

# Transmission of Cultural Memory in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*

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## Abstract

Cultural memory and oral traditions have a significant role in shaping the narrative and cultural identity of the characters. As a dynamic form of expression it preserves history, shapes identities and fosters community across innumerable generations. It would be fitting to point out that the legacy of oral tradition always remains as an important aspect of human creativity and its manifestations. Among various writers displaying interest on myth and culture, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a commendable position as an Indian American author. Her novels strive to bridge the cultural traditions by exploring the themes of identity, immigration and intersection of myth and modernity. Tilo, the protagonist in *The Mistress of Spices* deeply rooted in Indian culture is quite familiar with the stories passed down to various generations. The spices in the novel narrate their own stories with remarkable power. The narrative also often goes back forth to remind of the words of the Old One, which is also based on oral transmission of existing knowledge. Blending of elements of mythology in a lyrical style magnifies the cadence and rhythm of traditional oral tales. This paper aims to point out the impact of cultural memory and oral traditions in shaping the magnificent tapestry of English literature with reference to the novel *The Mistress of Spices*. It also highlights how magical elements and myths are employed to portray cultural narratives and the varied immigrant experiences. It also emphasizes the role of spices as symbols with cultural memory and significance.

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory, Traditions, Mythology, Intergenerational Transmission and Collective Identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has secured commendable fame through her writings that lay undue importance on traditional values, customs and beliefs. She draws frequently from Indian mythology and folklore, skilfully weaves them into vivid contemporary narratives to exemplify the cultural and emotional complexities of her characters. Divakaruni’s association with women welfare organisations like MAITRI, enables her to depict the pathetic life of some Indian immigrant women in America, she also effectively handles the challenges faced by them for survival and empowerment. Her debut novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is a conscious exploration of diaspora, cultural identity and tradition through magical realism. Tilo, the protagonist of the novel is depicted as an immortal spice

mistress who utilises her potential and knowledge of Indian spices to heal the psychological wounds of Indian immigrant community in Oakland, California. At the core of the novel is memory, which is transformed across generations and geographical boundaries. Cultural memory is defined by Jan Assman as a form of collective memory that is culturally constructed and passed down through generations via rituals, symbols and narratives ( Assmann 2008). For the numerous diasporic communities cultural memory offers to be a vital link for preserving identity amidst agonising dislocation and hybridization. The novel transmits cultural memory by bridging the gap between diaspora and the homeland. Tilottama or Tilo, the protagonist of the novel is both the narrator and cultural mediator, trained in the art of healing people with spices. She is bound selflessly to the mystical order of serving her community without deviating from her assigned duties. Tilo's spice shop in Oakland is an abode of comfort where cultural memory gets invoked and dispensed by means of her prescriptions. Her Indian – American customers bring untold stories of immigration, loss and transformation. Tilo patiently listens, diagnoses and dispenses spices imbued with their ancestral power. Interactions with the customers enable her to re-establish the threads of memory that unite the characters with their heritage.

Divakaruni uses the spices metaphorically to transmit cultural memory, strength and sometimes warning. Each spice that Tilo uses has its own specific cultural associations and it also reveals her access to cultural wisdom which she shares with the immigrants to recover both from the physical and emotional turmoils caused by immigration. The spices also “speak” to Tilo which is indeed a supernatural, divine communication. Mythical Realism employed asserts that Indian beliefs coexist with American living, thereby creating a cultural memory which is alive and responsive. Tilo often recounts her own past from childhood as Nayan Tara to rebirth as the mistress of spices, steeped in mythology; often blends personal incidents with that of the archetypes. The novel's structure of narration with Tilo weaving together the multiple strands of memories reminds the readers of oral story telling traditions. It also reinforces the view that cultural memory is a shared communal experience, often heard, narrated and comprehended with different perspectives. Mythical Realism is employed as a subgenre to gradually explore how memory functions in diasporic settings. As a contrast to magical realism which has political underpinnings, mythical realism enables Divakaruni to weave a form where ancestral knowledge rendered by the spices pervades the mundane. Tilo's identities like Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati, Tilottamma and finally Maya – reveal the diversities of diasporic identities and perceptions. Tilo's transformations, illustrate that diasporic subjects continually negotiate their identities drawing from the reservoir of cultural memory to seek composure in the new world. Myth is adopted as a means to articulate the unspeakable trauma alienation and longingness of the immigrants. The customers of Tilo render a cross – section of the immigrant experience in America. Geeta, is one of the assertive characters who struggle with dual identity and cultural affiliations. Her attraction for an African – American creates intergenerational conflict, revealing how cultural memory can be both a cause of connection and division. Jagjit, a sikh boy who often gets bullied at school and Ahuja's wife, Lalita, a victim of domestic violence get the sympathy of Tilo. Through Tilo's effective administration of spices on her customers Divakaruni reveals how cultural memory is adapted, preserved and lost in the painful process of migration. In the novel, spices are portrayed as repositories of culture apart from just being cultural ingredients. Tilo's deep association with the spices also symbolise the transmission of inherited wisdom. Each spice she dispenses not only carries a medicinal property but also spiritual significance attached to Indian tradition. Turmeric ( Haldi ) is not just simple spice used in cooking but has a sacred association with purity and prosperity in Indian rituals, Tilo invokes the cultural practises that have been passed down to generations when she offers turmeric to bring about marital harmony. Likewise, Cardamom symbolises love and nostalgia of the flavours of native land. In the

