

**Magic of the Spices: Mythology in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
*The Mistress of Spices***

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the award-winning author in Diasporic Literature. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, immigration, myth and challenges in a multicultural world. Divakaruni wrote her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* in 1997, this book short listed for the Orange prize from England and selected as one of the best books of 1997 by Los Angeles Times. She recreates the forgotten Indian myth and belief in her novels. She used magical elements in her following novels *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams*, *The Conch Bearer* and the *Palace of Illusions*.

The basic need of human is food, shelter and clothing. Food is inseparable part of human life. Collen Taylor Sen said: "The life of all living is food and the entire world seeks food. Complexion, clarity, good voice, long life, understanding, happiness, satisfaction, growth, strength and intelligence are all established in food" (7).

Indian culture is the one of the old civilizations in the world and the use of natural ingredients in food for health benefits is well known. Historical incidents like foreign invasion, trade and colonialism introduce the variety of food in India. The Indian food became world famous because of immigration. Peoples from India move to other countries and they popularize the Indian cuisine all over the world. Indian food is different from other country foods because it has some unique taste and cooking method. Indian foods are popularly known for its spiciness. Throughout the India spices are used in food. Spices used in Indian dishes carry some nutritional as well as medicinal properties. The present India shows the both ancient and modern culture in food.

India is the country with different cultures. Food habits also a symbol of culture. South Indian and North Indian foods are popularly known for its unique taste. South Indian foods have that unique aroma of spices and the tamarind sour taste. North Indian foods are well known for its sweets and the fragrant of ghee.

In Indian mythology people believe that rice given by Annapurna Goddess of Food. Indian bees make honey because of the divine intervention of the twin brother Avins. Akshyapathra is a vessel from Hindu mythology. It was given Yudhisthra by The Lord Surya. The power of Akshayapathra is it would provide unlimited amount of food to eat. This is a mythological story in The Mahabharat.

In India the food strongly connected with the culture and religion. People worship their Gods with offering the special food. In mythology Lord Krishna steals the butter from the houses in Brindavanam. So nowadays people offer butter in Lord Krishna Temple. The enduring story is fighting between Lord Muruga and Vinayaga because of Gnana Pazam. Another mythology of Menakshi kalyanam where the Gatothkaja eats up all the food made for the wedding and the resulting thirst is only quenched when Lord Sundereswarar creates the river Vaigai that still flows in Madurai. All these stories are referred as mythological stories on food.

Divakaruni used myth in her novel through the spices. *The Mistress of Spices* is a debut novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It is a unique novel written with the blend of myth and medicinal. The protagonist of the novel Tilo, she provides spices for her customers not only for cooking, it heals their family problems, loneliness and mental illness.

The Mistress of Spices is the story of the girl born with magical powers, later she was kidnapped by pirates because of her magical power. She was trained by the old mother in the island and she became mistress. She chooses the Oakland in California through the holy fire Shampati for run a spice shop.

This story describes the healing power of the spices with reference to magic. The protagonist uses spices like turmeric, fenugreek, cinnamon and other spices. Peppercorn has the ability to reveal one person's secret. At the beginning of the novel she describes silky yellow powder turmeric. In Ayurveda turmeric is the antibiotic it safeguards the humans from fungus and bacterial infection. Turmeric used in the cooking for add some color but the actual reason its medicinal quality. Tilo said turmeric have the quality of enhancing our beauty it will erase the blemishes and wrinkles. Based on mythology each spice has its special day. For turmeric it is Sunday. It used for sprinkling in the head of new born and over coconuts at puja, rubbed into the borders of new cloths. When she holds the spices, the spices speak to her. "I am turmeric who roses out of the ocean of milk when the Devas and Asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between" (14). She believes that turmeric, the shield for sorrows and gives hope for rebirth. So, she gave turmeric to Ahuja's wife for her marital sufferings. In her shop, she makes barfis for children, she added the flavors of crushed cardamom, clove and cinnamon in that barfi.

She gave that barfi to Jagit to make his breath fragrant. Cinnamon is a spice believed as a friend maker. It filled with antioxidants and fight against the heart disease. In ancient period they believe cinnamon gives strength to destroy the enemies. The small boy Jagit, he is the only Punjabi in his school. He was afraid of the school and his classmates. So Tilo decides to give cinnamon to him. She stuck the small piece of cinnamon in his turban.

