

**The Commodification of India's Culinary Culture in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices***

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the current position of IWE (Indian Writing in English) in the global literary market place and the refined politics and power play that is involved in this highly trending genre of South Asian Literature. The premises of my argument lies in the extensive and unnecessary use of India's culinary culture by Chitra B. Divakaruni, to draw the attention of European readers. She brilliantly uses this particular trait in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*. The paper outlines how commodification of India's culinary culture has turned into a common trope for IWE authors and why its use has become profitable in promoting and selling their products in the postcolonial literary Bazaar.

Key words: Commodification, Diaspora, Exoticisation, Food, Market

We could smell India before we even open the doors of the plane. You can smell India, all of this kind of smokey incense, Spices, and I guess, something burning on the plane, Something is burning; What is that burning? I said, It's India.. Home to more than one

billion people, India is a land of paradoxes, ancient traditions and modern day chaos, staggering wealth and desperate poverty. There's truly no place on earth like India. It takes hold of your senses from the moment you arrive and never let go.

(Winfrey, May1, 2012)

This is the opinion of Oprah Winfrey about India after her very first visit. This picture of India is aired on the most popular OWN TV show titled as *Oprah Visits India* (2012), attracting a storm of protest from cultural critics of India for representing India to cater Western taste.-The Indian English Writing (IWE) most often seems to pamper and promote this image of smokey, dark, mysterious India -- burning from poverty, destitution, disease, racism and religious fanaticism; smelling of cow and curries. This smell-smoke, colour and dust has become the permanent global image of India and it creates a short cut for success for diasporic Indian writers to feed their Western readers according to their taste.

Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* echoes and supports many of these western attributes which are gifted to India by the West and is being carried forward by IWE writers. To project India as outdated, underdeveloped, backward and primitive; Oprah describes it as “chaotic” and she felt as if she is taking a ride on a time machine and travelling back to ancient darkness of primitivism. From Conrad to Oprah Winfrey, time and again the West has proved that their outlook for the East has not changed much. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* not only strengthens this idea but also exoticise India through food, spice, myth, magic. Divakaruni triggers the American flare for exotic India by selling her novel with a packet of spices that exude a flavour of our culinary culture. Divakaruni has crafted her own stance to advertise exotic

India, applying more refined and cleverly arranged techniques that will help her novel win the sympathy of the Eastern audience for uplifting and highlighting certain authentic traits of her own culture, and simultaneously stimulates the American expectations for cross cultural stories.

The story begins with Tilo's yearning for her motherland. Tilo is sent to America to help and serve her fellow Indians. Tilo passes each moment in this new land reminiscing the beautiful nature, colours, flavors, fragrance of India. She runs a spice shop in Oakland, California and identifies herself as a “mistress of spices” – spices that add flavors to food, taste to tongue, richness to life. One cannot deny that spices are an integral part of the culinary culture of any country, and it has its own historical journey throughout ages. But it cannot be the only component to define Indian culture and tradition. We do not think of British or American culture in terms of their food only. But when it comes to India most of the Orientals, critics and Indian English writers are found to circulate their opinions around this food trope. In case of European culture we admiringly point out at their industrial revolution, economic growth, highest literacy rate, academic excellence, technological advances, medical facilities, scientific inventions, medical facilities and social amenities. While discussing India, we are mostly stuck to cow and curry, poverty and pilgrimage, race and religion, spice and smell. Today's IWE has become a medium for serving India as a consumable commodity, based on its cultural diversity and working as a force in breaking India.

... Graham Huggan argues that ‘India...is more available than ever for consumption; and more prevalent than ever are the gastronomic images through which the nation is to be consumed.’ The tropes of food and eating, particularly in a familial setting, undoubtedly

inform much current writing by South Asian Atlantic authors; and, on the basis of titles alone, some recent cultural productions do suggest that food has become a tired means of depicting South Asian diasporic life.

