



The “Magic” of Masala: An Analysis of Indian Spices as a Psychological Healer based on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*

Gutimali Goswami

Abstract

India, the land of Ayurveda, is regarded as the cradling ground of knowledge relating to being and healing. The methodical and holistic system of medicine suggested by various Vedas and Purana-s of India often targeted the diseased and not the disease. Hence, utmost importance was given to the internal of a human being, its mind or *manas*. An imbalance in the psychological existence or functioning was believed to be the root cause of every subsequent *vyadhi* or ailment that followed up and impacted the human body. To maintain a sound relationship between the mind and the body various readily available *banaspati* or plant-derived were also suggested. They were introduced in form of spices which were popularly known as *masala*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* utilizes the “magic” of these spices, both literally and metaphorically, and presents it as a psychological healer. She, through this novel, reminds us of the “medical charms” of the Indian spices which is undoubtedly a fundamental part of our cultural landscape. This paper, in a brief and comprehensive manner, attempts to analyze the ancient Indian belief system surrounding the key terms “health” and “healing” and presents it to the readers with the support of a fictional plot for better understanding.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Mind, Spices, Health, Healing, Culture.

1. Introduction

Unlike the valorization of the body in Western Philosophy, “Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage - his name is self; he dwells in your body, he is your body.” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 23), Indian Philosophy celebrated the mind. The Sanskrit word for a human being is *manusya* which is derived from the root *manas* (noun) which means mind and *man* (verb) which means to think. Hence, exceptional importance and extensive analysis of human psychology can be found in various Indian Philosophical traditions. A minor Upanishad of India, named *Amrithabindu* states, “*manamevajeevitham manushyanam bandha mokshaye*” (Rao, 2002, p. 316) meaning mind is the cause for both bondage and liberation. *Maya* which is the ignorant state of a human being brings bondage and knowledge of the eternal truth brings *Moksha* or liberation. However, in due course, a mind might get injured, diseased, or even lose its balance. To nurse the mind certain techniques are applied which are collectively termed as healing practices. Healing often has been defined as,

The process of bringing together aspects of one’s self, body-mind-spirit, at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading toward integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value. (Egnew, 2005, p. 256)

In India, Ayurveda can be regarded as the formal scientific culture of healing which meant, “The Science of Life” (*e-pathshala*). A scientific study, that is believed to be recorded almost

three thousand years ago, Ayurveda is also a broad ancient Hindu medical system. Ayurveda clearly mentions major energies that can injure a human mind or body and call it *dosha*. The *trishoda* or three energies affecting a human body are *vata* (space or air, equated with the nervous system), *pitta* (fire, equated with enzymes), and *kapha* (earth and water, equated with mucus). And most importantly, an elaborate listing of agents injuring a human mind was also enlisted, which were termed as *satogun*, *rajogun*, and *tamogun*.

Ayurveda believes not to treat the disease but to treat the patient. An intimate relationship with the patient is thus maintained and the diagnosis of the ailment is done by monitoring the daily activities of the victim. This is referred to as *Dinacharya*. By doing so a balance is thereby brought within the body and outside. Utilization of various herbs and edibles help in the healing process of Ayurveda. This includes plant derives like roots, leaves, fruits, bark, or seeds which have been included in Indian culinary culture in form of spices. Food plays a vital role in the psychological healing of a human mind, according to Indian philosophy. This can be explained with the help of Bhrigu's doctrine of *Pancha Kosha* (Rao, 2002). He states that the *Brahman* (a liberated being) is enclosed within five distinctive sheaths. The first being *Annamaya Kosha* or the food sheath, followed by *Pranamaya Kosha* or the vital energy or breath sheath, succeeded by *Manomaya Kosha* or the mind sheath, *Vijnanamaya Kosha* or the intellect sheath, finally leading to *Ananadamaya Kosha* or the bliss sheath. Hence, food being the medicament of all the injuries is given paramount significance in Indian Culture.

