



---

**Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*:  
A comparative analysis of novel and film from a diasporic lens**

**Manisha Sagar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi.

**Abstract**

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist, Tilo, though submissive to the patriarchal dictates and was also a victim of male violence in her early life, gives vent to her magical powers of healing others with her spices when the First Mother teaches her to do so and she sets her shop at Oakland. The appeal of the book was such that it was soon adapted into a movie, and both versions—the movie and the book—question the patriarchal parameters that ask women to be submissive and faithful. But soon Tilo becomes a desiring woman as she meets Raven, and thus her oaths to be faithful to the spices are broken, and she begins to lose her power. Instead of submitting to the oaths, she decides to give vent to her desires. She leaves the shop and decides to find her own identity, and thus, she creates a happy life for herself along with Raven/Doug at the end of the narrative. It is the diasporic context of the US – the liberating “third space” (Hall) which probably provides her the scope to seek an identity for herself and make the most of her life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with the use of a magic realist ending, can create that magical “third space” (Hall) which is liberating for women, thereby enhancing the appeal of the book and, by extension, the movie. The paper “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*: A comparative analysis of novel and film from a diasporic lens” explores the book and the novel to understand how the narrative is one of feminist liberation within the diasporic set-up.

**Keywords:**

Diaspora, Divakaruni, History, Immigration, *The Mistress of Spices*, Women

India-born American diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wrote a collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, which won the American Book Award in 1995. Her two novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, as well as a short story, “*The Word Love*,” were adapted into films. *The Mistress of Spices* was short-listed for the Orange Prize. She writes about the diasporic experience, contemporary America, women's issues, immigration challenges, history, myth, and the

joys, pains and challenges of living in a multicultural American society. Still, beyond that, her feminist self always looms large in most of her works. Her books have been translated into twenty-nine languages, and her work has appeared in over a hundred magazines and anthologies. She was one of the many writers who pondered the issues faced by migrant people, especially women in diasporic situations. However, her novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, is essential to understanding the terms "diaspora" and "diasporic writing", which, when rendered in its cinematic adaptation, has not only been a pleasurable watch but also brought to the fore the vital issues related to the diasporic community at large.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* revolves around the character of Tilo, who is the "mistress of spices" due to her magical power to heal others with her spices and prayers, as long as she remains faithful to her vows. The patriarchal setup forces her to live a life of service to mankind, but as Doug/Raven enters her life, she begins to become a desiring subject, and this causes her spirit to lose its power to heal. But magically, at the end, when she decides to give vent to her desire, she can attain true freedom. The diasporic setting of Oakland provides the author with the scope to grant her heroine the freedom to be a desiring woman and seek an identity for herself. The paper makes a comparative analysis of the film and the novel to state how the protagonist can create a space for herself despite all the inhibitions and injunctions as it is the diasporic setting of the US which provides the liberating "third space" (Hall) to the protagonist to give in to her desire and seek an identity for herself even though initially she was denied doing so.

*The Mistress of Spices*, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, was published on February 6, 1997. Its screenplay adaptation was released on April 21, 2005, by Paul Mayeda Berges. This novel revolves around the central character, Tilo, known as "the mistress of spices" in India, who has been sent to Oakland, California, to serve and assist the people. When Tilo was young, her parents named her Nayan Tara. She was the second daughter of her parents. She possessed some hidden psychic powers that she sometimes revealed to the villagers by foretelling upcoming disasters or locating hidden treasure. This unusual power makes her different from the rest of humanity. Still, at the same time, she, being a female, had to undergo the same atrocities of the male gaze and violence as other girls. She becomes popular for her extraordinary competence in offering help to people, often attributed to her supposed magical powers. However, some ruffians tried to kidnap her, but she managed to escape and reach an Island, where she met the First Mother, who gave unusual tutorials on the magic of spices to the other girls. The First Mother gives her a new name, Tilo (short for Tilottama, meaning "sesame," or "til", a spice known for its nourishing and energising qualities).

