CHAPTER IV

THE MISTRESS OF SPICES
Ayurveda, the Indian system of healing has had its genesis ages back and it has always sought to prepare mankind for the realization of the full potential of its self through an integration of the body, mind and soul. The 'Sutrasthana of Charaka Samhita', a much referred ayurvedic text, says "Life (ayu) is the combination ('samyoga') of body, senses, mind and reincarnating soul. Ayurveda is the most sacred science of life, beneficial to humans both in this world and the world beyond."³

It was during 3,000 to 2,000 BC that Atharva the fourth Veda was authored of which Ayurveda is an Upaveda (subsection). Though it had been practiced all along, it was around this time that Ayurveda in India, was codified from the oral tradition to book form, as an independent science. It enlists eight branches of Ayurveda. Ayurveda uses all methods of healing like lifestyle regimen, yoga, aroma, meditation, gems, amulets, herbs, diet, jyotishi (astrology), colour and surgery etc. in treating patients. In India, Ayurveda has been singing the praises of spices as "wonder-foods" for thousands of years. "The three—body, mind and soul—are like a tripod, the world stand by their combination; in them everything abides. It is the subject matter of Ayurveda for which the teachings of Ayurveda have been revealed."⁴ Spices are ingredients in many ayurvedic herbal formulations. The exotic colors and heady aromas of spices can elevate an ordinary dish into a sublime feast for the sense of sight, smell and taste.
Most spices also come with therapeutic properties, so every meal that includes spices can become an experience in enhancing health and well-being. Take for example the most important of all the spices; the golden, yellow hue of turmeric is essential in ayurvedic cooking. This all-around wonder spice helps detoxify the liver, balance cholesterol levels, fight allergies, stimulate digestion, boost immunity and enhance the complexion. It is also an antioxidant. *Ayurveda* recognizes it as a heating spice, contributing bitter, pungent and astringent tastes. Fennel is another cooling spice. According to *Ayurveda*, fennel is extremely good for digestion. Cumin is popular in Indian, Mexican and Middle Eastern cuisines. It is a cooling spice. It is supposed to aid digestion and help flush toxins out of the body. These are just three gems from the vast treasure-chest of ayurvedic spices. They work not only as fabulous flavour enhancers; they come with healing properties as well. It was essential to delve into the ancient history of *Ayurveda* because *The Mistress of Spices* revolves around spices, *Ayurveda* and India. It was the author’s interest in this subject that made her to choose this unique subject that she was able to blend in her beautiful writing. In fact her use of spices is so powerful that we find the spices to be the real characters in the novel.

It is a fact, well known and well acknowledged that when a person goes through some unusual experience of pain or suffering, he/she rises as a wiser, thoughtful and a mature person than what he/she was before. It is often seen that in any creative field, be it art, writing, dance or even singing for that
matter there is a need of an unusual stroke to turn an average work into a masterpiece, a stroke that comes from a person’s personal experience of pain, suffering or being a witness to something unusual in life. This thought reminds one of an award winning movie Rock Star, featuring Ranbir Kapoor. Until he had witnessed a pain of separation with his beloved, he was unable to rise as a true singer who was able to touch the souls of his audience. It was in this very spirit and this very thought that Chitra Bannerjee Devakaruni started on a mystical journey with her *Mistress of Spices*. As she had recently recovered from a month long stay at the hospital after having suffered a caesarean surgery that had gone wrong in all possible ways. She herself narrates this in on her website.

"That encounter with death affected me deeply, though not in the ways one might expect. I went through no dark tunnel, saw no bright lights. I did not rise out of my body and see it lying below. Mostly I stumbled through a grey fog of pain, made foggier by medication. I alternated between anger (why should I have to suffer like this) and worry (what would happen to my children). But at times I would feel a strange, light headed sense of peace, of emptiness, in the way Buddhists use the term. I felt as though I floated between states of life and death, and that it didn't matter which side I landed on. Because the boundary we humans had drawn between these two states was not as important, nor as irrevocable, as we believed. I mused a lot about boundaries as I lay in bed recovering over the next few months, learning to live again. And it seemed to
me, in some wordless way, that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about. I ached to give this discovery a voice and a form. But I didn't know how until Tilo, my heroine, the Mistress of Spices, came to me. I wrote the book urgently—almost breathlessly. Having been so close to death, I could no longer take even a single day for granted.\(^5\)