Another, very popular and often practiced, cure for disorder or ailment in the Indian belief system was magic. Derived from the root "magi" which meant "wise men from the east", magic was prevalent since the beginning of the Indus Valley civilization. Though various terms synonymous to magic can be found in Indian literature like *Maya*, *Indrajala*, *Sammohana*, *Mohini-Vidya*, *Kuhaka*, *Karmanya*, *Kusrti*, *Samvadana*, *Samvanana*, *Yatu*, *Kharkhoda-Vidya*, *Tiras-Karini*, *Kharolika*, *Mithyakautukakrida* etc., however, Veda refers to it as *Maya* which often means an extra-ordinary illusive power. Rigveda mentions the mythological character of Indra as the God of magic and states:

Rupam rupam pratirupo vabhuva
tadasya rupam praticaksanaya /
Indro mayabhih pururupa iyate
yukta hyasya harayah sata dasa // (Das, 1989, p. 6)

which means Lord Indra appears multi-variously by adopting diverse forms with the aid of his *maya*.

Probably, therefore, magic also was popularly referred to as *Indrajala*. An understanding of this term will put forward the very essence of the magical culture in ancient India. A magician creates a net or *jala* on the *indriyas* or sense organ of a person. Thus, magic often affected a victim's psychology by the means of his senses, and in due course, healed his mind and body.

The fourth and the last Veda of Indian literature, *Atharvaveda*, was furnished extensively with what we can call as "medical charms". It was earlier named as *Atharvangirasah*. This was because it was created by the contribution of two sages, *Atharvan* and *Angira*. *Atharvan* refers to "the holy magic that brings happiness" and *Angira* refers to "the hostile or black magic". The former is regarded as the storehouse of formulas for curing diseases and the latter includes prevention and cure against enemies, rivals and evil forces. While analyzing the healing tradition of India, *Atharvaveda* is an inevitable mention as it especially deals with curing the mind to treat the imbalance within the body, rather than surgeries or chemical consumptions.

Often regarded as the "Veda of Magic formulas", this medical tradition believes in treatment through a complex amalgamation of magic, religious ritual and plant products. The first seven books of *Atharvaveda* consist of magical poems to cure various diseases and the next eleven books focus on healing. There are also special hymns to praise the herbs and plant-derived used. Hence, we can conclude that in India, magic coexisted harmoniously with

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religion and science. Out of various branches of science, chemistry and medicine were the most compatible match with Indian magic. P. Thomas in *Epics, Myths and Legends of India* says,

The science of medicine, they say, grew out of black-magic. The horned witch-doctor was the forerunner of our civil surgeon. His cauldron of crabs, scorpions, vipers, hyena's teeth and noxious weeds was the first laboratory, in the world, and out of it grew the science of chemistry and medicine (p. 1).

Several mentions of various plant-derived can be found in the *Atharvaveda* which was considered magically effective.

2. Analysis/Discussion

Chitra Banerjee, in her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* is seen to have celebrated this ancient Indian tradition of magic and *masala* (Spices, derived from plants) to heal human psychology. Tilo, the central character of the novel, is a mistress or a healer from India. In ancient India, these healers were popularly known as *Vaidya*-s. The practitioners of Vedic knowledge and rituals believed that human beings were godly spirits. Their ailments, be it physical or psychological, were also therefore regarded to be resultant of an imbalance in their divine internal constitution. Hence, utilization of medico-religious means was believed to be the only and ultimate cure.

The *Atharvans*, The *Angiras* and The *Bhrigus* were healers who preached utilization of *agni* or fire as the connecting force between God and the victim. Then came the popular *Soma*, a juice derived from a plant, which paved the way for plant-derived medicines in the field of healing. A hymn ascribed to Agnivesh’s guru praising herbs was:

