

'But the spices are my love': Understanding the Significance of Spices in Indian Diaspora Fiction

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90 ABSTRACT: Gauri Bhattacharya points out: 'The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first-century researchers to explore' (65). Several aspects of the Indian diaspora – literature, social, political, historical and cultural lives have been and continue to be a subject of research. The aspect of the Indian diaspora's life that I want to draw attention to is their relationship with Indian spices. For this purpose, I look at primarily literary and historical sources as I argue that it is through diaspora literature that we truly understand the social and cultural significance of spices in diaspora Indian lives. This working draft will explore how Indian diaspora authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee use spices in their fiction in a unique way that goes beyond their use as just literary devices. Both authors provide an interesting comparison for examination in that though their writing deals with the equivalent thematic experiences of the Indian Diaspora in the USA, their treatment and representation of the concerns is different, an argument the draft will address. Finally, I will also question whether the use of spices in these texts is reflective of the 'commodification of cultural difference' that renders the Indian other as a consumable aesthetic commodity for the global market.

'The quintessential feature of Indian cuisine is the use of spices' (23), writes food historian Colleen Taylor Sen. However, as Sen further explains, the relevance of spices in India goes far beyond its consumption related purposes. It is a crucial part of religious ceremonies in the subcontinent and a prime commodity for trade as the history of the centuries-old spice trade in India may illustrate. Beyond trade Indian spices also have another international dimension. They continue to hold significance in the lives of Indians who choose to leave the subcontinent to pursue lives abroad.

Gauri Bhattacharya points out: 'The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first-century researchers to explore' (65). Several aspects of the Indian diaspora – literature, social, political, historical and cultural lives have been and continue to be a subject of research. The aspect of the Indian diaspora's life that I want to draw attention to is their relationship with Indian spices. For this purpose, I look at primarily literary and historical sources as I argue that it is through diaspora literature that we truly understand the social and cultural significance of spices in diaspora Indian lives. Arjun Appadurai's writes on how contemporary fiction performs the function of ethnologists as it conveys reality through literature from a complex authorial perspective.

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It is this complex gaze that I further want to understand as rather than simply considering the spice's uses and quantities, this literary analysis will aim to understand the importance the very use of spices continues to hold for the diaspora regardless of their geographical positioning. How spices come to symbolize connection, nostalgia for homeland and family but also simultaneously a fracture in their identities which is so starkly expressed in the gustatory metaphor of difference in spice levels in western and Indian rather, 'desi' food.

The research will explore how diaspora authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee use spices in their works of fiction and through that make a larger argument on the diaspora authors' use of specific spices as literary devices for not only more potent imagery but also to convey politics, ideologies and concerns through the running motifs and metaphors of spices.

In Divakaruni's case, the novel the research will focus on *Mistress of Spices* (1997) that uses a complex technique of the personification of spices. The quote used in the title '...the spices are my love' reflect the control the personified spices have on Tilo, the narrator and the protagonist. Spices here are not mere non-material objects but powerful controllers of destiny. This unique representation of spices is interesting from a literary and post-colonial angle. Gita Rajan talks about how Tilo's role as the spice mistress in Canada, is a direct challenge to the colonial spice trade (218). The spices rejuvenate immigrants in a foreign land in contrast to the exploitative colonial trading. Further, the spices are a connection between the immigrants and the homeland and simultaneously disconnection for the second-generation immigrants, an issue the paper will address. Diaspora identity politics will be explored by the paper through Divakaruni's mentioned text and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003) which also extensively talks of diaspora food practices. The paper will consider these to make a larger argument with regards to the significance of spices in diaspora fiction.

