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Food as an Instrument of Immigrant Rebirth and Maturation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Bannerjee's *Mistress of Spices*

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ABSTRACT: C.S. Lewis once asserted that "*Eating and reading are two pleasures that combine admirably*," acknowledging the profound synergy between the pleasures of enjoying food and literature. However, beyond mere enjoyment, the intricate connection between food and culture plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity and shaping one's sense of self. This research paper delves into the profound interplay between food and culture, exploring how specific culinary practices, ingredients, and recipes become symbolic representations of cultural backgrounds. More than a source of sustenance, these associations serve as affirmations and expressions of cultural identity, contributing to the preservation of heritage across generations.

Food, intricately linked to personal identity, reflects individual preferences, values, and traditions, acting as a powerful marker of familial, class, and ethnic affiliations. The paper emphasizes how the choice of food consciously expresses individual identity, contributing to the definition of personal and cultural affiliations. Furthermore, the connection between food and culture extends beyond the individual to the collective, contributing not only to the enjoyment of life's pleasures but also to the preservation and expression of cultural and personal identity. The research explores how food's profound connection to memory serves as a potent trigger for both joyful and sorrowful recollections. The taste and aroma of specific foods evoke memories tied to places, settings, and experiences. Additionally, the paper examines the significance of food in religious practices, where the act of preparing food is described as a magical endeavor capable of softening even the most calloused hearts. In the realm of literature, the paper focuses on the portrayal of cultural identity through food, with a specific lens on South Asian literature. It explores how writers, particularly those of the South Asian diaspora, incorporate references to native foods in their works, considering them integral to their ethnic identity, even when transported to new countries.

To illustrate these themes, the research delves into two notable works of South Asian literature – Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*. These novels provide unique perspectives on how food serves as a transformative and symbolic force, shaping the characters' journeys and embodying the essence of cultural authenticity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mukherjee's protagonist Jasmine, initially named Jyoti, begins her life as a rural girl with limited marriage prospects despite her beauty and intelligence. Her husband changes her name to Jasmine, expecting her to evolve into a sophisticated city woman. As the narrative unfolds, she undergoes more name changes, transitioning from Jasmine to Jazzy, Jase, and finally to Jane Ripplemeyer. Bharati Mukherjee willingly abandons the customs of her origin in favor of complete immersion in her adopted homeland. In this story, food becomes instrumental for Jasmine in establishing her place in American life, serving two primary purposes. Firstly, it helps her overcome the trauma of her journey by providing a sense of routine and security. Secondly, it becomes a tool through which she connects with her adopted homeland, asserting her identity in a manner that doesn't startle the native inhabitants, allowing her to integrate into a secure existence. Jasmine's father's untimely death and her mother's illness propel her into the role of providing food for her native community. It is in this capacity that she meets her future husband, Prakash. Upon marrying Prakash, Jasmine leaves her family to join his, instilling in her the pragmatism needed for her survival after migration. During this phase, Prakash tempers her individualist tendencies, preparing her for a rebirth and growth within the individualistic American society. The reader witnesses her progression through childhood, adolescence, and courtship, culminating in the full maturation of her American self. Throughout these stages, food plays a crucial and transformative role in her journey.

The *Mistress of Spices* follows Tilo, an immortal and clairvoyant Mistress of Spices who helps customers satisfy their desires. Initiated into her role by the First Mother, Tilo must follow strict rules, including not leaving her store, avoiding physical contact with people, and not using the Spices for personal gain. Tilo operates in a store in Oakland called "Spice Bazaar." Her life takes a turn when a handsome man, referred to as The Lonely American, crashes outside

her store. Despite their strong attraction, Tilo tries to resist romantic involvement. However, when they fall in love, the Spices become jealous, causing negative effects on her other customers. Realizing that breaking the rules is the source of misfortune, Tilo decides to return to India and close her store. Before doing so, she promises to help her customers one last time and spends a passionate night with The Lonely American, named Doug. Afterward, she sets the Spices on fire as a symbol of eternal servitude. Unexpectedly, Tilo survives the fire, and an earthquake has devastated the store. In a vision, the First Mother acknowledges Tilo's loyalty, promising her the fulfillment of all desires without the Spices deserting her. Doug helps her rebuild the store, and they happily reunite, their romantic relationship stronger than ever as they walk along the beach holding hands.