About The Author

Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee was born in India in Kolkata and later came to America for graduate studies. After having been awarded a Master's degree in English from Wright State University, she earned a doctoral degree from the University of California, Berkeley. Life was not a cakewalk for her and to earn money for her education, she undertook many odd jobs that included babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread in a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. All these and many more experiences that she encountered in Northern California form the basis of her writings that mainly deal with the immigrant experiences, the atrocities that women face in that part of the world. She often says that, “Women in particular respond to my work because I’m writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life.”\(^6\) She has started ‘Maitri’, a helpline founded for South Asian women dealing with domestic violence and similarly ‘Daya’ that operates in Houston. This initiative eventually led her to write *Arranged*
Marriage, a work that includes stories about the abuse and courage of immigrant women. This work won her an American book award in 1991.

Divakaruni presently resides in Houston with her husband Murthy and two sons, Anand and Abhay. She teaches in the nationally ranked Creative Writing programme at the University of Houston. Her work has been published in over fifty magazines and her writing has been included in over fifty anthologies. Her fiction has been translated into twenty languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian and Japanese. Divakaruni began her writing career as a poet. Her two latest volumes of poetry are Black Candle and Leaving Yuba City. She won several awards for her poems, such as a Gerbode Award, a Barbara Deming Memorial Award and an Allen Ginsberg Award. Her major works include The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart and Queen of Dreams. Her works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and fantasy. Her novel, The Mistress of Spices, was released as a film of the same name in 2005. It was directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, with a script by Berges and his wife, Gurinder Chadha. The film starred Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott. Her novel Sister of my Heart was made into a television series in Tamil and aired in India, as ‘Anbulla Snegithiye’ (Loving Friend).
About the Director

Paul Mayeda Berges, born 11 September 1968 in Torrance, California is an American screenwriter and director Of Japanese ancestry, Berges graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990. He has collaborated with his wife, British Indian director Gurinder Chadha, on a number of films. He made his directorial debut in 2005 with The Mistress of Spices, which was based upon the novel by the same name written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The movie stars Aishwarya Rai with the American actor Dylan McDermott. He has not only worked as a director but also accompanied his wife as a co-writer or director at times. He is Japanese married to a Punjabi who has been residing in U.K for long. They do make an unusual match geographically but artistically they seem to be identical twins. Both are well aware of the effects of Multiculturalism, both wish to represent the ‘immigrant experience’ in a candid manner. When Paul was asked in an interview conducted by Subhash K Jha, IANS, about how he relates to an Indian story, The Mistress of Spices, he answered: “I very much feel like a citizen of the world. I am very close to Gurinder and her family, so a part of me feels Punjabi. The world is such a small place. I feel as Japanese as I feel Indian. That multiculturalism comes across in all our films. Mistress of Spices is set almost entirely in San Francisco. That’s a city where I have spent a lot of my years. For Gurinder and me, embracing a multiplicity of cultures is very natural. I don’t get alarmed by it, only excited.”

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In the same interview, he also mentions that his movie was made in close collaboration with the author of the same novel and in fact, Chitra herself wrote the script for the first part of the movie and he has tried to remain faithful to the script. So let us now take on a journey to compare and contrast at the two wonderful art forms.

*Mistress of Spices*

“I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light, the liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island.

But the spices are my love. I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. 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.”

Magical, enticing and enthralling, *The Mistress Of Spices* is a piece of modern day fiction that contains unbelievable elements of the past wonder years, yet smiles its way through the fusion style literature by travelling beautifully through time. Written in a musical manner, it aims at highlighting the problems being faced by the immigrants through the life story of Tilo. Tilo, a young woman born in another time, in a faraway place is trained in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress charged with special powers. She
travels through time to Oakland, where she opens up a spice shop from which she administers spices as curatives to her customers. The price that she pays for this is a heavy one, full of sacrifice, rules and restrictions.

