

## REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture44

### Lecture 44: Diaspora and Cinema: The Mistress of Spices

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, we are continuing with our discussion on the module Diaspora and Cinema. Today, we are going to take up a new film titled The Mistress of Spices. Just like Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake, The Mistress of Spices is written by an Indian-American writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.



So, The Mistress of Spices is originally a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, which was later adapted into a film by producer and director Paul Mayeda Berges. The novel The Mistress of Spices was written in 1997. The film stars Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott as its protagonists. The film was released in the year 2006 in the USA. Aishwarya Rai in the film plays the role of the mistress of spices, the protagonist whose name is Tilo, and Tilo is an immigrant from India.

Dylan plays the role of the male lead, named Raven, who is an American. Later, the characters we see, Tilo and Raven, fall in love with each other, and Raven plays an important role in the shifting identity of Tilo in her newfound land, America. The author of The Mistress of Spices, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a first-generation Indian

immigrant who She is a professor of writing at the University of Houston in the Creative Writing program.

**The Mistress of Spices**



- *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is a novel by Indian-American writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, which was later adapted into a film by producer and director Paul Mayeda Berges
- The film stars Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott as its protagonists
- The film was released in the year 2006 in the USA

Aishwarya Rai plays the role of Tilo, an immigrant from India, and Dylan plays the role of Raven, an American. Later the characters fall in love, and Raven plays a an important role in the shifting identity of Tilo in her newfound land



19

Divakaruni began her writing career as a poet. Her volumes of poetry include *Black Candle* and *Leaving Yuba City*. Her first collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage*, came out in 1995 and won the American Book Award. Divakaruni is also the co-founder of an organization called Maitri, a helpline for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Thus, we see that she is simultaneously a writer, a professor, and a social activist.

**Introducing the author: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**



- The author of *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a first-generation Indian immigrant.
- She is a professor of writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program
- Divakaruni began her writing career as a poet. Her volumes of poetry include *Black Candle* and *Leaving Yuba City*
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20

Some of the author's important works include *Arranged Marriage*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *The Palace of Illusions*. Now, coming to the director Paul Mayeda Berges, Berges is an American screenwriter and director. He is best known for his film *Bend It Like Beckham*, which came out in 2002. He made his directorial debut with the film adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

In exploring films with an Indian cultural backdrop, he collaborates with his wife Gurinder Chadha, who is British Indian. Some of Berges's other works include *What's Cooking* (2000), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), starring Aishwarya Rai, and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010). The cinematic adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* (2005) primarily focuses on exoticizing the spices. The central protagonist, Tilo, is a first-generation Indian diaspora. Tilo is an experienced spice seller blessed with magical powers, earning her the title 'Mistress of Spices,' as she can prescribe spices to treat various ailments.

**Introduction**

- The cinematic adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (2005), is primarily based on exoticizing spices. The central protagonist, Tilo, is a first-generation Indian diaspora
- Tilo is an experienced spice-seller who is blessed with magical powers, and hence called the mistress of spices who can prescribe spices to treat specific ailments
- Divakaruni's novel mainly revolves around spices that act as an empowering agency for the Indian community in America. But, in the film the audience can see extreme self-orientalism through the use of spices. It deals with the issue of cultural conflict faced in a multicultural diaspora space, as depicted in the novel
- Nonetheless, the film makes a departure from the novel in various aspects

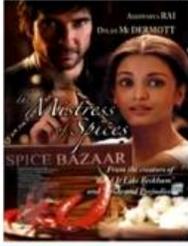


The image contains two visual elements. The top one is a movie poster for 'The Mistress of Spices' featuring a man and a woman, with the text 'Animesh Rai', 'Directed by M. HERMOTT', and 'SPICE BAZAAR'. The bottom one is a still from the film showing a woman in a pink shirt, likely the character Tilo, in a kitchen setting.