You herbs, born at the birth of time
More ancient than the gods themselves.
O Plants, with this hymn I sing to you
Our mothers and our gods.
The holy fig tree is your home.
A thousand are your growths.
You, who have a thousand powers,
Free this my patient from disease.
Fly, Spirit or Disease.
Be gone with the blue jay and the kingfisher.
Fly with the wind's impetuous speed.
Finish together with the storm.
Most excellent of all are you, O Plants,
Your vassals are the trees.
Let him be subject to your powers
The man who seeks to injure You.
When restoring vanished strength
I hold you herbs within my hand.
And the Spirit or Disease departs,
Cheated or another death.
Reliever is your mother's name.
Hence, restorers are you called.
Rivers are you, with wings that fly.
Keep distant that which brings disease.
Unharm'd be he who digs you up.
Unharm'd the man for whom I dig.
And let no malady destroy
The lives within your guardianship
Hymn in Praise of Herbs, Rig-Veda (Naveen, 1993, p. 5).

Vaidya-s were given a respectable position in the Indian society and were regarded as sacred. This was in fact; a full-time profession and *Vaidya*-s were employed by the state. *Raja-vaidya* was the one holding the highest position among other practitioners who served the king. A *vaidya* was expected to be proficient in all fields of medicines, possess knowledge of Ayurveda, practical skills and cleanliness. Though they were very highly paid, various restrictions were also laid on them like not allowing them to collect the fee from the Brahmins and providing them with free medicines and not treating criminals, huntsmen or opponents of the rulers. Charaka believed that, a *vaidya* should have a certain goal:

Not for self, not for the fulfillment of any earthly desire or gain, but solely for the good of the suffering, should you treat your patients and so excel all. Those who sell the treatment of disease as merchandise gather dust and neglect gold (Saini, 201, p. 257).

A *vaidya* though was expected to be sympathetic but was strictly prohibited from involving themselves in any private conversations or indulging in a love relation with a patient or their jest.

Tilo, who was getting prepared by the Old One to become a mistress of spices and heal the pain of the world, was also educated with this knowledge of herbs and habits of a healer. She, being the narrator of the story, begins it from her childhood. The third-born in a lower-class family, the protagonist though was named Nayantara or the star of the eyes, was neglected since birth. This was because she being a girl was believed to be the one who paves the way only for a dowry-debt in the family. However, soon did her fate changed with everyone's realization of her inherent magical powers. She could foretell the future and solve the miseries of people. She now became *Bhagyavati* or the one who brings luck.

Her camaraderie with snakes was clearly mentioned at the very beginning of the story. She said,

Snakes. Oldest of creatures, closest to the earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast. Always I have loved them. Once they loved me too. In the heat-cracked fields behind my father's house, the land snakes shielded me from the sun when I was tired with playing. Their hoods spread ripple wide, their smell cool as wet earth at the bottom of banana groves. In the streams that ribboned the village, the river snakes swam with me skin to skin, arrows of gold cutting through sun-flecked water, telling stories. How after a thousand years the bones of drowned men turn to white coral, their eyes to black pearl. How deep in a cavern underwater sits the king snake, Nagraj guarding mounds of treasure. And the snakes of the ocean, the sea serpents? They saved my life" (Divakaruni, Black Swan, p. 21).

During her time with the pirates, she reviews her life and, in an attempt, to locate the purpose of her existence she sends a calling over the water. A resultant typhoon releases her in the water and out of the clutches of the pirates. She was then saved by the snakes who resided under the water. They educated her about the spices and the Island of Spices. However, they also warned her about the consequent loss of her name, voice, sight and even her self. They further told her about the Old One, who have resided on that island for ages. Recalling the sight of her that they once saw when she climbed up to the top of the mountain and sent 'the thunder-writing across the sky', they described her to Nayantara as a burning pillar. Enlightened and excited, Nayantara was now at rest, for she had finally found the purpose of her life. The snakes could subsequently see the spices glowing under her skin. Yet, they offered her a place amongst them and requested her to become a *sarpa-kanya*. She defied the pleadings and refused to be a part of the snakes.

The utilization of snakes undoubtedly acted as an agent to heighten the magical sparkle in the plot. In the Hindu cosmology, snakes have always been an integral part. Nagas of ancient India had regarded snakes as their God. This semi-divine race who were themselves half-human and half-serpent had mythological references too. Be it *Samudra-manthan* or Vishnu resting under *Sesnaga* or even the most popular *Vasuki*, who abides by Lord Shiva's neck. Chitra Banerjee by introducing serpents very successfully shifted the readers to the ancient Indian

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mythological landscape and clouded the entire plot with a magical and mysterious ambiance.

