

Cooking the self: Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract: Food is a basic requirement for all living beings in the world. It is considered a significant factor in leading a life. Some people have food to satisfy their stomachs, while others have food to achieve their goals. Lévi-Strauss writes about food from different angles. This study employs Claude Lévi-Strauss's Culinary Triangle Theory, which differentiates between the raw, cooked, and rotten as symbolic categories within a cultural system, to analyse Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). In addition to providing sustenance, the novel's spices serve as a bridge for identity, memory and cultural transformation. The novel demonstrates how food significantly impacts people's lives, profoundly changing them and providing a sense of emotional fulfilment. This research paper provides insights into the influence of food on Tilottama's cultural evolution, from its natural state through the stages of raw, cooked, and rotten.

Keywords: raw, cooked, rotten, nature, cultural transformation, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Introduction

Famous Indian-American novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is esteemed for her lyrical prose and examination of the realities faced by South Asian immigrants. She has received praise from critics across various genres for her writings, which combine myth, tradition, and modern life. One of her fascinating novels, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), blends significant cultural understanding with magical realism. The novel exemplifies her distinctive storytelling approach, which unites East and West. The story takes place in a small spice shop in Oakland, California. It revolves around Tilottama, a mysterious woman deeply rooted in Indian rituals and in understanding the hidden

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qualities of Indian spices. She helps members of the Indian diaspora, who encounter struggles with their identity, love, and adversity in a foreign land, by drawing on her connection to spices. Tilo starts to question the rigid guidelines of her mystical order. She is forced to deal with the consequences of prioritising her own desires over her sacred obligations. The transition of food from raw to cooked and fermented serves as a metaphor for the transformation of cultural structures and the human journey from barbarism to civilisation, as Claude Lévi-Strauss's Culinary Triangle Theory illustrates the relationship between nature and culture. He regarded food preparation as a coded system of meaning and argued that "the preparation of food is a form of language that reveals a society's structure" (Graf and Mescoli 2020, 465).

Divakaruni's narrative explores deeper social and psychological changes, particularly within the diasporic context, highlighting these through culinary ingredients, especially spices. As natural preservatives and antioxidants, spices also help prevent or reduce food deterioration and spoilage, thereby increasing its nutritional value. "From ancient times, spices have played a major role in the lifestyle of people from certain parts of the world" (Kunnumakkara et al. 2009, 1). "Different spices may help us with different troubles" (Divakaruni 1997, 71). Tilo, the mysterious main character, symbolises the transition from raw emotions to a spiritually cooked state that becomes rotten by desire and later evolves into cultural refinement, with spices serving as mystical aids and culinary purposes.

The raw: Tilo's feelings of alienation and unformed identity

In Claude Lévi-Strauss's Culinary Triangle Theory, the raw refers to the pure and unchanging state at the emotional, cultural, and social levels. This idea is evident in *The Mistress of Spices* through Tilo's early identity and her customers' emotional upheavals. Initially, Tilo is in a raw emotional and spiritual state. Her journey begins with acts of violence, loss, and the confinement of her tragic infancy in India. The rawness is both physical and symbolic; she is unrefined and not yet shaped by the influences of spices and cultural norms that she later adopts.

The raw stage of Tilo depicts her transparency and sincerity before she undergoes changes. Her parents lose hope of having another girl-child when Tilo is born in a village in India. She grows up in circumstances that make her feel solitary. As she matures, she

discovers a mysterious power within herself. “I who had been last was now first. There was something else too, a deep wordless sorrow...” (Divakaruni 1997, 9). These lines reveal her loneliness and the purity of her existence. “Mother take back the power. Let me stay here with you. What satisfaction can be greater than to serve the one I love” (Ibid, 58). This reflects her unwavering love for her Old Mother on the mystical island. As Tilo remains pure, so are the spices. It is revealed through her words: “I will take them into the inner room, the one with no windows, where I keep the purest spices, the ones I gathered on the island for times of special need” (Ibid, 6). Not only are the spices pure, but Tilo’s heart is also. Tilo remains unprocessed, raw, and unaltered, like the raw spices, until she encounters Raven in America.