Finally, the last section of the paper will explore the post-colonial aspect of the usage of spices in diaspora fiction. Aside from the spice trade metaphor, a crucial idea that needs to be considered with regards to contemporary fiction is Graham Huggan's idea of the 'post-colonial exotic' in association with the use of spices. I propose to consider the texts as a 'self-conscious use of exorcist techniques and modalities of cultural representation' symptomatic of the post-colonial exotic which here may be considered a 'pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism – a result of the spiralling commodification of cultural difference...' (33) I thus will attempt to argue that the use of spices is reflective of the 'commodification of cultural difference' that Huggan talks of. The section will be discussed in two parts, where the first will establish the post-colonial aspect of the texts with regards to their gustatory elements and the second will review the post coloniality in light of Huggan's extensive argument.

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As mentioned above, while there exists considerable research on the lives of the Indian diaspora, nothing significant has been written on their gustatory practices and specifically their relationship with spices. This paper will attempt to address this gap in scholarship through literary research.

Before proceeding further, a note. As this is a working draft, the introduction is a comprehensive overview of what all sections of the paper will address. However, because of the enormity of the research and ideas I have been working with, the section on Divakaruni and on post-colonial exotic is still under construction and requires severe and several edits and additions. Because of the particularly underdeveloped nature of the section on post-colonial concerns and paradoxes of these texts, I have omitted it from this draft altogether. However, both these sections will be duly addressed and explained in my presentation and subsequently the paper.

Swaad Anusaar: Food, Spices, and the Diaspora

92 Spices have historically played a significant role in global politics and movement. Paul Freedman, a historian in Yale, identifies spices as ‘...first goods to have such dramatic and unanticipated consequences’ (Henrique, ‘How Spices Changed the world’). He like many other scholars is referring to the historical spice trade which may be considered as the foremost propeller of conscious global trade and movement. Martha Henrique, while making a similar comment on the significance of spices to the global trade and cultural network, writes how those who controlled the spices, controlled the flow of wealth around the world and thus, controlled the world. Would it thus be implausible to argue that global colonialism not only benefitted from the spice trade but to a huge extent might have been propelled by it?

Keeping this historical context in mind, where pepper was considered ‘black gold’ and India ‘the spice bowl of the world’, as it still may be as it exports 68% spices of the world, the question I would focus on is how this intrinsic importance of spices to the Indian economy, culture and history shapes Indian identities, further identities of those away from the Indian homeland. While globalization and modern trade networks have ensured availabilities of global commodities like spices in different corners of the world, one may ask, to what extent and why is Indian food and thus Indian identity still considered eternally bound to spices, even in contemporary times.

In the context of my argument on Indian diaspora and spices, literary and anthropological research demonstrates how spices are associated significantly with the homeland and an attempt to preserve and reconstruct aspects of it is through their consumption. Turmeric, used in food and medicinally, is not just a material experience but also a nostalgic one attached to memories of the Indian homeland and life where a mother’s turmeric stained hands is an ordinary event. An ordinary event, rendered extraordinary, unusual and perhaps even othered in the case of diasporic identities as they navigate alien cultures that

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are unfamiliar with such practices. Vimal B. Patel writes how the diaspora ‘...are always in a quest to overcome the vacuum feeling which resulted from diasporic dislocation’ (109) – spicy Indian food in many cases thus represents an attempt to fill this vacuum as my analysis of literary texts by Diaspora female authors like Lahiri and Divakaruni will illustrate.

What I find particularly interesting and will address is the role of women in diaspora communities with relation to food. Women are primary creators, or recreators of these experiences of the homeland, or better motherland, with regards to their traditional associations with the kitchen. With regards to spices, what becomes even more significant is women become carriers of the ancient knowledge of spices symbolic of their role as carriers of tradition in most cultures of the world. Women in their reproductive powers – biological and cultural – do not only hold the duty, supposedly, of creating future generations but also connecting them to their past and in the case of Diaspora women, their homelands or ‘authentic roots.’ Sam Naidu in his analysis of women diaspora authors writes how in these texts:

...small objects or trivial events are described in minute detail. The richness of home living and the domestic spaces of women are evoked. In these spaces women are shown to have knowledge, expertise, traditional skills; here they are free from oppression albeit temporarily. Redolent descriptions of food abound... power of food to evoke the homeland in the exilic imagination is one of the most effectively rendered of the common aesthetic elements...(66)

Further he adds how female domestic spaces are contrasted with male public spaces, to represent a shift in power dynamics, which, I would add is significant with regards to the diaspora woman who is doubly marginalized in a foreign land by virtue of her race and gender.