Divakaruni's novel mainly revolves around spices, which act as an empowering agent and have an empowering agency for the Indian community living in America. But in the film, the audience can see everything. Extreme self-orientalism is also taking place, a term that has been used very frequently by critic and scholar Lisa Lau. Self-romanticization and self-orientalism are something that we see happening a lot in the filmic adaptation through the use of the spices and the way they have been represented. So, it deals with the issue of cultural conflict faced in a multicultural diaspora space, as depicted in the novel.

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23

In any case, the film makes a departure from the novel in various aspects. The filmic adaptation of *The Mistress of Spices* mostly ignores various important sections, such as the childhood stories and memories of Tilo, and it focuses mainly on the love story between Tilo and Raven, her American boyfriend. Divakaruni, in the novel, describes Tilo's spice shop as an age-old, time-worn, and dilapidated space with the purpose of presenting it as a stark contrast to the pompous representation of the new land, America. So, at the heart of this new land, America, stands this Indian spice shop, which is basically very age-old. It's dilapidated.

It's a little dark and dingy in appearance. And we see that this is in contrast with American culture. You know, the new and pompous, showy culture of America, which prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat, to quote Divakaruni from her novel. On the other hand, the spice shop in the film is presented almost like a cultural boutique. As opposed to American culture, the spice shop is like a cultural boutique with

Glittering interiors, and it almost has a magical tapestry, a magical texture to it. The way the spices are represented in the film looks too attractive. So the film showcases spices from India in a museumized fashion, in a fashion which is too romantic to be true. Too unreal, and the presentation almost captivates the viewers precisely for this same reason. It amounts to romanticization of Indian culture.

Right. So the way the director shows the spices, showcases the spices, amounts to romanticization of Indian culture and exoticization of Indian spices, which are otherwise mundane cooking ingredients that find space in Indian kitchens. And that are a common part of the South Asian culinaryscape. According to the *New York Times Review*, the *New York Times Review* calls this film, I quote, 'a one-dimensional, sometimes illogical

film, but it's certainly good-looking.' The Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World, is exquisitely beautiful.

**Introduction**

- The film mostly ignores various important sections such as the childhood stories of Tilo, and focuses much more on the love story between Tilo and Raven
- Divakaruni, in the novel, describes Tilo's spice shop as an age-old and dilapidated space with the purpose of presenting it as a stark contrast to the pompous representation of the "new land America," which "prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat" (Divakaruni, 4)
- On the other hand, the spice shop in the film is presented almost like a cultural boutique, with glittering interiors, having a magical look
- The way the spices are represented in the film looks too attractive, and the presentation captivates the viewers- it amounts to romanticization of the Indian culture and exoticization of spices, which are otherwise mundane cooking ingredients that are a common part of the South Asian culinary-scape



23

And the photography often looks like an enticing food magazine layout. So that's also a kind of, you know, stereotyping. It is a kind of fixing Indian culture and the meaning of India to certain very stagnant coordinates, as if India cannot be anything more or less than this. Right. The Mistress of Spices narrates the story of Oriental mysticism and belongs to the genre of post-colonial magical realism.

In the original novel, Divakaruni describes I quote, but the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of art and poetry, aquamarine feathers, unquote. In the novel, Tilo and other mistresses who are trained by the figure of old mother about the magical powers of spices are basically shown as young Indian women who are confined in the body of an old woman. And this old woman could actually very well represent none other than India itself. India and its time-worn, its long-long tradition, its long-long legacy with spices, our knowledge of spices, which are not only used for cooking but also for healing, for medicinal purposes also.

