic, cultural, and narrative relevance. It can be further shown how food serves as a means to bridge gaps within the context of diasporic communities and how it transcends topographical and cultural boundaries. It aims to indicate the recurring patterns, motifs and narrative strategies related to food and the reader's cultural awareness and knowledge about different types of cuisines. Sharing meals contribute to cultural continuity for individuals navigating a new cultural landscape.

**Research Question:** How does the depiction of food in diasporic fiction reflect transnational themes and in what ways does it transcend geographical and cultural boundaries? How food gives agency to the women protagonists and writers to establish their own identity outside the threshold of kitchen?

**Textual Analysis:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* can be read as food narratives which not only bring out the idiosyncrasies in the characters but also show how food acts as a trope to navigate cultural crisis and establish a link to the greater world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a rich and enchanting food narrative that weaves together magical realism, cultural assimilation and the healing power of spices. A young woman named Tilo is immensely beautiful outside and powerful inside because she is the mistress of a wide variety of exotic spices and through the help of her spices, she can actually heal people and bring them out of their crisis. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of an Indian community in Oakland, California. The novel also evokes elements of magic realism because the spices are personified and imbued with magical powers which can bring about transformation in people. Each spice is attributed with human qualities and possess distinct power and personality as if they were characters themselves. Cinnamon with its warmth, symbolizes love and passion, turmeric represents healing; chilli peppers embody fiery emotions etc. These spices become part of Tilo's life and the lives of other characters she comes across in the course of the novel. As Tilo makes magical spice blends for her clients, the narrative probes deeper into the properties of each spice creating a sensory experience that makes the readers engrossed in the beautiful artistry of culinary tale telling. Tilo's spice shop becomes a cultural space of assimilation and association where people from various backgrounds and ethnicity throngs in order to receive solace, guidance and healing. The spices become metaphor for individuals to preserve their cultural roots amidst change. But the box of spices for Tilo is like Pandora's box which if opened without the restrictions followed can lead to perjury and destruction. Tilo conforms to the rules attached to the spices because she knows if she, the mistress of spices do not listen to what they say to her, she would be doomed forever. The magic of spices is awakened only by oral incantations by the healer. So, the mistress of spices too

becomes the mistress of words. The colonial connotations with Eastern spices have not waned with time but further deepened into racist implications in the post-colonial age. Spices which have charms and magical power are considered items of dark art and sorcery dealt with by the Orientals. Spices here protects the community from racism, from cultural hegemony and gives them power enough to embrace the new culture. The name Tilo is also symbolic, derived from one of the spices of her choice, the sesame or 'til,' the spice of nourishment. "I will be Tilottama, the essence of 'til' life-giver, restorer of health and hope" (42). She receives an identity not because of the spices, but from the spices. Since she had born with such ability, was called 'Mistress of Spices' and named her shop 'Spice Bazaar.'

The connoisseur of 'food' is the ability to create emotions in people and to heal them of their physical problems. Each spice has its own origin and growth. 'Spices' are integral element in cooking, which adds flavour to the cuisine. Likewise, in this novel, spices give life not only to the protagonist Tilo, but also for other customers. As the novel continues, she gets her first customer Haroun. He has come to America just like Tilo seeking peace. Haroun finds it very difficult to come out of his traumatic past and visits Tilo to relieve himself from those haunted memories. Tilo applies Sandalwood powder on his palms and asks him to rub all over the palm. At that moment he was sceptical of the power of spices and Tilo, but after he finishes rubbing the powder, his mind becomes calm and poised. Hence, Sandalwood cures the pain of remembering and gives a sense of solace. But the magical power of spices comes with a warning which is if Tilo is touched by somebody or if she touches somebody, she will lose her power and invite her damnation. Haroun after finding a new life with sandalwood powder comes to inform Tilo that he got a job as a cab driver. Suddenly Tilo has a vision and there she sees Haroun covered in blood and lying in devastated condition inside the car and she remembers the power of 'kalo jire' which can protect one from the evil eye. "Kalo jire, I think. Just before the vision comes upon me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like a thread strangling the night. I must get 'Kalo jire,' spice of the dark planet 'Ketu,' protector against the evil eye" (30-31). But as she was in a hurry, she cut her finger and blood started oozing out of her finger and the man who waited outside for Tilo almost every day enters and sucks the blood. Tilo is scared because nobody should touch her or else her magical power would disappear. Tilo's next customer was Jagjit, who came with his mother to her shop. Jagjit was very shy and did not move away from his mother, who was embarrassed with her son's actions. When Tilo noticed this, she felt sad for him. Since she is the mistress of spices, she knew how to deal with it. She comes with a small piece of Cinnamon and keeps it inside the turban without Jagjit's knowledge. Tilo always trusted her spices which would never let her down. Though Tilo successfully treats her patients she herself found deserted by her spices because she violated the rules associated with them. One day Tilo, after taking permission from her spices went to visit the man she fell for, Raven. When she returned her shop was burnt down with the power of 'red chillies' and she consumed herself in the fire as promised, Raven comes and saves her from perjury and she finds that she escapes death because the spices showed their unflinching love and allegiance towards their mistress. This shows that spices not only evoke emotion and power in others but also have strong emotions within them and the power to control those emotions. Divakaruni gives each spice a special day: Sunday is for 'turmeric,' Tuesday for 'fenugreek,' Thursday for 'red chilli,' Friday for 'asafoetida' and Saturday for 'methi.' The unique healing properties of spices can calm our nerves and soothe our souls and the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices* does this for her clients. She remains true to the spirit of spices and their essence, and spices too reciprocates her love and honesty with positive results.