Tilo must take on the appearance of an old woman, forever forsaking her vanity and never looking at herself in a mirror. She must never leave her store or the spices to venture into the city that lies beyond. She must never help any but her own people and she must never become too close to anyone who comes to her. The now immortal Tilo lives in the body of an old and arthritic woman. Each chapter in the book is the story of a spice --- turmeric, cinnamon, chilli, fennel, peppercorn and so many more and of the people that consume it. The spices blend with the emotions with the various characters that are healed by Tilo. Turmeric, the hope for rebirth; chilli, the cleanser of evil; fennel, to cool tempers; fenugreek, to render the body sweet and 'kalojire' to reduce pain and suffering. Tilo, the mistress, can only pray to them to release their magical powers but the ultimate power, the power to heal, cure and restore happiness and well-being lies in them. This magical tale is well blended with the emotions of the characters that face an immigrant experience and are shown as being cured by Tilo. We have Lalita, the wife of a typical chauvinistic, pot-bellied man with whom she shares the burden of an unhappy wedding. She does not want to hurt her parents by leaving him, so tries to legitimize his abuse and her suffering by blaming her initial unacceptance of him. Then there is Jagjit, the shy frightened boy transformed to Jag by the endless hostility and
abuse he had to bear for his accent and turban. He lives with a yearning for the power of the steel blade and gun, a fourteen year old boy who has joined a gang. There is a boy who dreamed of his grandmother's ‘kheti’, has the desire to start a new life over. Haroun, the cab-driver had fled ‘Dal’ lake where generations of his family had rowed ‘shikaras’ for tourists. He lands in America as an illegal immigrant, but he looks forward to riches and happiness in this land. The three generations of the Banerjee family are in a war over their values, only to realize that their love and understanding for each other can overcome every barrier.

Mistress of Spices – The Movie

![Movie Poster](image-url)
A girl is born to poor parents in a village in South India. She comes as a burden but eventually her healing powers are recognized by people around the village who start respecting her as an embodiment of Goddess. Because of her supernatural powers she is abducted by bandits, whose dangers she manages to...
escape by jumping off into water and being carried away to the shore. She is found lying unconscious by a group of girls and the First Mother (Zohra Sehgal). From there begins her journey to be trained as a Mistress of Spices by the First Mother. After being trained as healers who would help mankind by using the healing power of the spices, they are trained to walk over fire and also control their desires, develop friendship with the spices. The girls are then sent to different parts of the modern world. Tilo (Aishwariya Rai) is named after Sesame seeds that means life giver and is sent to San Francisco to open up a ‘Spice Bazaar’ to heal her people. She has special powers to look into people’s lives and solve their problems while she herself lives a simple life. Her special gift comes with a price and that is in the form of certain rules that she has to follow without fail. First, she must use spices only to help others. Second, she must avoid direct physical contact with another human. Third, she must never abandon her spice store.

In San Francisco she caters to an older Indian man called Dadaji (Anupam Kher) who cannot digest the fact that her granddaughter is getting married to a man who does not belong to their religion or cast or race. She also heals a man named Kwesi, a woman named Myisha, a taxi-driver named Haroun Rehman, Jagjit and his mother, a man named Doug and also his girlfriend. She prepares special spices and mixes them to improve their lives. Things roll on well until one day Doug crashes into her spice store along with his bike. The coming of Doug is seen as a danger signal by the red chillies. They are shown as making
warning sounds to which Tilo wants to but cannot pay heed at because her attraction for Doug is moving beyond her love for the spices. On one side she tries to curb her desires and one the other she wishes to be with him. This antithesis of emotions begins to land her in trouble as the spices that she has given to people begin to react adversely. Tilo unknowingly breaks the first rule by helping Doug and stepping out of her store, eventually her second rule too is broken when she touches him and finally when she goes out with him to visit the town her third vow too is destroyed. After she breaks the rules the spices start reacting adversely, instead of curing their customers they start worsening their situation. Haroun meets with an accident, Geeta's family situation does not improve, Jagjit falls in with the wrong crowd at school, and Kwesi's girlfriend breaks up with him. Her First Mother (Zohra Sehgal) appears in a vision and reminds Tilo about the vows she had taken and how she should not let America bewilder her. She vows that she will return to India, and posts a notice about a Closing Sale. She goes all out to help her customers one last time and tells the spices that she will spend just one night with Doug, and then will give herself totally to them. She closes the store and goes off with Doug one last time.