Tilo struggles between her desire and duty. To keep her mind and body in a natural state, she prefers to take Asafoetida as “it is an old traditional phytomedicine used to treat various diseases in different countries” (Shahrajabian et al. 2021, 36). It helps Tilo balance her cultural and spiritual life as a Spice Mistress in America. The spices store turns into a holy place enduring the rawness, depending on the immigrant's journey. “When your heart is crusted over with your own pain, it is easy to feel little for others” (Divakaruni 1997, 22).

The cooked: Transformation and adaptation

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘cooked’ is a symbol of cultural transformation. Food in the hands of humans transforms from raw to a cooked meal with form and purpose. It signifies growth, healing, adaptation, and socialisation. It represents people undergoing transition into new cultural contexts or resolving internal difficulties through spiritual and emotional development. In this phase, transformation becomes possible. Tilo’s transformation is vibrant with the help of mystical spices. She is skilled in ancient mystical traditions and deeply grounded in their ritual, discipline, and structure, which essentially ‘cooks’ her raw powers into controlled and socially valuable skills. She is not merely born magical. Her abilities are evolving and being shaped, much like raw food is cooked to nourish others. “The cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw... in any cuisine, nothing is simply cooked” (Lévi-Strauss 2008, 37).

Cooking raw food varies by place, using local ingredients. Similarly, Tilo, living in a different location such as Oakland, California, endeavours to adapt her Indian identity and traditions to a multicultural, modern society. She merges her Indian heritage with the

realities of diasporic life, preserving the cultural elements while maintaining their core essence. Tilo controls the spices, which are natural elements that humans have transformed into something useful, symbolic, and social. Her evolution from a naive girl into a Spice Mistress with discipline reflects Lévi-Strauss's idea of cultural refinement and adaptation of nature. Her journey in America illustrates how food and people are culturally 'cooked' to adjust to the new world.

Tilo is 'twice-cooked' as she transforms from a selfless Mistress of spice to an ordinary woman who chooses personal love for Raven by breaking the rules. She seeks the help of sandalwood for comfort, lotus root for longevity, and 'makaradwaj' to become young and beautiful. Sandalwood "plant is considered sacred and its importance and usage are also mentioned in Vedas, Puranas, Buddhism, epics and scriptures" (S. Choudhary and G. Choudhary 90), and lotus... is regarded as a sacred flower grown as a freshwater aquatic plant" (Beni and Bajpai 2024, 134). "*Makaradwaj*, king among spices...who is the conqueror of time" (Divakaruni 1997, 261). Tilo develops her beauty in accordance with American culture and aspires to be as youthful and attractive as the city's bougainvillea girls. "Culture is a mediation of the relations between man and the world" (Lévi-Strauss 2008, 37).

The rotten: Dislocation and cultural decay

In Claude Lévi-Strauss's Culinary Triangle Theory, 'the rotten' represents elements that decay due to neglect, interruption, or cultural rupture. It marks a shift in culture or emotions where identity begins to erode rather than develop. Tilo is a prime example of this stage. She starts as a devoted practitioner of a mystical discipline but enters a rotten phase by neglecting the rules of the spices laws she once regarded as sacred, and undergoes an inner unravelling. Driven by love and empathy for her customers, she touches them, breaking the rules of Old Mother once again. "It is not allowed for a Mistress to touch those who come to us" (Divakaruni 1997, 6). Eventually, she begins to see serving people as a form of mystical slavery and chooses the path of personal agency and love. She decides to defy the First Mother because she loves Raven. Occasionally, she unintentionally violates the rules. She uses spices to satisfy her personal desires and longings, which causes spiritual disconnection. Longing for the voice of spices, she questions herself, "Tilo are your powers leaving you" (Ibid, 181).