II. FOOD AND LITERATURE

Food literature encompasses a diverse range of writing that explores the intricate connections between food, culture, history, and society. It includes memoirs and autobiographies that delve into personal relationships with food, cookbooks that blend instruction with personal anecdotes and cultural insights, and novels that use food as a narrative device to explore themes of identity and memory.

According to Kessler, food in literature serves as a cultural signifier, laden with meaning beyond its literal consumption. Food can signify social status, cultural heritage, or emotional states. Literary critics analyze the usage of food to uncover deeper meanings and insights into the cultural and personal identity of characters, extending connections within the text and from literature to life.

Food imagery plays a pivotal role in literature, acting as a powerful tool to unveil the true identities of characters. In the collection *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* by editors Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, an article titled "Food in Literature—Introduction" delves into the significance of eating practices in shaping self-identity, family dynamics, class, and ethnic identity. This perspective, rooted in psychoanalytic theory, underscores the universal nature of the experience of food and eating. Mark Stein emphasizes the power of food choices to divide communities and delineate boundaries. Food taboos, according to Stein, can mark outsiders as unclean, unhealthy, or unholy. Andy Martin suggests that our sense of identity depends on our tastes, and we define ourselves by what we do not eat. Claude Lévi-Strauss further supports this notion, stating that what and how we eat reveal our habits of mind and reflect societal structures and worldviews.

Food as a Symbol of Home and Belonging

In *Jasmine*, protagonist seeks refuge in the culinary traditions of her native India amidst the upheaval of her immigration to America. Mukherjee illustrates Jasmine's longing for home through her vivid descriptions of food, such as when she recalls, "I miss the warm smell of curry, cardamom, cinnamon. They smother the stench of America." Here, food serves as a sensory anchor, evoking memories of home and providing Jasmine with a sense of belonging even in the face of cultural displacement.

"Immigrant communities bring with them diverse culinary traditions that serve as catalyst for cultural exchange and adaptation. Through the lens of cuisine, immigrants preserve their heritage while contributing to the evolution of their adopted homes. The act of preparing and sharing traditional dishes becomes a communal experience, fostering familial and cultural bonds" (Gardaphé and Xu).

In *Mistress of Spices*, food emerges as a powerful symbol of home and belonging for immigrant protagonists navigating the complexities of cultural adaptation. Tilo, the protagonist of *Mistress of Spices*, finds solace and connection in the spices of her homeland, using them not only to flavor her customers' dishes but also to transport herself back to the familiar comforts of her past. As she reflects, "I wrap myself in the scent of cumin, I call on the comforting smell of cinnamon, I drift on the richness of cardamom." Through the sensory experience of spices, Tilo maintains a tangible link to her cultural heritage, offering herself a refuge from the alienation of her immigrant existence.

"Food becomes a fundamental means of distinction between individuals and communities in literature. Whether a character is eating, cooking, serving, or abstaining from food holds significance. The specifics of what a character consumes, or refuses to consume, the company they share during meals, and the role of food in their lives contribute to defining the character and reflecting the cultural identity within the narrative" (Kessler, 156).

Furthermore, both Tilo and Jasmine use food as a means of forging connections with others in their immigrant communities. Tilo's spice shop becomes a gathering place for fellow immigrants, where they share stories, exchange recipes, and find comfort in the familiarity of their shared culinary heritage. Similarly, Jasmine bonds with other immigrants over communal meals, finding solidarity in their shared experiences of cultural adaptation. As she reflects,

"We feed one another our dreams and hopes. We savor the flavors of our childhoods, clinging to the memories as we cling to one another."