After a sweet night of love-making, she leaves him a note that she must leave and cannot return, but will always love him. Thereafter she goes back to the store and sets the spices on fire, with her at the center of the flames. Then comes the anticlimax as the spices, instead of punishing her leave her
untouched and then Doug comes to the store and finds Tilo lying there and this story comes to an end in a typical fairy tale like manner where they lived happily Ever After.

**Script v/s Screen**

From Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel of the same title, the movie seems to condense Divakaruni’s story in such a way that the layered characters of the book end up having no depth on the reel. The result is a visually beautiful movie that merely manages to scratch the surface and that too irritatingly. So opens Chita Devakaruni Bannerjee’s *Mistress of Spices* with a poetic phrase describing India as “The land of ardent poetry and Aquamarine feathers” (pg.3). Like a perfect novelist she sums up the theme of the novel in one sentence. It is a story about magic, about the East and about India, the place for the Exotic. Devakaruni ventures into unfathomable world of magic, myth and fantasy blending it with a contemporary multi-cultural world and its reality. The entire text revolves around Magic Realism: Magic realism is an aesthetic style genre in which magical elements blend with the real world. The story explains these magical elements as real occurrences, presented in a straightforward manner that places the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’ in the same stream of thought. It is a film, literary and visual art genre.

The journey begins, continues and ends in a magical style. Tilotamma, who is previously called Nayan Tara meaning star of the eyes of a flower that grows
by the dust is regarded as no more than an unwanted burden "Wrap her in old
cloth; lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except
a dowry debt? (pg 7). This lonely, neglected girl is born with a second sight that
is used by her family who never returns anything, not even love and this gives
her a reason enough to want to flee from the place. Eventually abducted by the
Bandits and then after a plunge in the water, she finds herself on the shore of an
island that is ruled by an old, grand First Mother. She passes through
Shampati’s fire, a symbol of purgation, cleansing and rebirth. She then takes
her new birth and transforms from Nayan Tara to Tilotamma, a word that is
associated with a myth as well. So from here begins her magical journey and
her strange relationship with the spice world where she would be rendering her
services to the new world disguised as an old woman.

A world that is inherent to India and would be carried over to the New World
California. Magic Realism dominates the text and we see that Divakaruni has
beautifully woven the sensory experience of the spices with the mythical
ancient magic and the daily problems encountered by the common people who
do not live in their own land either. Interwoven with Magic and reality is the
underlying quest and search for identity that Tilo keeps hunting for.
Throughout the novel she keeps changing her identity, not through the use of
magic but literally making it clear that the problem of identity crisis is a
complex one. The author herself explains that Tilo, The Mistress of Spices
who moves back and forth between one existence and other. She has many
names and disguises and names where each one is symbolic of a new identity that she takes on. It is a journey of self hood that she embarks and finally that culminates where she is able to accept her own body, her own desires and live her own life. Her names are symbolic of her multiple personalities that she wears. Beginning from Nayan Tara (Star of the eye), she is changed to Bhagwati to Tilottama (mistress of sesame seeds and a mythical lady) and finally to Maya, that means spell or enchantment. Maya here is also symbol of the new place America that has magnetism about it. We resist it and yet we always give into its charm. It is Maya that enraptures our mind, body, soul and everything. Throughout the novel Tilo is shown as being in an ‘In-between state where she is aware of the past, is living the present but unsure of the future. At first, she plunges in water and lands on an island where her present identity is changed, the first transformation that changes her from a girl into a woman. Thereafter she passes through Shampati’s fire where she taken to a new land where once again she is aware of the past and future but without much knowledge of where the present is. Here, the First Mother presents her with a knife the purpose of which Tilo believes is “to cut my mooring from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea” (Pg 51).