### Introduction

- According to The New York Times review, the film is "a one-dimensional, sometimes illogical film, but it's certainly good-looking. The Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World, is exquisitely beautiful...And the photography often looks like an enticing food-magazine layout" (qtd. in Monika Jaiswal)
- *The Mistress of Spices* narrates the story of oriental mysticism and belongs to the genre of postcolonial magical realism. The novel describes:  
"But the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers" (Divakaruni)
- In the novel, Tilo and other mistresses who are trained by the 'Old Mother' about the magical powers of spices are basically young Indian women confined in the body of an old woman. Contrastingly, the film presents a young and beautiful Tilo with the knowledge of spices and their healing properties, who lives in a spice shop in Oakland, California



So, we see that an old woman has, it is the body of the old woman and basically young Indian women are confined in this body. Contrastingly, when we come to the filmic adaptation and the filmic experiment of this novel, we see that a young woman is presented. So, this young and beautiful woman Tilo is presented with the knowledge of spices and their healing properties and she lives in a spice shop in Oakland, California. Tilo being the mistress has to follow many restrictions. In order to be able to use her knowledge optimally in the most effective fashion, she also needs to follow certain restrictions.

She can read people's minds and prescribe spices depending on their ailments only if she remains celibate, only if she remains loyal towards the spices. And these spices, like I said, prohibit her from falling in love with a man and stepping outside of the domain of her shop. So she constantly needs to stay within this environment surrounded by spices. She needs to maintain her celibacy. After following restrictions for a long period, Tilo finally gives in to her desires.

She submits to her desires when she meets Raven, an American man, and then she readily falls in love with him. She gets emotionally involved with her customers, as we see in the film. So she is emotionally engaged and emotionally invested in her customers while trying to solve their domestic issues and problems in life. And she caters to the needs of the Indian community living in the USA. Tilo addresses issues of racism faced by this character, for example, the character of Jaggi.

She also addresses the threat faced by Haroun due to his religious identity. And then we see that Tilo is constantly dealing with the complexities faced by Indian migrants. So she is dealing with the complexities that Indian migrants face during their stay or when they come to America. This is because of the age-old East-West conflict and clash of cultures.

So she is dealing with the populace of Indian origin living in America who are facing different kinds of issues.

It could be issues of racism, religious bigotry, or many other complexities. In one scene, we see Anupam Kher playing the character of a helpless grandfather who comes to seek Tilo's help in dealing with his American-born granddaughter, Geeta, played by Padma Lakshmi. Geeta's grandfather had recently come to live with his family in America, and he is very disappointed as he discovers his grandchild's habits. He is disappointed with Geeta's lifestyle, the way she dresses, her late-night job, and her mixing with male co-workers. So he seeks Tilo's help in bringing Geeta closer to her Indian roots.



So when we have, you know, such characters on the focus in the filmic adaptation, we are representing India in a very, we are representing India very summarily as a package. So Indian culture is only about conservatism. People could also say, so Indian culture does not allow opposite genders to work and mingle with each other. That is not exactly the only face of Indian culture, really. There is more to Indian culture than just what is being reflected and presented in this film.

So we see that Disney Studios in a way is also doing the same thing. They have very stereotypical straight jacketed understanding of Indian characters and Indian culture, which are likely to fall into the pithole of the trap of self-orientalism and self-romanticization. So, we see coming back to this film, we see that the grandfather is seeking Tilo's help to bring Gita back, you know, to her Indian roots, to her Indian traditions. Next, we see this figure of Jaggi, who is facing racism in his school because of his Indian identity.

He is prescribed cinnamon by Tilo because cinnamon is traditionally considered as a friend maker spice. So he makes more friends and he stops facing hostility all the time. Next, the character of Haroun, who is a cab driver of Kashmiri origin, is a regular customer of the spice shop. He comes and asks Tilo, whom he addresses as Lady Jaan. So, he asks Lady Jaan Tilo to see his fortune

in the new land, what lies in the future? Tilo can see his gory and blood-filled past in Kashmir. So with her special power, Tilo is able to see his blood-filled, extremely gory past that he has experienced back in Kashmir, and she prescribes him the Chandan spice, the sandalwood spice presumably for its soothing effect.