Along with the protagonist of our story, another very integral character of the novel was the spices or *masala*. E.M Foster mentions about two categories of characters; one being Round Character and the other Flat Character. Round Characters are complex, with different characteristics and undergo development (Foster, 1981). On the other hand, Flat Characters are those uncomplicated ones who are constructed as a “single idea or quality”. In this novel, though the protagonist was a Round Character, her dimensions were curated by a fundamental character (Flat) of the novel, the spices. Stating the importance of spices in the novel, the Old One declares,

Remember this. You are not important. No Mistress is important. What is important is the store. And the spices (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 20).

Nayantara was tutored about spices by the Old One and was named Tilottama. This name had both medicinal and mythological significance. The prefix of the name, ‘*Til*’ refers to sesame seeds. *Til* when grounded and used can cure several diseases relating to the heart, liver and brain. Hence, Tilottama refers to the magical one, who gives life and restores health and hope. However, most importantly, the mythological inference of this name almost announces the upcoming trajectory of this character in the novel. Tilottama was the most beautiful apsara in the court of Indra. She was the goddess of cosmic power and knowledge. She was also the most elegant and hence was given the position of the chief dancer in the royal assembly. However, she was restricted from giving love to anyone but dance. Succumbed to the temptation, she fell in love and was punished with an exile from the earth, with illness and old age. The protagonist of the novel was also believed to be a divine energy and seen to have undergone a similar course of action and thereby a similar fate. Being educated about numerous spices, Tilo declares in the first chapter of the novel,

I am a Mistress of spices...I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells...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 (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p.3).

After passing the purification ceremony and entering the *Shampati*’s fire, Tilo chose Oakland as her location to treat, heal and serve the world. She, therefore, left the Island of Spices and became the owner of a shop name Spice Bazaar. However, a spice was silently placed amidst her clothing by the Old One before she began her journey. It was a ginger root. Ginger or *Adrak* was believed to give her heart steadfastness and keep her mind strong.

M.H. Abrams stated two distinctive methods of characterization. First is “showing or dramatic method, in which the author indirectly presents the character talking or acting and leave it entirely to the readers to infer the motives and dispositions that lie behind what the character says or does” (p. 49). Here, the involvement of the readers plays a dominant role to deconstruct and understand the character. The other was “telling method, where the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe and often to evaluate the motives and dispositional qualities of the character” (p. 49).

Tilo, who is considered a round character in this novel, is characterized through the telling method. However, the Flat Character, which is the Indian Spices, is characterized through the showing method. Tilo introduces these spices to the readers and narrates about their inherent medicinal and magical values. Every spice was assigned a chapter in the novel where Tilo, in context with other characters, highlighted their medicinal and healing properties. In the second chapter, Turmeric or *Haldhi* was described as,

Turmeric is the auspicious spice placed on the head of a newborn for luck, sprinkled over coconut at puja, rubbed into the borders of a wedding saree (Divakaruni, Black Swan, p. 13).

By this, the divinity and purity of turmeric were presented to the readers. To make it relatable, Tilo explained it through the character of Lalita, Ahuja’s wife. She was a lonely, sad woman whose husband had a drinking issue. She didn’t have a happy conjugal life. However, she was

very talented. She sues well and makes fantastic embroidery work. Tilo could trace her breeding inferiority and therefore gifted her some turmeric, “The spice of love and luck” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 21), she said.

Similarly, for Haroun, her dear friend who drives a taxi, Tilo could sense terrible violence and impending danger. She, therefore, decided to offer him some *Kalo jire* or black cumin. She stated that, “It will help to protect him against evil” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 22). For Jagjit, a Punjabi teenager who was bullied by his friends, was the spice *Dalchini* or cinnamon- the warm brown spice of friendship, which also destroys enemy (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 23).