Here we can also argue that Tilo represents India and Doug represents America. Where America attracts the world with its Glitz and Glam, India on the other hand blends into it yet faithfully retaining its values and strong roots. The central themes of feminine spirituality and cultural identity are rich
throughout the novel, Tilo, is the healer, her store the panacea for a number of people belonging to her community who come to her spice store. She is divine in nature and almost becomes symbolic of a priest or a saint who tries to relieve the devotees off their pains or sufferings. She tries to relieve the warrior-chef Kwesi off his suffering. Geeta, a young girl who accepts western value system with ease, yet is able to retain her Indian ness but her grandfather seems to be troubled because of this and takes her decision to marry outside her caste as a rebellion. Ahuja’s wife is a young oppressed bride with ambitions of her own that are curbed by her fat bellied typical husband or the bougainvillea girls, who play an important role in Tilo’s image-conscious reality. Through these minor characters we see Tilo exhibiting a wonderful blend of feminine spirituality and time and again she takes us on a cultural journey towards Exotic India where her spices become the healers.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience and through these experiences she herself develops in her personality as each character helps her unravel a layer in her self that she was never aware of and thus this novel beautifully carves out the theme of ‘quest for identity’ as we may call it in the modern world. She begins the journey of her life like an unopened bud and by the time we reach the climax we find her to be a beautiful, full bloomed flower where she has seen life, experienced every desire and transformed into a lady who is ready to
embark on the modern world yet with an uncanny power to cling on to her roots with pride.

It is true that Divakaruni has portrayed the plight of the Indians living abroad, the true diaspora experience that she has been witnessing all the while and all the time has been compiled in the form of the life stories of the people who come to her store for healing or to pick spices. Tilo herself is a diaspora wherein she belongs to one place then settles in another island and eventually even when she lives in America, she is never able to call that land her own. The typical diasporic pain is shown through the various stories mentioned in the text. Where on one hand we see the treatment of these sub-plots being dealt in great detail, the movie on the other hand has left out some stories of a few characters.
Divakaruni is a very potent Post-Colonial writer as she herself belongs to the land of the colonized and now resides in the home of the Neo colonizer. It is through this experience that her works are autobiographical in nature. Post Colonialism is a study of literature of those countries that were once the colonies of British. By now we also know that there is a term Neo-Colonialism and that term defines America, the Neo Colonizer. Where Post Colonialism was a result of British rule, the latter one is because of the impact of Globalization. We find people and cultures seeping into the boundaries of each other and if at all we find ourselves in the land of the Neo Colonizer we are reminded time and again that we are and shall be the second citizens in that place. Tilo first comforts conflicting perceptions of herself through her experiences with race and class both of which are linked together in South Asian formation of identity. She sees the damaging effects of racism on the lower class patrons of her store. Vijay Prashad observes in this context that “South Asians have been confusedly named and renamed both as ‘whites’ and ‘minorities’ throughout the twentieth century”. For “white Americans have been unable to decide how to identify Asian Indians in terms of race”. She first encounters the brutality of racism when one of her patrons called Mohan is brutally beaten up by two young white on one evening .As they beat him up, he and his wife Veena are left crying. They hear the whites shout “Son of a bitch Indian should a stayed in your own good am country.”(p.172). Immigrants in America have faced acts of discrimination and acts of violence commonly and brutally as well. They can work in that place but. Tilo has observed the pain of
being a South Asian living in America in terms of race relations and what it means to be an American in terms of personality.

In the middle of all the magic and the superbly sensual experience that we derive from the novel, we are also able to find love. Love that changes the course of the story, love that is supposed to be a forbidden fruit and love that gifts to Tilo a completeness in her character and personality. Love always brings a problem in Divakaruni’s fiction and here too we see Tilo falling in love with Raven. Her relationship with Raven causes a dual problem in her life, she is an Indian who has fallen in love with an American. She is sworn to chastity as a Mistress and is threatened with the loss of all her supernatural powers if she cohabits with a man. This is very typical of a traditional Indian set up where a girl cannot love a man outside her caste and if at all she does, she has to face alienation because of the contrasting values and cultures. This problem is the same as being faced by Geeta who wishes to marry outside her caste and religion. Tilo’s relationship with Raven illustrates many conflicts that multicultural groups face in America. Raven, is a bewildered American youth whose identity was concealed by his mother, he also took up to drugs because of this. It is this commonality of dubious identities in the background of American Scenario that binds them together. For the sake of her love she forsakes her magical power. This love gives her a final identity that holds true to the spirit of the nation in which they live. Thus love culminates all her powers and her names to give her a final identity and a place to which she now
belongs. She is no more in a state of transition, rather completely beautiful not yearning for anything more. The theme of love intertwines a lot of minor themes that help to unwind Tilo, the true ‘mistress of spices’. Sensual, beautiful, unrealistic, poetic and musical at times, the one hour 36 minute experience of the movie is an amalgamation of all the above mentioned attributes mentioned in the novel.