Fenugreek is considered as a Tuesday's spice. In Ayurveda fenugreek is medicine used to take care of asthma, hormonal disorder and to maintain a healthy metabolism. It was first shown by Shabari, oldest women in the world. Tilo described fenugreeks taste as: "Put in water and it will

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Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019

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bloom free. Bite the swollen kernels between teeth and taste its bitter sweetness. Taste of water weeds in a wild place, the cry of grey geese” (47). She asked fenugreeks favor to help Ratna. She feels humiliated by her husband so Tilo gave the spice to make them happier.

Tilo meets the lonely American who frequently visits the shop on every Friday. She feels very close to him, she wants to give some spice to him. She remembers the old one word for each person there is one special spice. So, she searches the spice for lonely American. Finally, she finds Asafoetida, a remedy to love. Tilo describes the things in her shops:

See, bunches of podina leaves green as the forests of our childhood. Hold them up and smell how fresh and pungent, isn't this cause enough for gladness. Tear open a packet of chili-cashew. That hot taste, that crumple and crunch against your cheeks, the delicious tears that rise to your eyes. Here's kumkum powder red as the heart of a hibiscus flower to put on our foreheads for married luck. (79)

She was worried about Lalita Ahuja's wife. She wants to know whether turmeric works or not. Few days later she came to the shop without any happiness in her shop because she lost the turmeric, she doesn't use the spice. Tilo consoles her and give Fennel, which is the spice for Wednesday. It gives the fresh smell and refreshment. Tilo advised her to take a pinch of Fennel after every meal, she insisted give fennel to her husband also because Fennel cools the temper. There is myth about Fennel, when sage Vashistha swallows the demon Illwal he ate Fennel to he would not come back. Ancient people believe that Fennel is an equalizer; it can take the power from one and give it to another when two people eat at the same time. So Tilo thought Lalita got strength to protect her.

She was in the disguise, for getting her original appearance she used the spice ginger. It is used for digestion problem in Ayurvedic and one of the important spices in Indian curries. Tilo sliced the ginger and boiled it for her. But now she breaks the rule of the mistress. She would not use the spices for her own benefit, she thought it's all for Geetha's welfare. She ate the ginger slices; the gingers give her youth appearance. She went to meet Geetha to give the mango pickle mixed with some magical spices. Tilo has some doubts because she breaks the island rule, so the spices are angry on her.

Tilo falls in love with Raven the lonely American. The old mother warns her, but she is not aware of the consequences. She requests the king of spices Makaradwaj to make her most beautiful women in the earth. But Makaradwaj remains silent because Tilo humiliating the island customs. The spice laughs and warns her as “Do you desire it more than you desired us on the island, that day when you would have thrown yourself off the granite cliffs had the First Mother said no” (261).

The medicinal quality of the spices in this novel is true it will help in practical life. But the magical qualities of the spices like giving courage solve the family problems and rebirth is the

mythological references. The spices turned against Tilo. The important law of the spice island is when the mistress committed any prohibition act the spices withdraw their magic powers it acts against the beneficial persons. So the people who are all visited the spice store get into trouble. Jagit the school boy, Lalitha typical Indian women and Geetha and other people facing the problem because of Tilo's magic failure. Lalita wrote a letter to Tilo about her problems, she requests all the spices to help her. She said, "I will pound almond and chyavanprash for mental strength and physical and set it outside the door for the wind to carry to the women-house where you wait" (273). Finally, she consoles the spices and First mother, she got new life and named herself as Maya. "In the old language it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (317).

Divakaruni used myth to enlarge the benefit of the spices. Each spice has the medicinal quality but people unaware of that they think spices only used for cooking. In this novel Divakaruni was gave awareness to the people about spices and its medicinal qualities. When the myth included in this novel it became interesting.

Thus, myth is extremely played an important role in this novel *The Mistress of Spices*. The ancestors create a myth on every spice to easily convey the medicinal qualities of the spices. Because no one giving importance to the plain theory, so when they include some myth and magical elements into that matter it easily reaches the peoples mind. So, Divakaruni cleverly handles the myth as a tool to explore the qualities of the spices.

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