Her purpose begins to fade as she prioritises her personal emotions over her divine duty. The strength of the spices diminishes, leading to destruction of her shop and disorder among her customers. Tilo initially hesitates when Raven takes her hand, but she allows it. “I should not have permitted it. But how could I pull away. All those things you warned me against, First Mother, I wanted them” (Divakaruni 1997, 28). She remembers her Old Mother warning her about disobeying the Spice Mistress's principles while she was on the island. “Look well Mistresses. Once in a great while a Mistress, grown rebellious and self-indulgent, fails her duty and must be recalled. Warning is sent to her, and she has three days only to settle her affairs” (Ibid, 56).

Tilo succumbs to her own desires, which makes it difficult and perplexing for her to choose and provide her clients with the ideal spices for the perfect solution. ““When you begin to weave your own desires into your vision,’ the Old One told us, ‘the true seeing is taken from you. You grow confused, and the spices no longer obey you”” (Ibid, 72). To meet Raven again, Tilo once more breaches the Spice Mistress’s rule against crossing the store’s boundaries and enters America. She prepares by looking in the mirror, which is forbidden for them. ““Tilo have you gone crazy is this why you broke the rule of boundary and stepped into America. For this...And the mirror, though what I will need it for I cannot yet tell. No Tilo, not that most dangerous of forbidden things”” (Ibid, 130).

Under Lévi-Strauss’ ‘rotten’ concept of the culinary triangle, Tilo changes her eating habits to suit her own desires and experiences ecstasy within them. “When I drink (another Mistress rule I am breaking) the wine travels through me, cold and then hot, points of light that collect in the small space behind my lids, begin to flicker” (Ibid, 197). She offers her life to escape the guilt of breaking numerous spice rules, and she destroys herself with red chilli, a sign of devastation that also erases her identity as a Spice Mistress, but spices forgive Tilo. She tries to establish herself in a new role, despite the critical phase. Raven renames her Maya, and she attempts to establish herself in a new role, despite the fact that the phase is critical. Tilo reveals her lost mystical life to Raven and steps into a new life with a new name. ““Come on,’ I say to Raven, and hand in hand we walk toward the car” (Ibid, 317).

Rotting processes reveal issues of expressive stagnation and cultural decline. When trauma causes internal breakdowns, Tilo embodies a

state of decline. However, the novel suggests that decay can act as fertile ground for renewal and transformation, indicating that even this phase of life is not final.

Conclusion

The novel's characters embody the three metaphorical stages of cultural experience—the raw, the cooked, and the rotten—as interpreted through Claude Lévi-Strauss's Culinary Triangle Theory. 'The raw' signifies unaltered identity and emotional vulnerability. At this stage, the character Tilo (in her early years) remains unaffected by societal changes, unsure of her place in society, and is characterised by suffering or displacement. Their unadulterated state marks the beginning of the emotional or immigrant journey.

'The cooked' signifies change and adaptation, an identity reshaped by emotional growth and cultural exchange. To live peacefully in a new country, individuals must shed their rawness and embrace new cultural and culinary practices, akin to how certain foods must be prepared and cooked before they are edible. Tilo uses self-definition and emotional resilience to find balance, strength, and voice. They become hybrid beings that are 'cooked' into multifaceted, adaptable identities rather than remaining entirely rooted in tradition. The process of rotting reveals issues of emotional stagnation and cultural displacement. When trauma causes inner breakdowns, Tilo represents a state of decay. Nonetheless, the novel suggests that rot can be fertile ground for rebirth and transformation, suggesting that even this phase is not the end.

By placing these characters within Lévi-Strauss's triangle, Divakaruni offers a deeper insight into the immigrant experience, where food, memory, emotion, and identity are all intricately intertwined. The spices in *The Mistress of Spices* become live symbols of transformation rather than merely magical ingredients or therapeutic aids. They demonstrate how individuals develop, change, struggle, and ultimately discover their own new identity.

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