**Tilo and the Spices**

- The character of Haroun, a cab driver of Kashmiri origin, is a regular customer of the spice shop. He comes and asks Tilo, whom he addresses as 'Lady Jaan' to see his fortune in the new land
- Tilo can see his gory and blood-filled past in Kashmir and prescribes him the 'Chandan' (sandalwood) spice, presumably for its soothing effect. According to Tilo's training on spices by the Old mother (played by Zohra Sehgal), sandalwood is the spice that cures an individual of the pains of remembrance. As Haroun rubs the sandalwood on the palms of his hand, he cries and describes the past, only to suddenly forget what he was speaking about
- Tilo feels sorry for his past life and sees his fortune, and says that the new land will bring him fortune, riches and even love



According to Tilo's training on spices by the old mother, and the old mother is played by Zohra Sehgal in the film, Sandalwood is the spice that cures an individual of the pains of remembrance. Once again, like I already stated towards the beginning of this lecture, the old mother could very well be the symbol of the traditional Indian knowledge of herbs and spices that have curative effect, that have a curative effect that have medicinal purposes, that are used for, you know, wellness, healing, as well as for, you know, for culinary purpose to enhance taste of food. So, here we see that Haroun is suggested to use sandalwood.

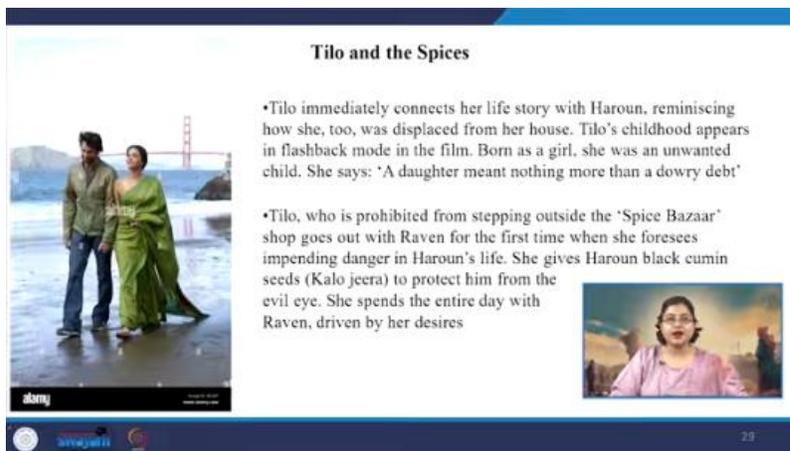
which would calm, which would kind of alleviate his pains from the past, the painful memories from the past, because sandalwood cures an individual of the pains of remembrance. As her own rubs the sandalwood on the palms of his hand, he cries and describes his past only to suddenly forget what he was talking about. So, Tilo feels sorry for his past life and when she sees his fortune, she foretells that the new land will bring him not only fortune and riches but also love that he desperately needs. So, Tilo is also

immediately connecting her life with her own and she reminisces how she herself was displaced from her house.

So, she herself has undergone this experience of displacement. So, Tilo's childhood appears in flashback mode in the film. Born as a girl, she was an unwanted child. She says... that a daughter meant nothing more than a dowry debt.

Tilo is prohibited from stepping outside the spice bazaar or the spice shop. And yet, once she falls in love with an American boy called Raven, she goes out with him for the first time when she foresees some impending danger in her own life. She gives her own black cumin seeds, or kala jeera, to protect him from the evil eye. She spends the entire day with Raven, driven by her innate desires that she has been suppressing all this while.

**Tilo and the Spices**



- Tilo immediately connects her life story with Haroun, reminiscing how she, too, was displaced from her house. Tilo's childhood appears in flashback mode in the film. Born as a girl, she was an unwanted child. She says: 'A daughter meant nothing more than a dowry debt'
- Tilo, who is prohibited from stepping outside the 'Spice Bazaar' shop goes out with Raven for the first time when she foresees impending danger in Haroun's life. She gives Haroun black cumin seeds (Kalo jeera) to protect him from the evil eye. She spends the entire day with Raven, driven by her desires

Upon returning to her spice shop after spending an entire day—a lot of time—with Raven, she finds that the spices are all scattered on the floor. They are lying all over the floor. Darkness has engulfed her shop. The spices no longer obey her.