After all the tutorials and learning from the First Mother, Tilo is sent to Oakland to serve the people there. It becomes her duty to use her magical power to uplift the toiling people from their

debilitating state so that they can be saved. It may sound like magic realism, but that is how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni envisaged the character of Tilo. This conception of Tilo was appealing not only to the readers but also to the viewers in the novel's adaptation into a movie. In other words, one of the immediate reasons for the appeal of the movie is the magical powers of Tilo and her spices, both of which have an orientalist aspect to it as the West with its colonial mindset usually tends to look at the Orient as a land of spices and that of the magical powers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni appears to be drawing on the same Oriental myths invested in Tilo to demonstrate how they can be an object of appeal to Westerners and how they can also serve as a balm to the ailing men of the West. However, it is beyond this Oriental myth that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes the novel, tracing Tilo's life through her narrative.

Tilo is instructed by the First Mother to use the spices to help and protect others in Oakland, and to adhere strictly to the rules so that the spices will lose their essence, and the magic does not destroy her. In other words, it is in the way Tilo practices her living and is faithful to her vows that her and Spices' magical power will be. Surviving by these vows, Tilo patiently and humbly devotes her life to spices and opens a Spice Bazaar in Oakland. Through her devotion to spices, Tilo represents the subservient and submissive nature of Indian women, and her behaviour smacks of her culture and tradition to prove her loyalty. The patriarchal culture has always thought of women as someone who is "chalu" (from the word "chal", i.e., always moving) and therefore they need to be kept in check and balanced to make their life a pure life. Here too, Tilo is made to live a life of a traditional woman who should uphold her vows to make a living and not lose the power invested in her.

In that sense, Tilo conforms to the tradition of self-effacing women, whose primary purpose is to add value to the lives of others by serving them and always obeying what is asked of them. In other words, Tilo becomes a woman who is entirely devoted to serving mankind and follows the path of obedience to retain what is supposedly her magical power. She starts healing the wounds of people and solving their problems by using spices. She loves spices, and spices are also sensitive to Tilo. As she says, "When I hold it in my hands, the spices speak to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world" (MOS 13). In other words, Tilo's life revolves around species and spices only, and it is in that world that she finds some fulfilment, or is it that she is made to feel that life can be fulfilling only when she keeps adding magical powers to her species by being faithful to her vows?

Divakaruni, here, reveals the deeper powers of empathy that are encapsulated in the character of Tilo. While continuing to serve and help others, Tilo falls in love with Raven, an American, which comes as a turn in her life. For a human being, it is entirely natural that one gets attracted to a particular individual with whom one wants to share one's life. Thus, like any other woman, Tilo unknowingly and unconsciously becomes desirous of Raven and longs for his company.

This change in her life and mind makes the spirits jealous of her. Spices here represent the patriarchal forces, which turn hostile at any evidence of exhibition of autonomy by a woman. Women, as stated, are meant to be submissive and cannot have any autonomy and cannot be desiring subjects. When they become so, the patriarchal society values them as “angels in the house”, and as they try to assert themselves, they lose that respect in the society and become aberrant. Till Tilo was submissive to her spices and very faithful to her vows; she had the benediction of the magical powers. However, as Tilo grew desirous and began to heed her needs and passions, she started losing her powers, and her spices were no longer as potent.