Filled with depth, sensory experience and a magical voyage, *The Mistress of Spices* comes across as a fantastic tale of love and depth, where on the other hand the movie merely manages to scratch the minds of the audience and that too awkwardly. Well this statement is like giving the conclusion of a story or a book by simply looking at its cover without really reading or watching it. So spurs out the obvious answer from a literary lover: the book was better than its movie version. Well, this honest opinion solely cannot be a parameter to judge the screen version of this wonderful text. Where the focus of the author was to bring about a literary experience that blends with wonderful poetry, the focus of the film maker was to focus on romance and sensuality by retaining the story line of the text in a condensed manner. Where One of the major themes of the text is to bring about a self-revelation in Tilo as a character by making use of new names, places and even love, the focus of Paul Meyeda is to show (Tilo) Aishwariya Rai transforming from a simple Mistress into a modern woman who was made to curb her desires but love made her lose her identity. The movie is a commercialized version of a story that had a deep and a far reaching
effect when it was penned down but when the same version was shown on
screen it was merely dragged down to a level of a romantic story, with love
being its major theme.

The chemistry too is a very bland chemistry between (AishwariyaRai) Tilo and
Doug (Dylan Mcdermott).

Where we see in the novel the male protagonist is called Raven, In the movie
his name has been changed to Doug and shown as an architect who was shown
as a typical spoilt American brat who was struggling hard to find his own self.
Although the basic themes of the movie remain the same yet a few literary and
emotional themes are missing because of time constraint and maybe a little
flaw in director’s inability to bring about them out more lucidly. The main
concern remains the same and is the portrayal of the sad plight of the
immigrant population living in America. Be it Haroun (NitinGanatra) the taxi
driver, Geeta’s troubled grandfather (Anupam Kher), Kwesi, the troubled youth or Myisha or Jagjit and his mother or even Doug and his girlfriend. Through the character of Tilo, we are able to peep into the lives of this minority population who live in an alien land, far from their home ground but are never are able to be a part of this Nation. Throughout the movie we see these characters suffering and Tilo trying hard to relieve them of their sufferings. Thus the theme of homelessness, alienation, diaspora and multiculturalism are all dealt with sweepingly throughout the course of the movie. As in the novel, where we find Tilo almost tracing a journey of self-revelation at times with the help of some characters like the First mother or the symbolic meanings of her names, we see that in the movie she has not been assigned a variety of names but a single new name Tilotamma (Tilo) meaning the mistress of sesame seeds, the only symbolic aspect of her existence that defines her journey as an individual in search of herself.

The theme of identity or existentialism finds no place in the movie as opposed to the novel. Aishwariya Rai doesn’t come across as an impressive character filled with depth. She simply seems to be trying to express everything through her eyes, the incompleteness in her life when she watches various women living in that place some in a relationship, the others in a troubled relationship and some few longing to be in a relationship. All this instills in her a feeling of loneliness, a desire to be accepted and a need to be loved. This theme again is not a revelation towards her selfhood which it should have been but merely
dragged down to a level of a love affair. At heart a cross cultural romance with a mystic theme, The Mistress of Spices should appeal to women and Rai's millions of Bollywood fans. But the snail's pace at which Berges unfolds the plot is as painful to watch as the ridiculous way in which the heroine literally jumps out of her skin each time she walk past a red chilli, which ignites forbidden passion. Her innate dilemma whether to choose between love of her life and the love for spices has been shown in a funny rather than a convincing style, time and again we find red chilies threatening her at her watching Doug and she pleads to them unconvincingly “Don’t punish me chillies”. “Why are you warning me chillies?” The chillies become more of a hindi movie villain who tries not to let the beloved meet the lover all the time. In the book though, through it all, Divakaruni writes so that we can smell the spices and taste the foods prepared with them. We learn the secrets of the spices while relishing chapters with such titles as ‘Fennel,’ ‘Black Pepper,’ and ‘Fenugreek.’ The very same theme of sensuality has been dominating the movie as well. Without doubt, the sensory experience created by the movie has a far reaching effect and we can literally taste and smell the spices all throughout and this is one reason that makes the movie look and taste beautiful. The tone of the entire book is a magical one, filled with poetry the first half of the novel builds up well, with lots of dire omens and rituals giving us a picture of exotic India with flashbacks to Tilo's youth and training as a Mistress. She emerges as a powerful character and the minor characters whom she helps make her character look stronger.
The priority given to explaining the cultural, religious, and medical significance of each spice makes parts of the book read like informative poetry. Unfortunately the book went downhill thereafter. The dire portents all shrivelled out. What happened was far less grim than what one had been led to expect. A second main character appears and he was quite a washout -- unreal, unlikely and unconvincing. A significant portion of the book is devoted to this man’s story of his past. About half way into the story, just as soon as the reader gets used to the narrator’s descriptions, it becomes clear that the magic is not in the story but simply in how the story is told. Anyway, the third part of the book ties up all the loose ends in nice happy endings. The infamous natural disasters of California obligingly do their bit. Things conveniently things fall into place for Tilo and the other characters. The story ends on a positive note the familiar immigrant tales of dreams, desires, pain, and struggle end with hope. Intriguing to the core is the fact the in this unbelievable spice shop where troubles are erased by the virtue of different healing, helping spice attributes, a similar concept to the ancient art of Ayurveda, but in a more mythical, fictitious circumstance, the spices literally come to life.