All spices have left her because she has betrayed them. She has betrayed and broken her celibacy. She has fallen in love and so she has overstepped the boundaries. She has stepped outside the shop. Tilo is encountered by the apparition, the shadow of the old mother

who had taught her the secrets of spices. She warns her to give up on her desires and to return to her spices, to return her loyalty to the spices. Otherwise, she will be punished by the same spices. So, what the old mother tells her as a way of warning is something very, very symbolic. You must return

To where you belong, you are in danger. The spices are your traditions. Do not let America seduce you. With dreams of love, you have aroused the rage of spices. So her celibacy is something, a kind of, you know, sannyas that we tell in Indian language.

Her celibacy or sannyas, her loyalty towards spices, and her maiden life are something that, you know, give her life some kind of strength to read the future, to tell the future, and to cure ailments through spices. So, there is this kind of dedication that she needs to show towards the spices. Her life, in a way, is dedicated to the spices,



and this is a way of symbolically showing her connection with traditional Indian roots. Once she severs the ties and very symbolically falls in love with the allure that America has to offer in the form of her boyfriend, Raven, she will be detached from her traditional knowledge. She will lose everything that makes her a proud and unique Indian, right? Her knowledge of Indian spices will basically depart from her.

They will desert her, abandon her, and go. So, although Tilo decides to give up on her love and return to her spices, she is again distracted by the arrival of her American lover. So, the Western forces—basically, the story is symbolically talking about the Western forces that detach an Indian from her roots, from her ancestral knowledge, from her traditions, and her legacies. So once again, the boyfriend, the American lover, who is a bearer and a representative of everything American, comes back into her life. She decides to consummate their passion for each other in a vivid scene of making love on a bed of red chilies.

For the first time, Tilo uses the spices in her own favor to make herself look more beautiful in the presence of her boyfriend. Later, she is engulfed by Shampati's fire. However, in the film adaptation, we see that Tilo is forgiven, and she wakes up the next

morning, the next day, because the spices realize she has proven her devotion and dedication toward them. The spices forgive her because she has proven her devotion toward them. The film endorses Brand India in Hollywood.

We can understand that it is through the figure of Tilo and through many self-produced Orientalist tactics and ploys, as well as the romanticization of archaic Indian culture, it almost endorses and props up Brand India in Hollywood. It successfully flaunts but also museumizes, I would argue, Indian culture and ethnicity through characters, especially Tilo. But it also celebrates Indian culture through Jaggi and through the values that the grandfather, the figure of the grandfather, presents.

**Conclusion**

- Although Tilo decides to give up on her love and return to her spices, she is again distracted by the arrival of her American lover. She decides to consummate their passion for each other in a vivid scene of making love on a bed of red chillies.
- For the first time, Tilo uses the spices in her favour to make her look more beautiful in his presence. Later, she is engulfed by Shampati's fire; however, in the film, Tilo is forgiven and wakes up the next day. Tilo is forgiven because she has proven her devotion towards the spices
- The film endorses 'brand India' in Hollywood. It successfully flaunts Indian culture and ethnicity through characters like Jaggi and the grandfather. It presents multiple facets of the diasporic community living in different cultures. The film lacks in representing the psychological and cultural conflicts that are predominant in Divakaruni's novel, but it upholds the effortless alliance of the East and the West.



11

So there is both this celebration and museumization of Indian culture, as if sending a message that Indian culture could not be anything more than what the film represents, which could be questionable and problematic. So, the film presents multiple facets of the diasporic community living in different cultures. However, it lacks representation of the psychological and cultural nuances and conflicts the characters in a straitjacketed fashion, and the psychological and cultural conflicts and nuances are lacking. This is something that Divakaruni, however, has kept very prominent in her novel.

The treatment of psychological nuances and the layered psyche of the characters are at the fore, something that Divakaruni focuses on. However, despite its own baggage of problems, one could conclude that the filmic adaptation of *The Mistress of Spices*, at the end of the day, upholds the effortless alliance of the East and the West. So with this, we come to the end of today's lecture. Let's meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