In essence, these novels illustrate how food transcends its mere sustenance to become a potent symbol of identity, belonging, and resilience for immigrant characters. Through the sensory experiences of taste and smell, the protagonists can preserve a connection to their cultural roots, forge bonds within their communities, and navigate the complexities of their immigrant identities with grace and strength.

Cultural Identity and Assimilation Through Food

According to Bhabha, "*the realm of "in-betweenness and liminality" constitutes the "intercultural space" where the concept of "hybrid identity" is forged*" (Kuortti et. al 8). Hybridization denotes the fusion of cultures that one inhabits in the intermediary space. Bhabha emphasizes,

"Neither the homeland nor the adopted land; instead, he underscores a middle ground termed the Third space. This space embodies hybridity, wherein cultural meanings and identities bear traces of other significances." (Ashcroft et al. 53-54).

Jasmine learns to reside in a universe where, as Ravichandran and Deivasigamani argue, individuals are not singular entities but myriad, liberated from boundaries, with infinite possibilities of crafting identities. Thus, it is her "*many selves*" that contribute to her survival.

Consequently, her numerous identities persistently haunt her. She observes, "*ghosts float toward me*", and occasionally, they "*scare*" her. This illustrates her discovery of "*Jasmine the reliable caregiver*" alongside "*Jase the prowling adventurer*" within herself. Despite this, she finds joy in the conflicting forces within her, finding the "*tug of opposing forces*" exhilarating and learning to "*live with both impulses*," thus, she "*changed because I [she] wanted to*" Consequently, she evolves into a "*perpetual nomad and hybrid in the most radical sense; she shuttles between differing identities*" (Nelson 77). According to Dayal, Jasmine perceives "*identity as difference, as a multiply split subjectivity: Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jase/Jane*" (Mukherjee, 76).

By the novel's conclusion, according to Tandon, all these identities amalgamate into one, with Jasmine becoming a symbol for a type of Indianness that, over the ages, has embraced and assimilated all that is admirable and honorable from every nation, religion, and culture.

Renowned food studies scholar, Marion Nestle, offers a unique perspective on *The Mistress Of Spices*. Nestle remarks,

"Divakaruni's narrative brilliantly captures the transformative power of food, portraying spices as not only ingredients but as conduits for cultural memory and identity. Through Tilo's mastery of spices, Divakaruni illuminates how food serves as a vehicle for immigrant revival, enabling characters to reconnect with their cultural heritage."

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo undergoes a transformative journey guided by her interactions with pirates, snakes, and spices. During her time with the pirates, Tilo reflects on her life's purpose and sends a calling over the water, resulting in a typhoon that frees her from captivity. Saved by underwater snakes, she learns about the Island of Spices and its mystical properties. The snakes warn her of potential loss but also reveal her destiny as a healer. Despite their offer for her to join them as a sarpa-kanya, Tilo chooses her own path.

Tilo's journey as a mistress of spices is intertwined with her understanding and mastery of the spices themselves. Each spice represents a facet of her identity and mission, serving as both tools for healing and symbols of her destiny. As she embarks on her path to serve and heal others, Tilo embraces her role as a conduit for the transformative power of spices, embodying the ancient traditions and wisdom of her ancestors.

She utilizes various spices to address the needs and emotions of different individuals in her community. For her friend Haroun, who faces violence and danger, she offers black cumin to protect him from evil. Similarly, for Jagjit, who experiences bullying, she provides cinnamon, known for its warm and friendly qualities, to destroy enemies and foster friendship. However, Tilo's ability to help everyone is limited by societal restrictions, as she cannot extend her healing to Kwesi, an African American, due to rules that confine her to helping only "*her own people*."

During her forbidden love affair with Raven, Tilo considers using asafoetida, believed to counteract love, to heal him psychologically. However, her own desires lead her to contemplate using lotus roots, associated with love, to attract him. Despite her knowledge of healing, Tilo's emotions sometimes cloud her judgment, as seen when she considers using makardwaj, believed to restore youth, for her own benefit.