She asks spices to fulfil her wishes too, but the spices in turn start shrinking and spoiling, hurting her customers and thus destroying her established practice. Tilo decides to submit herself to fire as she is no longer the same Tilo, the mistress of spices. However, in her attempt to be burned by the spices, she is saved by them, as she has shown complete devotion and love to them. Magically, Spices accepts her relationship with Raven, and she begins to recover her customers as well. Thus, Tilo finds a space for herself in the novel as well as in the movie, which the spies earlier occupied. In the novel, the narrator frequently changes her name, revealing her multiple identities. However, in the movie, she is named only Tilo, which depicts her firm and determined personality. Ultimately, Tilo finds selfhood in her personality, and her love and tenderness are accompanied by determination and resolution. The movie also concludes with a scene depicting Tilo’s lovemaking with Doug (Raven), while holding spices in her hands, showing that spices are now ready to accept their new mistress and have learned to accept the need for a woman to experience and express love. The film concludes on a positive note, demonstrating that a woman can connect with her innermost desires and feminine self and assert her autonomy without severing her ties to her external environment. Thus, by harmonising her inner needs with the attitudes of the external world, Tilo can move towards a life of greater fulfilment and well-being.

*The Mistress of Spices* explores the diasporic experience of a magical female character named Tilottamma in Oakland, the US, where she sets up a spice shop to heal the angst, anguish, and pain of those who visit. Spices are often known for their healing properties, and Tilottamma utilises them to enhance the lives of her customers in magical ways. While the novel and film seem to focus on the power of spices as described in ancient Indian *Ayurveda* texts, the author conveys much more through her portrayal of the spice mistress in America and her engagement with the diasporic community. The book is being adapted into a film, directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, titled “The Book of Tilo,” which features Aishwarya Rai as the heroine, Tilo.

Tilo was born in a poor rural village family somewhere in South India. She is shown to possess magical powers that enable her to alleviate people’s worries, anguish, pains and problems;

consequently, they start to respect her as an embodiment of a goddess, as is usually the practice. Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee writes,

“I am a Mistress of Spices. I can also work on the others. Mineral, metal, earth, sand and stone. The gems with their cold, clear light, the liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island. But the spices are my love. I know their origins and what their colours signify, as well as their scents. I can call each by the true name it was given at the first, when the earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From '*amchur*' to '*zafran*', they bow to my command. At a whisper, they yield their hidden properties, their magic powers.” (MoS, 63)

As Tilo possesses magical powers, some ruffians abduct her, as it can be a profitable venture for them. However, she somehow flees by jumping into the water, which shows that she has a quick mind and is ready to make the most of herself. As she is being carried to the shore, she is discovered unconscious by a group of girls and their First Mother (acted in the movie by Zehra Sehgal). Then, her journey as the “Mistress of Spices” begins as she is coached by the First Mother to be a healer who can transform people's lives from the worst to somewhat better and then help them live a good life. She is sent to Oakland to run a spice shop and heal others.

As stated, Tilo possesses incredible healing powers, but she must adhere to specific rules while using this ability justifiably and properly. These rules are that (a) she can only use spices, and nothing else, to heal people, (b) she has to avoid somehow physical interaction (i.e., no physical relationship with anyone), and (c) she must not leave her store (in other words, she must live a life locked in the shop as usually women are locked in their homes). With these conditions in place, she continues to live, heal and assist others with her spices. On the one hand, Divakaruni employs the magic realist technique to explore the mystical properties of spices. At the same time, she presents the predicaments and issues faced by the diasporic community, especially women within this setting. But above all, it is a patriarchal setting that she is referring to throughout the initial part of the narrative to suggest how women are being locked into that good self which the patriarchy envisages to keep women within bounds.

Then we meet the customers who come to Tilo's shop in the hope of being healed by her. Among them are some significant ones – (a) Dadaji, an old Indian man (acted by Anupam Kher), struggles to accept that his granddaughter is marrying a man from a different caste, religion, or race; (b) a woman, Myisha, (c) a cab driver, Rehman (d) a man, Doug and his girlfriend, and many others. All these individuals face various kinds of problems, which have made their lives somewhat problematic, and Tilo helps and heals them through her magical spices and potent invocations. Thus,

we see many typical characters in the movie with their potent problems, and there is always Tilo, with her magical spices and prayers, to somehow ease the tensions and problems in their lives. She has fully committed herself to the service of humanity, seeking no greater blessings than those imparted by the First Mother.