Having raised questions about the relationship between spices, global networks and gendered identities, I move on to my analysis of texts by Diaspora female authors and how they represent these and other associated concerns in their writing and use of spices.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Navigating Alien Cultures

Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel *The Namesake* (2003) opens with a pregnant Ashima, a major female character in the text, attempting to recreate a popular Indian snack in her kitchen in the United States of America – a potent representation of her diasporic experience:

Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones...Tasting from a cupped

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palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. She stares blankly at the pegboard behind the countertop where her cooking utensils hang, all slightly coated with grease. She wipes sweat from her face with the free end of her sari...(1)

Note the spices, the grease and the saree. Distinct symbols but also the attempted use of condiments to recreate home with food and consumption but the failure to do so, as Lahiri so clearly writes – ‘as usual, there's something missing.’ Mareile Flitsche argues how a migrant's body in order to cope with new alien physical environment seeks familiar food for comfort. Flitsche comments how ‘...[h]e or she acts according to the food and meal knowledge brought along. Appropriate food in an appropriate environment gives comfort, supports identity and a feeling of home, and fosters solidarity in a diaspora community’ (972).

94 This sense of familiarity Ashima is eager to create but fails at. Flitsche further comments with an example of food boxes for refugee migrants on how a failure to procure food of the homeland creates an identity disjunct and alienation, as it reasserts and questions their sense of belongingness. As the novel progresses one notices how Ashima's diasporic identity has a constant sense of loss and alienation attached to it, represented in consumption and lack of it. Her constant effort to familiarise alien American food with Indian spices – as represented above. Ashima's children insist on a Thanksgiving and therefore ‘[t]hey learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne’. Spices here thus represent an active attempt to recreate familiarity and home beyond indulgence in memory and nostalgia, though that too is pertinent to their use. It is also interesting how Ashima adds spices to a beloved American treat to recreate an adored Indian snack *Bhel Puri* – thus also representing a mixing of cultures, in the case of Ashima, it is cohabitation rather than assimilation because of the strength with which she holds on to the construction of India. Her cooking and dressing style exemplify this.

Another distinct feature of this paragraph is the symbolic value – the opening exoticizes the book right at the start and marks it as something distinctly, if not South Asian, then definitely non-western and American. Lahiri thus uses these spices as a literary technique to simultaneously familiarize and defamiliarize with the reader. Parts of this preparation is familiar to both Indian and American readers. The only readers who might possibly associate with the whole creation is the diaspora audience perhaps they straddle both cultures simultaneously like the novel's fragmented identities. Lahiri through these spiced turkeys and makeshift *bhelpuris* thus places her readers in the same precarious in-between position that her displaced characters feel. The only readers who will truly relate to these concoctions are those who have had to similarly make-do in alien lands. A shared sense of displaced and diasporic experience is thus symbolized through a lack of spices but also a precise active use of spice to overcome the loss.

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Sam Naidu writes how Lahiri uses food as a trope to explore the vicissitudes of the diasporic consciousness in her writing. She clearly has a fascination for food and daily practices with it. Food represents the dilemmas of her characters but also the mood and background for several settings. In 'A Temporary Matter' the couple is united in their mirrored moments of 'stirring the rice with their forks, squinting as they extracted bay leaves and cloves from the stew' (11) even if distant otherwise. The lack of electricity and the food makes Shoba remark, '[i]t's like India', almost a meta realization of the author's literary intent.