Tilo's encounters with other characters also highlight the diverse uses of spices. For Geeta's grandfather, seeking to reunite his family, Tilo provides saffron and almond to sweeten his words and thoughts, as well as kantak, a thorn herb, with specific instructions to avoid poisoning. The magic of spices is further demonstrated when Tilo gives Lalita fennel seeds to strengthen her mind and Jagjit Indian madder to calm his anger.

She uses of spices for her own desires and to help others sometimes leads to violations of her role as a mistress of spices. She gives Raven peppercorn to help him reveal his secrets, breaking the rules of her position. Similarly, she breaks regulations when she uses ginger for courage before leaving her store and chili to stop injustice against Haroun.



Despite her fear of punishment, Tilo ultimately learns that accepting punishment in her heart is enough, as the spices recognize her readiness to suffer without physical consequences.

The opening line, "*I am a Mistress of Spices*," sets the tone for the novel, immediately establishing Tilo's identity and her central role in the narrative. It highlights the significance of spices not only as a means of flavoring food but also as a source of power, knowledge, and cultural heritage. Through Tilo's journey and her interactions with characters from diverse backgrounds, Divakaruni explores themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and the universal human experience of seeking belonging and acceptance.

III. CONCLUSION

In examining the role of food as an instrument of immigrant revival and maturation in the novels *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, it becomes evident that both authors utilize culinary experiences to depict the complexities of immigrant life and the process of cultural adaptation. Through the narratives of Jasmine and Tilo, the protagonists of these respective novels, Mukherjee and Divakaruni explore themes of identity, belonging, and self-discovery in the context of diaspora.

Throughout *Jasmine*, food acts as a symbol of cultural heritage and continuity, as well as a means of survival and adaptation in the face of displacement and upheaval. Jasmine's journey from India to America is marked by her encounters with different cuisines, each representing a facet of her evolving identity. From her early experiences as a cook in New York to her later exploration of American fast food, Jasmine's relationship with food reflects her efforts to navigate between her Indian roots and her new American reality. Moreover, her culinary skills become a source of empowerment and independence as she forges her path in the unfamiliar landscape of America.

Similarly, in *The Mistress of Spices*, food serves as a catalyst for personal transformation and spiritual growth. Tilo, the protagonist, uses spices not only to enhance the flavors of her customers' dishes but also to weave magic and bring about positive change in their lives. Through her interactions with the diverse clientele of her spice shop, Tilo learns valuable lessons about empathy, compassion, and the interconnectedness of human experience. Her ability to understand and cater to the unique needs of everyone reflects her own journey of self-discovery and enlightenment.

Moreover, food serves as a medium through which immigrant characters negotiate their hybrid identities and reconcile the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity. Jasmine's fusion of Indian and American culinary influences reflects her efforts to reconcile her past with her present and envision a future that embraces both aspects of her identity. Similarly, Tilo's mastery of spices enables her to bridge the gap between the mundane and the magical, the old world and the new, as she navigates the complexities of diasporic existence. Ultimately, Mukherjee and Divakaruni's portrayal of food as an instrument of immigrant revival and maturation underscores the transformative power of culinary experiences in shaping individual identity and fostering intercultural understanding. Through the narratives of Jasmine and Tilo, these authors celebrate the richness and diversity of immigrant experiences while highlighting the universal themes of love, loss, and longing that bind us all together across borders and generations.

In conclusion, *Jasmine* and *Mistress of Spices* offer poignant reflections on the immigrant experience through the lens of food, demonstrating how culinary traditions can serve as a source of strength, resilience, and renewal in the face of adversity. By weaving together themes of identity, belonging, and self-discovery, Mukherjee and Divakaruni invite readers to savour the flavours of immigrant life and appreciate the transformative potential of food as both nourishment for the body and sustenance for the soul.

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