This life of healing and helping proceeds with a magical valour for Tilo, but as always, things take a turn in life, and for Tilo, it comes when one fine day, Doug comes to the spice shop on his bike. They develop a mutual attraction for each other, which is a natural thing in any circumstances. But Tilo, bound by her vows, tries to suppress her desire, while on the other hand, she becomes unconsciously drawn to him. As her attraction to Doug grows, the spices she provides begin to have an adverse reaction. Tilo starts to break the rules she was asked to follow by stepping out of the shop with Doug by touching him and then by going out with him. As rules are flouted, her customers' situations worsen, as the effect of the spices weakens. First Mother appears in her vision, warning her about the broken vows. As stated earlier, when discussing the book, the spices and patriarchal context impose numerous rules on women, and to retain their supposed privileges within this context, women must be faithful to them. Only by doing so can they retain those privileges. Tilo thinks she should return to India and puts up a closing sale at her shop. She also chooses to spend one night with Doug. It is here that she makes a choice—earlier she had chosen to take a plunge into water to escape from bandits, and now she chooses to take a plunge to find herself in a relationship with Doug. This metaphysical leap is more magical than her magical powers, as it leads her to discover the true beauty of her being.

On the lovemaking night, she writes to Doug that she will never return and will always love him. Then, she returns to the store and sets the spices and herself alight, thinking that this is how she will liberate herself. However, the flames leave her unharmed, and later Doug finds her lying there. It is essential to note that although she decides to purge her feelings by setting fire to the spices, her purging has already begun when she bravely leaves the spice shop to express her emotions, which are stronger than her commitment to her vows.

Now, the story concludes happily when the couple—Tilo and Doug—live joyfully ever after, as is often the case in all fantastic, magical narratives. The spice mistress's and her lover's wishes come true in this magic realist romance. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni beautifully blends spices with ancient mythical magic, the daily struggles of the people, and Tilo's feminist aspirations, which allow her to put her love and desire before her vows and find herself. Behind this magic is Tilo's search for an identity, which keeps her in a state of in-betweenness—aware of the past, present, and future. To put it another way, the author initially introduces the patriarchal rules in Tilo's life, only to force her to defy them. With no one to lose but herself and her magical powers, Tilo can express her desire and

become what she desires. However, most women, bound by familial ties, are unable to take such a step. They remain caught in a quagmire of everlasting victimisation within the patriarchal mould. The first-world setting of Oakland likely prompts Tilo to listen to her heart and be what she wants to be, but in the context of India, she probably wouldn't be able to do the same, as a woman can't take the same leap that Tilo takes. It is in this sense that the author celebrates the liberating "third space," as conceptualised by Stuart Hall (1993), where diasporic beings find their true liberation, especially diasporic women.

In specific ways, Divakaruni has depicted the actual diasporic experience of Indians in the United States. All of the characters face various issues, and they seek help at the spice shop. Tilo is diasporic because she pathologically belongs to one place but lives in another. The magical powers of her Indian spices lure her, preventing her from calling America her birthplace. The different stories of the characters, especially Tilo's, illustrate the anguish of diasporic consciousness.

Homi Bhabha states that diasporas are "gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gatherings on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gatherings at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gatherings in the half-line, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gatherings of the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, and disciplines; gatherings of the memories of underdevelopment, of the other worlds lived retroactively; gatherings of the past in a ritual of revival; gatherings of the present" (Bhabha, 139). In Frantz Fanon's view, the diasporic community is a group of individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, and rootless (1963: 176).

In other words, people living in diasporic contexts often struggle to establish themselves as 'rooted' in a setting in which they reside, having fled from their original roots to establish themselves elsewhere; yet they often care more about their roots than others. In this process, some individuals feel rootless and, as a result, long for their roots. Others try to incorporate their native customs into their new lives, somehow keeping certain facets of their life and culture alive in their new lives. Some people adjust to the new surroundings and change their lifestyles, but most of the people struggle and suffer more profound anguish, which often makes them find some solace elsewhere, and that is why Tilo's Spice shop is so popular among the diasporic people, along with others.