In 'When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine,' there is a ritual in the life of the child narrator which involves the titular character giving her sweets as he reminisces his own daughters and her consuming them and putting in a prayer for him and his family. On a larger level this symbolizes connection between different diaspora communities, how the narrator's Pakistani family helps a Bangladeshi immigrant get through the 1971 war. Their eating practices, around the television and not the dining table brings them together as they watch the war back home. In a potent imagery of diaspora unity abroad, Lahiri depicts their two countries at war but a Pakistani family and a Bangladeshi literally on the same side, breaking bread as they watch the report together. Dining table here symbolizes normalcy which they cannot afford while the sofa becomes a communal gathering to tackle the grief. The dining table is used as a sense of western normalcy when they carve pumpkins, but the war draws them back to the sofa, a communal yet mired space.

It is important how in both the stories spices define and ascribe 'Indian-ness' and on a larger level even south Asian identity to the story. The yogurt sauces, the cashew nuts, the fish are universal ingredients, but a tinge of clove, fennel, whole chillis, spicy marinade for the nuts, adds a distinctly South Asian coating to the cuisines, as both stories present. We know that the sauces, when they are really curries or *salan* are distinctly of a particular geographical and cultural region due to the preparation process and the constituents. Further, a particular moment that is noteworthy in the Mr Pirzada story is when for days the narrator's mother cooks nothing but eggs and rice. Across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh – simple, non-spicy food is a symbol of mourning and loss. It is a way of coping with the grief to allow the body to recuperate via a simple meal in place of a complex preparation with the *garam masala*. The spicier the food, the richer, in creation and cost and thus more celebratory versus simple bland porridge or rice preparations which is the food of the sick and the poor. Thus, spices are used construct the mood, flavour it with nostalgia and distinctly mark a group of people as belonging to a specific region.

Chitra Divakaruni also uses similar literary strategies in her *The Mistress of Spices*. However, a distinct difference between Lahiri and Divakaruni's use of spices is that food pervades Lahiri's writing even if spices in particular do not, in the case of Divakaruni's text – spices are everywhere except in the food. They are personified as almost divine powers that control lives and people instead of being just present in everyday activities like cooking – they

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hurt, cure and rescue people – are mystified as an eastern exotic power almost. But in Lahiri, the spices or even a lack of them conveys the diverse diaspora experience and community.

Mistress of Spices: Global Feminist Assertions

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1997 novel *The Mistress of Spices* works simultaneously with different binaries and paradoxes. This section explores how spices are the prime symbols she uses to navigate such paradoxes that pervade the diaspora experience.

Perhaps no other Indian diaspora novel is as permeated with spices as Divakaruni's this particular text. Each chapter is dedicated to a particular spice, almost like a cookbook as Abbey (2006) discusses. The very opening line of the text is 'I am a Mistress of Spices' – declaring a female identity centred around spices, which is not 'the' ultimate mistress but one of 'a' community. The text opens with this assertion and a declaration of the power that Tilo, the female narrator and protagonist holds:

The spices are my love...I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first... Their heat runs in my blood. From *amchur* to *zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers.

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Yes, they all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot. (1)

Divakaruni thus lays out the thematic concerns of the text right in the opening pages. Spices here are not mere condiments to be consumed and tossed unthinkingly but powerful magic holders that determine fates and destinies and thus need to be controlled and used accordingly. As Tilo informs her reader, she carries the power and knowledge of this magic – a feminist assertion in overturning of the traditional patriarchal notions of not only a woman in the public space – as Tilo runs the *Spice Bazaar* but also how the knowledge of spices thus culinary knowledge is placed above others, and rendering of particularly female spaces and knowledge networks as significant in even traditionally patriarchal spaces like trade and market.

Tilo goes on to say

'... the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood.

They are the ones I work with.