The spices do come to life even in the movie and here music is ingeniously used to do this, thanks to the genius of the ‘favourite’ Gurinder Chanda music director, Craig Pruess, sprinkling the movie with a pinch of music every now and then. The story unfolds excruciatingly slowly. It’s hard to feel for the
characters. The dialogues sound awkward and contrived. The film doesn’t flow, the action never jells, and the romance never sparkles.

The old woman in the novel with a skin almost shriveled up is shown as the most unglamorous undesirable woman but in the movie she had to be shown as evocative. Modest sensuality had to be brought out for Aiswariya Rai in a never before seen side to her acting, the love scene was masterfully created with touches of the Henna patterns on her body and her only glamorous scene. The director seemed to have been very confident about her and Paul fondly recollects in one of his conversations: “Ash is a soulful actress and with a strong chemistry with the team, she has delivered my perfect Tilo.”

Aishwariya’s portrayal of Tilo was difficult to empathize with because it lacked that human quality of self-awareness. Zohra Sehgal appears as the First Mother. As a First Mother she should have looked calm, composed and angelic but her look does not compliment her character neither does her coarse voice.

Nitin Ganatra is the cab driver Haroun, is quite accomplished. So is Ayesha Dharker, who is Haroun’s neighbour Hameeda. Anupam Kher has a small role as Dadaji, as expected, he delivers his role to perfection. The minor characters are all Indian immigrants to the Bay Area, varying from wealthy to struggling. Divakaruni’s sympathies are clearly with the struggling group, and have been taken up because of two problems are detailed with warmth.
However we find that due to lack of time or maybe in order to avoid monotony, a few minor characters has been left out in the movie completely. There is no mention of Lalita. Playing grand-daughter to the weary Anupam Kher with her Mexican lover, Padma Lakshmi’s acting skills make a small but pivotal appearance.

Also into the movie is a West African, Nigerian couple Yoruba speaking Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje and Caroline Chikezie belonging to the Igbo tribe in Nigeria who don’t see their bond till Tilo intervenes. A despondent mother of a bullied Indian boy whose role moves from polite to brash but has his own kinks worked out with a little help from ‘the mistress’. Kwesi, the warrior-chef gave way to Kwesi, the flirt who likes to cook Indian food and happens to teach a self-defence class in the end. Geeta, the mature and well-rounded lawyer was traded in for a typical-looking airhead who acts like a teenager. Ahuja’s wife, a young oppressed bride with ambitions of her own, was altogether missing in the movie. As were the bougainvillea girls, who played an important role in Tilo’s image-conscious reality in the novel. Familiar face, but little known Hollywood actor, Dylan McDermott plays the handsome, sensitive type man who has experienced many women, but finds Tilo to be someone he can speak to and share his secrets with, especially with the help of her spices that she has decided to use to help him through a tough phase, enabling their love affair to develop beautifully. In the novel though, he has been named Raven who does not get enthralled by the beauty of the mistress because she is disguised as an
old woman. It is here that the movie differs from the novel because Tilo falls in love with Raven and her innermost desires come out for him but the movie shows the glamorized version of it where Doug, falls for her eventually because of her beauty and her twin green eyes are the focus of the entire screenplay. Instead of sticking with the character’s book description, McDermot was made out to be an architect, with some stubble, a flashy motorcycle, and the name Doug not Raven as in the book.