Thus, diasporic experiences vary as much as those of migrants. Every immigrant is distinctive in their new nation. Every migrant has many stories to tell about their departure from home, their settlement in the adopted country, their adjustments, readjustments, and maladjustments, their physical and emotional distance from loved ones, and their efforts to find, adapt, and forge new bonds with others, as well as their renewed political, economic, and cultural orientations. Thus, diasporic experiences vary as much as those of migrants. The term 'diaspora' is a 'metaphoric designation' for

expatriates, refugees, exiles, immigrants, and others who have left their home country for various reasons—the diasporic individual and group experience anxiety from a sense of belonging and dislocation from a place.

Diasporic people long for their homeland that they or their ancestors left, whether voluntarily or forcibly. Despite this, they often don't desire to return home. They live in a state of flux, which allows them to adjust to new experiences, as Tilo does in the story. Therefore, diasporic communities possess at least two homelands: their settled nation and their often-dispersed homeland of origin. In this context, women's representations of diasporic discourses have special significance because they offer a fresh perspective on the realities of diasporic female experiences. Women writers of Indian origin negotiate a multiplicity of affiliations—as women, women of colour, minorities, wives, and mothers—to articulate various diasporic experiences through their emerging new consciousness, which is often about their feminist assertion about finding their true self and shaping their identity.

These multiple identities often lack appropriate representation in male diasporic writing, as males in their diasporic writing frequently discuss the various (mal)adjustments they must make to adapt to the new land. Women diasporic writers, on the other hand, successfully render their feminist aspirations and take steps to make their voices heard, which often is not so vehemently represented otherwise. Divakaruni, in *The Mistress of Spices*, successfully addresses the idea of female 'desire' in her protagonist Tilo, who not only heals others' worries and anguish but also seeks to deal with herself and forge an identity for herself despite all the prohibitions that are put on her.

Divakaruni depicts how an oppressed woman cannot choose her lover and suffers greatly, but certain women, like Tilo, can realise their true selves. She chooses love over her duties as a spice mistress but suffers. The author attempts to end the story miraculously by reuniting Tilo with her lover, thereby avoiding a tragic ending. The movie may condense the novel, but it successfully depicts diasporic issues and employs magic realism to tell the story. Many may suggest that cinematic adaptations are not always an accurate means of rendering written words, as both the medium and the context are too different to capture the same essence of art, a point also made about translated texts. Still, in the case of the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, the movie can render the ambiguities, anguish, pains, and other facets of diasporic experiences poignantly, while also bringing to the fore the woman's fight to find a respectful, autonomous place for herself.

The novel and film, *The Mistress of Spices*, are read as a powerful testimonial against patriarchal decrees, which regard women as secondary. Women are often seen as second-class citizens who shouldn't have their desires. They are simply objects of desire and can never be truly desiring subjects in a patriarchal society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges this patriarchal imperative and its laws by exemplifying how Tilo possesses desires and expresses them, even when she knows she



has the risk of losing everything she has. She owns a thriving spice store in Oakland, where she finds joy in sharing the problems and pains of her customers, predominantly members of the diaspora. However, when she is in love, she chooses to give it all up for love and her desires. She is painted as a resolute woman who has endured many victimisations in her life and yet has remained resilient against all those hardships, and thus makes a true feminist assertion.

### **Works Cited and Consulted:**

- Agarwal, Beena. *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora*, Authors Press, New Delhi. 2011.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Black Swan, 1997.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constant Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1967.
- Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Longman: London, 1993.
- Sharma, Charu. "Hyphenated India: Reading Women Diasporic Writings" in Silky Khullar Anand, ed., *Women Writers of Indian Diaspora*, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2010.