If you stand in the centre of this room and turn slowly around, you will be looking at every Indian spice that ever was—even the lost ones—gathered here upon the shelves of my store' (1)

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These lines, a rather orientalist nostalgia associated with India, exemplify the diaspora agony and attachment to the homeland. They also articulate and position the novel as an exploration of diaspora experience in its active attachments and association with the land of origin, a factor defining diaspora in anthropology as discussed by scholars like Safran (1991) and Cohen (1997). What I also find interesting is how Divakaruni has a tendency to homogenize the relationships of different communities, ethnicities and identities with spices. All South Asians regardless of their diverse identities like Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians, Muslims, Hindus, Oriyas, Bengalis, Sikhs – have the same needs for spices and comforts or so the text implies. Agreed that the diaspora experience is shared in communal and common feelings of dislocation, yet the context of this loss is extremely different evident in that a food item like chicken prepared by a Punjabi will be very different from a Hyderbadi Muslim. Thus the familiarity they crave through food and a unique blend of spices– as discussed in the previous section is completely different, yet Divakaruni clubs them all under one umbrella. This is, however, also positive in that it attempts to construct a global cosmopolitan identity and experience where Tilo helps everyone regardless of their religion and place of origin.

To reiterate Appadurai's comment on contemporary fiction as ethnographical in nature, Ranjan describes Divakaruni as a literary ethnologist and presents a structured argument on *Mistress of Spices* as an almost ethnography of the diasporic consciousness explored through the spice mistress Tilo. Ranjan argues how Tilo unleashes the mystical power of the spices to help the global disenfranchised citizen despite her setting as a seller in the global trade economy (230). Tilo's position as the shopkeeper of Spice *Bazaar* – which literally translates as Spice Market- is indicative of parallel ideological resistances of feminism and postcolonialism:

Divakaruni reinscribes the arch metaphor of colonial expansion through the spice trade. What was once the colonial spice route from west to east (with all the attendant orientalisms), now reversed, is the re-entry path for Tilo, the postnational spice mistress. And, the powerlessness of the colonized people is now re-imagined as the unlimited potency of the spice mistress' (221)

Ranjan makes a strong and elaborate argument that celebrates the text as and its characters for a path breaking narrative technique that is post-colonial and auto-ethnographic while addressing the discrimination against diaspora communities. While I agree with the argument, I would argue that Divakaruni's spicy literary resistance, though should be celebrated, also needs to be critically questioned. While Tilo's market strategy takes a backseat to her mystical duties as the spice mistress, one needs to consider how Divakaruni's literary strategy, especially with regards to the excessive inclusion of exotic spices from the east might be a rendering of the cultural other into a consumable aesthetic product for the contemporary western reader?

Conclusion

In this working draft I attempted to explore the different ways in which Lahiri and Divakaruni use spices in their writing. As I demonstrated, spices are an inseparable part of the Indian diaspora experience because of factors like nostalgia, memory, familiarity and claim to motherland. My argument on *The Mistress of Spices* is missing two important points of analysis. The first is the significance of the shop, spice bazar to the novel, as a symbol of commodified Indian culture but also as a microcosm of a global diasporic network where displaced Indian identities come for refuge and solace, not only through the buying of familiar food but also for community. The second is how Divakaruni frequently and consciously reverse orientalis American culture and even the patriarchal gaze, through spices, most evident in Tilo's relationship with the Native American, Raven. I will present both these arguments in my final draft.

98 Finally, before concluding, a crucial section of this paper is the one considering the post-colonial implications of the two texts. As briefly discussed before, Tilo's selling of the spices, may be viewed as post-colonial resistance in the involved ownership and assertion of the homeland's culture in the alien west. Her catering to and resolving of problems of the diaspora community with spice remedies, arising because of their encounters with the west, is symbolic of a return to roots for answers – a simple pickle bringing peace in the Indian family in the novel. However, it is simultaneously exclusionary, self-exoticist and commodifying of post-colonial resistance in the construction of the very aesthetic of the novel. As Huggan argues, the exotic is a particular mode of aesthetic perception 'one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery' (13). All these ideas including resistance and its commodification will be developed in the presentation and subsequently, the final draft of this paper.

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