A few other characters also were morphed from unique to stereotypical. But that was not the case. In the book, on the contrary, Tilo’s story didn’t always revolve around Raven. The author’s Tilo has a whole life before Raven. It was refreshing to read about Tilo’s trip to a department store, her few daring adventures around Oakland that she accomplished by herself. Dermott, although he fits the part visually, seems bored and tired and wanting to get out of there. The couple lack chemistry of course, before Tilo became a Mistress of Spices who led a seemingly ordinary life, she had an unconventional upbringing that was reduced to mere flashbacks in the movie. NayanTara, the unruly and mischievous child was missing from the movie. There was no explanation of why she chose to be named Tilo upon commencing her role as a Mistress. The omnipresent telepathic snakes too were missing. Many significant parts of the book were compromised in the making of the movie. One exception to this would be that the degree of exoticizing India was a degree higher in the movie, with the use of Indian musical instruments to bring each spice to life.
The book is commendable for its memorable characters and unconventional use of language, myth, and religion. The relationship between Tilo and the spices is familiar because it’s the pull many of us feel at some point when we are caught between religion/rules and personal desires. Nonetheless, this was one of those books that should not have been made into a movie because it was obviously going to lose whatever charm its audience was holding on to. Berges has written a screenplay that turns its back on conventional dialogue and puts a bunch of ridiculous internal monologue in its place. That is why you get a lot of dialogues like: "Talk to me, chillies!" or "Chillies, don't send him away, he means me no harm"

However, we find that the movie remains faithful to the basic text and sticks to the storyline. Where the novel was a thematic work based on magic realism with the help of which the lives of millions of women living abroad who are trying to strike a balance between the modern and traditional values is shown. This is also the crux of this modern fable which is consistent with the themes highlighted in Chadha’s previous works, Bhaji on the Beach and Bend it Like Beckham, which feature young women struggling to find a balance between the old and the new influences in their lives. The film reflects a conflicted sense of identity torn between the traditions and beliefs of one’s homeland and the values of modern Western culture within the parameters of the ‘New World’ –
this time Oakland, California. When Tilo totally disregards her past traditions in favor of free will, all sense of order is lost.

As discussed earlier, the focus of the novel is in placing it in the genre of magic realism and it manages to do that wonderfully. The film, The Mistress of Spices is a work of magical realism. Magic realism challenges polar opposites in this case, the traditions of India versus the modernity of America. In a modern setting, this genre or mode of representation contains fantastical elements and incorporates folklore and legend. The film highlights the different ways in which different cultures perceive reality. It is in Tilo's store that we get a glimpse of the world to which she belongs to as opposed to the world in which she is living. As literary professor Jane Anderson Jones summarizes "The intersect of these different world views is magical realism".

The Video presented in 1.85:1 anamorphic widescreen, the picture quality is nearly flawless. Details are sharp, colors are vivid and skin tones are realistic. There are no noticeable defects such as pixilation or edge enhancement. The Dolby Digital 2.0 is hardly exceptional, but it is intermittently inventive and solid throughout. Santosh Sivan's cinematography and the art design are up to the mark. The music is a mish-mash of what could vaguely pass as fusion music, with a token Bally Sagoo composition.
In the end, it would be injustice to compare the book and the movie as both have different concentration, different viewpoint and cater to different audience. The common thing that remains faithful to both is that both the works have been able to generate an interest and belief in Magic realism, India and Ayurveda. With the innumerable close shots of the rolling camera, we are able to smell and feel the wonderfully colored and enticingly smelling exotic spices.
NOTES AND REFERENCE


3. Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana, 1.42-43

4. Rig Veda (1.46-47)


9. The Mistress Of Spices excerpt


15. http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/MagicalRealism.html