(Maxey, 2012: 163)

While promoting this particular novel Divakaruni offered a packet of spices to the western readers. This trope of food pornography is being widely exploited in the book and the film. More than sixty percent of the novel tirelessly discusses Indian food from North to South and from east to west of Indians who belongs to different religion and cultural backgrounds – from Kashmiri, Gujarati, Punjabi to Tamil, Bengali. Ruth Maxey further explains how this food-title fatigue can be traced to a body of work which includes such films as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) released in the United States, Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) in the UK, and literary products that includes Carmit Delman's Indian Jewish American autobiography *Burnt Bread and Chutney* (2002), Nisha Minhas's British Asian novel *Chapati or Chips?* (1997).

Food is an inseparable part of a culture's evolution. Linguistically, culturally and gastronomically India is the most diverse country. The quintessential feature of Indian food lies in its extensive use of spices. It reflects a perfect blend of various culture and ages. It has been growing with time by adding and fusing new essence, flavors to life and discarding what is rejected by the mass. The popularity of Indian delicacy has become global with the popularity of highly trending Master Chef shows, and, super successful South Asian restaurant business in European countries and the sudden proliferation of culinary literature. Undoubtedly, it has a huge impact on the present socio-economic status of India. Indian Chefs who comes out as a winner of such Reality TV shows, enjoy a lot of attention all over the world. It has become a

huge industry. The Chef who has made a mark in this profession, enjoys all the pomp and glamour of a celebrity. No one in India could think thirty years back that some one could come out as celebrity out of kitchen. South Asian food industry has boosted the growth of global economy and has deep impression on diasporic communities of UK and USA. Therefore, it has created an opportunity and a bazaar for cross cultural stories based on culinary culture. The British are so very familiar with Indian food that some of the Indian dishes like chicken tikka masala enjoy the status of national food in UK. (Maxey, 2012: 164). In literature it has been exploited in order to exoticise the ethnicity of one culture. Sometimes it is used as a means of asserting one's socio-cultural identity. In *The Mistress of Spices* various flavors of masalas including mouthwatering dishes are used as a trope to engage the reader actively, directly and emotionally, engaging all the sense organs (smell, touch, taste, sound, sight) of the reader. It evokes the image of the whole South Asian cuisine and helps them to contemplate their journey to the East.

“Mark Stein argues, moreover, that the sheer immediacy of food metaphors means that the reader can engage more actively with the text, since they ‘put... readers to work...[because they] demand that we become involved getting our hands sticky.’”(Maxey, 2012: 164)

The story revolves round the life of Tilo, the main protagonist, who is the owner of a spice shop in the foreign land of America and provide necessary help to immigrant Indians who are in trouble and trying hard to cope up with the new challenges of this unknown land. Tilo tries to solve all the problems with the magical power of Indian spices. While supporting others she herself suffers an identity crisis and tries to explore all the forbidden options. From cultural identity politics to gender issues, she tries to solve every single problem with her innovative

recipes of spices that creates a magic in the day-to-day life of the customers. In words of Stanley Fish, She seems to be playing with the “commonly extended metaphor of consumption”, he directly points at “the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other”. Fish condemns this concoction of identity politics, “The edible is lumped together with the flirtatious in a parody of sexualized food metaphors that are indisputably peppered through cultural fictions of ‘exotic’ or ‘ethnic’ consumption. Over the last decades, the fashionable promotion of alterity has increasingly come under critical investigation” (Wagner, 2011: 105).