Another novel to read as a culinary fiction is Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* which depicts three generations of women and their quest for identity and 'wholeness' through their inherited culinary flair. Food and culinary art are said to have mystical powers that can create healing and communal wellbeing. The fiction set mostly in India and Britain is a carnival of the attachment shared by mothers and daughters. This novel extends from 'mono-cultural' consciousness to an assimilation and blend of multi-cultures and this journey is embarked upon through the food vehicle. The novel spans through three generations - Ammu the grandmother who never leaves India, Nalini the mother who comes to Britain with her young children at the age of 24, and Maya the daughter who comes to UK at the tender age of four and grows up there. Ammu inhabits very little room in the whole story but remains etched in the minds of her daughter and granddaughter till the very end of the novel. Her culinary skill, the mystical and healing properties she attributes to the spices and her distinctive insight regarding various kinds of food and their history draws an intricate connection to her roots and her culture. She is always calm and composed for she connects with nature and its healing properties and can hear the footsteps gradually embracing her with all love and gratitude. Her stories are the common thread which binds the three generations together. Nalini inherited her mother's gastronomical characteristics and love spending time in cooking. Working as her mother's assistant in a small village of Kerala where the mother-daughter duo lived in harmony with the world and earned their living as cooks, Nalini had imbibed her mother's wisdom regarding the healing properties of spices and food. The village astrologer once advised her: "You will be a very, very prosperous woman, unimaginably so, but never lose sight of your gift. If you do, you lose your centre and all else falls away" (58). When Nalini's husband Raul deserts her she finds herself alone in a foreign country with no money left to return to India and with two young children totally dependent on her she was compelled to take up employment in a sewing factory, and thereafter cooking saves her sanity. As the astrologer had predicted, her culinary skill brings her respite from penury and her humdrum job at the sewing factory, and restores laughter, opulence, and love in her life. Her instinctive and judicious use of spices, her deep sense of appreciation and love permeated her pickles with mystical restorative properties and this made her a wealthy woman with her own brand of pickle, 'The Abundance of Spice.' She worked hard to popularise her brand name and she received immense support from Maggie and Tom. Maggie became almost a mother-figure to Maya and Nalini's significant source of female camaraderie made her rich and affluent. Nalini then meets Ravi Thakker, whom she marries later, through a cooking assignment and she was happy in her own way. But her happiness seemed to be transient since her first husband Raul re-surfaces as a family friend from America and threatens to overturn the fabric of her new life she had built for her children. Raul threatened to jeopardize Nalini's life to such an extent and extorted money from her that she was finally forced to sell her shop and raise money. Already divorced from her gift, Nalini loses Satchin, her first-born to a freak car accident and her life unspools again. Raul even poisoned Maya against her mother and she drifted apart but unlike Maya, her younger daughter had always taken a deep interest in cooking and helped Nalini to restore her shop and skill. Maya eventually realises her mistake after visiting India and recognizes the deep and inherent connection food had with their cultural roots: "I watched spices being ground with stone, leaves being soaked and dried in the sun, fruit being preserved into pickles, dishes prepared from scratch with love and attention. Each person was working through their own thoughts and kneading dough or grinding lentils was a temporary respite" (251-252). She even received two letters from the village astrologer which gives a greater meaning of life she abandoned: "Do what you love...listen to the magical conversation that is always taking

place through the food that you savour, the words that are spoken to you, the music that you hear, the people that you meet, and you will never feel alone” (p. 248 – 49). She finally returns to her roots and unites with her family through the magic and mystical food.

**Conclusion:** Food becomes a powerful metaphor for the diasporic women to assert their identity and negotiate the dual existence and experience they undergo. Women writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mita Kapur, Preethi Nair, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and others have attempted to navigate an immigrant’s voyage through assorted gastronomical images. Food serves as a multifaceted symbol representing cultural heritage, generational dynamics, assimilation, adaptation, and individual identity. Food is incorporated by the writers as a cultural nexus depicting the journey of characters navigating identity, belonging, cultural conflict and dual behaviour. Food serves as a symbolic bridge that connects cultures and generations, fostering knowledge and a sense of belonging in the diasporic context. Food is the universal language that binds all irrespective of caste, creed, colour, and sex.

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