words of Divakaruni, “The spices are singing to me. Their songs are of loss and longing. They sing of memories I have not lived but which I know as though they are my own”. (Divakaruni 25).

Spices empower Tilo to effectively access cultural histories which might otherwise be faded away quickly in a foreign land. Therefore they have naturally become a metaphor for the continuance of cultural identity inspite of geographical displacements. Narration of stories with mythological allusions also facilitates transfer of cultural memory; Tilo’s knowledge of ancient tradition is gained from her First Mother, her mentor. This reminds the readers of the lineage of Teacher – Disciple, where knowledge is conserved in the form of speech than written texts. The novel also has rich references to Hindu mythology, the story of Puran Devi, the spice Goddess who granted Tilo her special powers. These myths are employed not just to evoke interest but to be a source of cultural continuity. When Tilo recollects these stories to share with her clients it is in turn a reinforcement of her connection with her lineage. She also draws upon the myth of Savitri to insist upon the value of resilience and demonstrate how the noble ancient narratives are relevant even in contemporary struggles. Divakaruni employs magical realism in order to facilitate the transmission of preserved cultural memory. Tilo who is gifted with supernatural abilities of communicating with the spices and foreseeing future, blurs the fine line between myth and reality, throwing insight that cultural memory definitely exists in a space which is beyond any logical comprehension. Apart from emphasizing upon the preservation of cherished cultural memories, it also highlights the strains that occur when traditions are expected to encounter modernity. This is the plight of the Indian – American characters like Lalita, Hameed and Jagjit who often encounter the feeling of being disconnected from their ancestral roots. In spite of all supernatural powers Tilo herself undergoes this internal conflict when she engages herself in a relationship with Raven, an American. Her fascination for him represents her departure from spiritual duties, which is indirectly the impact of western notions of individuality and freedom. The spices do punish her for this transgression and remind her of the moral responsibilities in a foreign land. Divakaruni presents such incidents in the novel to reveal that cultural memory is not static; indeed it is something to be negotiated. The transmission of cultural memory is perfectly exemplified through this novel *The Mistress of Spices*, spices have a predominant role to symbolise culture, oral traditions and the anxiety that exists between age old traditional practices and modernity. Diaspora writers like Divakaruni illustrates how the immigrant communities arduously struggle to preserve their heritage while trying to adapt to their environments. The novel also suggests that cultural memory has the capability of evolving without compromising its essence, such themes also reveals Divakaruni’s genuine interest for her ancestral roots. The spices, rituals and myths presented in the novel act as bridges and ensure that cultural identity endures despite innumerable challenges of displacement. Food is presented as a crucial medium for transmitting cultural memory in the novel; some of Tilo’s clients seek spices to be connected with their home land and receive the nostalgic comfort it offers. Language has a significant role to play in the transmission of the cultural memory. The novel has abundant Indian terms, proverbs and rituals which are used effortlessly by Tilo to transmit her cultural knowledge. Tilo’s name changes at different stages to indicate her personal and spiritual journey. The usage of untranslated Indian words reveals the cultural context which resists the homogenizing tendencies of assimilation. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Tilo abandons the ardent rules of sisterhood and embraces ordinary self – directed life. The name Maya which means “illusion” also implies creative and transformative power. This decision of hers marks a significant shift, rather than being a recipient of passive cultural memory, Tilo makes herself an active participant in its reinvention. Her self – assertion suggests that cultural memory must always evolve to remain relevant for Tilo’s new path – based on her own choice and individuality it is representative of the fusion of both tradition and modernity. By doing so, Tilo embodies a novel initiative for cultural transmission: as the one who honours the past but not imprisoned with it.

In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni provides a rich exploration of how cultural memory gets transmitted in diasporic settings. Through the evolving character of Tilo, she delineates the symbolic use of spices, the novel is also presented both as a source of healing and contesting site. To be more comprehensive, memory is used in this context not as a passive inheritance but as an active, dynamic force that helps to shape communities, identities and sense of belonging. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's usage of mythical realism, oral narration and symbolic imagery helps to deepen the narrative's entire engagement with cultural memory.

It also enables the readers to understand how tradition can be both a cause for sustenance and suffocation. The ultimate suggestion of the novel is that if cultural memory has to survive and flourish it has to be inclusive, adaptable and engaged critically.

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