This exploitation of one's ethnic culinary habits has become a common target for IWE writers; which has brought them huge success as it fuels the West's hunger and temptation for exotic India by serving India on the platter garnished with all its diverse flavour of food, spice and colours. *The Mistress of Spices* clearly deploys this concept. *The Mistress of Spices* gives a detail description of the elite Indian food which the larger section of the population hardly afford and portrays the foreigner's craze for trying typical Indian cuisines, they avoid – “... the dullness of rice-flour-beans-cumin-coriander. They want pistachios for *pulao*, and poppy seeds for *Rogan josh*, which they will prepare looking at the book” (*The Mistress*,48). The author digs deep to bring out the nostalgia from the Indian “mother's kitchens” – “Emerald green *burfis*, *rasogollahs* white as dawn, and, made from lentil flour, *laddus* like nuggets of gold” To Westerners the most common image of India projects cow, curry and chutney. Today's IWE authors recurrently use these specific items (pickles, chutneys) that depicts India to the West as a savory titillating object of consumption, which mixes all the desired colours and flavors in a single dish and exoticise it. The readers exhibit the rich Indian flavours of *nawabs* and *rajas* as they are served “ *biriyani*

fragrant with ghee, cool bowls of *raita*, *patra* seasoned with fenugreek. And for dessert, dripping with gold honey, *gulab-jamuns* the colour of dark roses”(The Mistress,50). The various food imagery are pregnant with exquisite sexual undertones, “for my bougainvillea girls, whose bodies glow saffron in bed, whose mouth smell of my fenugreek, my *elach*, my *Paan parag*. whom I have made. Musky. Fecund. Irresistible.”(50) On one hand the author gives Tilo the freedom of choice, indomitable power that dares to question the conventional belief system, on the other hand, She portrays the typical victimized Indian woman, cornered in a small claustrophobic, kitchen smelling of spices, sweat and smoke – “A woman in a kitchen, cooking my rice... Rice steam has softened her skin, her loosened hair tied back tout all day.... Mustard seeds sputtering in the pan, brinjal and bitter gourd turning yellow- red. She mixes ”(61). She generalises the image of victimised Indian women – “ Is she one, is she many, is she not the woman in a hundred Indian homes who is sprinkling, over sweet *kheer* that has simmered all afternoon, cardamom seeds from my shop for the dreams that keep us from going mad? ”(61) She never dares to escape from the hardships, torture, abuse. And she drowns herself more in kitchen chores. The book serves the items as a menu of specialised foods, from all provinces of India, “Rice, *Rajma*, *Kerala sabji*. *Kheer*”(63). *Kheer* ,being considered widely as an authentic Indian cuisine, is repeatedly exoticised, “ Kheer with almonds and raisins and crunchy pods of *elaichi*... I dip my mouth into its sweetness, milk white lines my lips and it’s like New Year, and like New Year I can wish for anything. ”(63) Then she turns to Indian snacks which the American tongue relishes, “ the American holds up a packet of *chanachur* on which written LIJJAT SNACK MIX VERY HOT!!? ” (147).She has the whole arrangement done to gratify the American hunger with palatable enticing Indian dishes from breakfast, lunch to dinner.

Divakaruni seems to be toying with the word “authentic” which has sexual connotations here. She plays with the American’s psychosexual fantasy. The author uses food as a parameter to judge identify and authenticity of Indians. PpTilo’s authenticity draws special attention from her American lover. He says, “ ‘You’re authentic in a way they’ll never be,’ he adds. *Authentic*. A curious word to use. ‘What do you mean authentic?’ I ask. ‘You know, real. Real Indian. ’”(255)

Particular sections of the novel gives the sense of a recipe book that sells Indianness as gorgeously wrapped goodies, according to the needs and demand of European readers. The author has given every possible translation for the Indian spices , herbs and except a few non-translatable spices and herbs like *garam masala*, *Neem* By translating the Indian spices she is giving easy access to the Western readers. In a way she is othering Indians in terms of their food habits and tastes. Lisa Lau notes,, “ Select aspects of Indian culture sell particularly well, such as depiction of women as victims, culinary descriptions, details of cultural garments, arranged marriages, the tradition versus modernity struggle... poverty and deprivation. Pretty much any aspect of perceived Indianness which can be exoticised appears to have a market value. The global commodification of difference and otherness has been on the rise [...]” (Lau, 2014)

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