The case of Kwesi was a bit different. Though he was a kind man who was in dire need of some healing, Tilo couldn't extend him any help. It would be against the rule of a healer as he was an African-American and she was to help only her “own people” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 24).

Many other spices were discussed during the breeding period of her forbidden love affair with Raven, “The Lonely American”. He often visited the store in search of a spice that would heal him psychologically. However, not sure of which one would be of any help, he would always wander around. Though it was hard for Tilo to close her heart and mind for him, she tried to select a spice on his behalf, keeping her desires aside. She was sure, he could be healed with *Asafetida* or *Hing*.

Asafetida is the antidote to love. This is the spice that makes men strong in battle, hardens their heart and takes all softness from them” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 27). But she refrained from providing it as her love and desires overpowered her sense of duty and knowledge of healing. She rather thought of utilizing spices like *Kanwal* or lotus roots to attract him towards her. She said, “Lotus is the spice of love” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 28). Tilo also stated about *Makardwaj* and called it King of Spices. “It could make me young again”, she said (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 28).

Tilo's lengthy encounter with Geeta's grandfather and his family brought into limelight spices like *Kesar* or saffron. When mixed with *Badaam* or almond and added to boiling milk, Tilo believed that drinking that milk will, “sweeten your words and thoughts. It will make you remember love, not anger” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 32). To fulfill his earnest and desperate wish to reunite his family, when Geeta's grandfather reached out to Tilo, she had also provided him with a spice named *Kantak*- a thorn herb. However, it can turn poisonous and act detrimental for one's body, if used more than the prescribed amount. Hence, Tilo had specifically mentioned, “three hair with honey” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 51) and had suggested him to add it to the rice prepared for the family's dinner. She though warned him about the consequent stomach aches but also informed him about the magical one hour of the “Golden Tongue”. “Whatever you say during that hour, everyone shall believe and obey” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 52).

In the second visit of Lalita, Tilo hurriedly provided her with some *Jeera* or fennel seeds to “strengthen her mind” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p.34) and Jagjit was given *Manjistha* or Indian madder “to make him calm and take away his anger” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 39).

Tilo also used spices for her desires when she made Raven eat snacks made of *Kalo mirch* or peppercorn. She said, “Peppercorn makes a person tell all his secrets” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 45). The conversations between the two, that followed after the intake of the spice, helped Raven bare his heart and unburden his soul. This, though helped him to heal psychologically to a great extent, but it was marked as a violation of the rule for Tilo. Tilo had also earlier broken the regulations laid upon her as a mistress when she left her store to see Geeta. She had then stated about ginger as the spice of courage. She had boiled the root of ginger in water and drank that honey-colored liquid before stepping out for the first time (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 40). Another grievous mistake done by Tilo was when she used *Lanka* or “the Red Spice of Anger” as she called to stop the injustice against Haroun. She said, “The power of chili is pure. It will cleanse the evil from the city” (Divakaruni, Macmillan, p. 62).

But the fear of punishment lurked over her throughout the plot. However, in the end, the pure and innocent spices replied to this as, “Mistress who was when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo the suffering in body also” (Divakaruni, *Black Swan*, p. 305).

Conclusion

This statement only reaffirms the ancient Indian philosophy with which our analysis began, that is mind over body. A cleanse of one’s mind was given much more importance than that of one’s body. Hence, even during pandemics like the recent Covid-19, the psychological distress caused by it was addressed by Ayurvedic immunity-boosting measures where spices played a fundamental role. This paper is an attempt to encourage its readers to focus on the roots of both the disease and the cure; the root of the ailment being vinnana (mind) and the medicine being Veda (Ayurveda).

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Bio-note

Dr. Gutimali Goswami is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English, North Kamrup College, Assam. She has worked as Assistant Professor of English in Kakojan College, Assam, and also at Dibrugarh University, Assam. She submitted her doctoral thesis to the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow. Dr. Goswami is specialized in Gender and Literature, and presently resides in Assam.

Email Id: gutimaligoswami111@gmail.com