

Invention and Re-invention of Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

Ms. P. Helan Jona

Assistant Professor of English
Cauvery College for Women (Autonomous)
Tiruchirappalli- 620 018
Tamilnadu

&

Dr. Cheryl Davis

Assistant Professor of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Tiruchirappalli- 620 002
Tamilnadu

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the theme of self-identity, identity crisis, isolation, dislocation of women, the quest for treasure, search for a home, loneliness, nostalgic experience, marital dissonance assimilation, search for respectable life and alienation. In the globalization, everyone wants to move out of his or her native soil for a better living. In travel, they often undertake a journey to discover themselves. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, the protagonist of this novel, leaves her homeland in the hope of integrity and a better life. In the host land, she undergoes homelessness. Later she rethinks about her own lives as women and instils in them the confidence and strength to go ahead. It also shows how she explores her identity after facing several physical and mental encounters. It depicts the representation of different myths, magic and history, related to spices. It also evaluates the importance of spices in a socio-cultural perspective in the life of the protagonist.

Key Words: Immigration, Spices, Identity and Culture

The Mistress of Spices is unique in that it is written as a blend of prose and poetry. Divakaruni tries to create a female universe out of the conventional male world. Tilo learns to be the mistress on a faraway island, which situates the female universe outside traditional geographical locations.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a juxtaposition of the past and present life of Tilo. The past life of Tilo reveals the fact of how she was ordained as a mistress of spices by the Old one, the first mother who trained her on the island to be a mistress of spices. Her past life is

dominated by fantasy and magic. The present life of Tilo is related to her service as a mistress in a space store in the crooked corner of Esperanza where Oakland buses stop. The store becomes a protective shell to her. Tilo is a woman of wisdom and passion. Tilo touches the lives of many people who come to her shop and for whom she has given remedy for their suffering and sorrows with her chanted spices.

Tilo was born in a village. When she had her birth, the midwife cried over her face and the fortune-teller shook his head sorrowfully at her father. She was named Nayan Tara, star of the Eye. "They named me Nayan Tara, star of the Eye but my parent's face heavy with fallen hope at another girl child and this coloured me like mind" (MS 7). She was considered a dowry debt. They fed her milk from a white ass her mother was suffering from a fever. She was lonely and wandering the village unattended.

Shortly after birth, it becomes apparent that the girl child is special. She can see into the distant future with uncanny clarity. True to her name, as she has supernatural powers, she began to foretell what would happen. People from every walk of life praised her and the pirates came to know of her.

Tilo is reminded of the pirates. Tilo's life became tiresome. She wanted to escape from the emptiness of life. She has been to have a calling thought for the pirates. The pirates arrived at dusk. In the end, they carried her thought of the burning village. The pirates' chief named her *Bhagyavati*, bringer of Luck. She became a *Bhagyavati* Sorceress - pirate Queen, bringer of luck and death, "I overthrew the chief to become queen of the pirates" (MS 19).

She had been longing to have death. It became another calling thought to her. She began to cry to *Bhagyavati*, the bringer of death. One day, death came to her with the tossing of the ship over the ocean, but she was saved by the snakes. The serpents saved her by their love on *Bhagyavati* and they told her about the island and doing so, they saved her once again. The old one had immense power on the island. It was the island of spice. The snakes asked her not to go to the island at once. They wanted to give her a new name, *Sarpa-Kanya*, snake maiden. In the end, the Oldest One of the snakes allowed her to go the island as she had the spice glow under her skin, a sign of destiny. He told her way to and from that time onwards she did not see the serpents again.

She reaches a magical island of spices there women call themselves the "mistresses of Spices". First Mother was taking care of all and teaches them too. They were trained in the art of

listening and controlling the spices, and then they sent forth into the greater world to aid humanity. The First Mother used to say that the hands are very important to call power out of the spices. They call it, Hater gun. The Old One used to examine the hands of the girls very carefully. To her, a good hand is not too light, nor too heavy. They are the wind's creatures. On the other hand, heavy hands have no spirit as they are pulled downward by their weight. "The Mistress of Spices" should feel other's pain as snake's belly which is not cold or dry. She should leave her passions behind. In the centre of the good hand is imprinted an invisible lily, the flower of cool virtue, glowing pearl at midnight. Tilo's hand failed to have all these things, but she became "The Mistress of Spices". After the purification ceremony, the First Mother tells the girls, "Daughters it is time for me to give you your new names. For when you came to this island you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since" (MS 40).

While Tilo was about to leave the Island of Spices to America First Mother, from the folds of her clothing placed a slice of ginger root to give her heart steadfastness and to keep her strong in her vows. The taste of ginger root is the last taste of Island and the first taste of America.

At the beginning of the novel, Tilo says,

"I am a Mistress of Spices... I know their origins and what their colours signify 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, the magic powers" (MS3).

Tilo, knows the spices origin, their colours and their smells. She can call them by their names and feels that the old secrets of the spices have been forgotten now, but it was known to mothers. The spices of true power are from her birthland, land of ardent poetry, India. Tilo represents the cosmic energy and divine strength to acquire authority over spices. Spices have a special power for a specific diagnosis. The spices are treated as characters in her novel as they listen and speak to Tilo. They act and react and make Tilo use and not to use their magical power.

Each chapter of this novel is named after a spice which reveals their powers and their origins and thus making the novel very interesting to the reader to continue without postponing. In the chapters she deals with different problems faced by women and even found a solution for them, healing them with the help of spices.

Tilo takes special care of each customer by learning their heart's desire, their greatest fears, challenges and dreams of America. She chooses the perfect spice to complement their needs and aid them in all facets of their lives. We learn to love and root for these mortals, suffer their pain, elate in their joy.

As a Mistress of Spices, Tilo is bound to an ancient set of rules and consequences loom if she is to step out of the bounds of her shop and duties. Her mission is to guide her customers through the wisdom of the spices. The power of the spices is only hers to wield as long as she follows their will. But as Tilo learns to love and care for her customers, she finds maintaining a boundary and accepting the spices will be harder and harder to do.

Turmeric, also named Halud meaning yellow, the colour of daybreak, conch shell sound is used as a shield for heart's sorrow. It is placed on the heads of newborn for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at puja, rubbed into the borders of new and even wedding saris. When rubbed on skin it erases, blemishes and wrinkles sucked away to age and fat and gives the skin a pale golden glow. Cinnamon or Dalchini is a friend maker and a destroyer of enemies and gives strength in legs, arms and mouth. Fenugreek, the speckled seed was first sown by Shabari, oldest woman in the world, renders the body sweet again ready for loving. Dhania or Coriander seed is used for clearing sight. When you soak it and drink the water it purges you of old guilts. Amchur is used to heal the taste buds and bring back the love of life.

To ease Jagjit's troubles, the spice-Mistress administers

"Cardamom which I will scatter tonight on the wind ...to open your teacher's unseeing... Cinnamon friend-maker, cinnamon *dalchini* warm-brown as skin, to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it's not so bad" (39-40)

Tilo gives turmeric to Ahuja's wife Lalitha because Tilo quietly observes her feeling and loneliness. Turmeric may ease Lalitha's loneliness. But it will only tie her closer to her husband and the home, even greater constraints on a life of singular speechlessness. Later when she does not want to lie with her husband, Tilo asks her to take the spice Fennel to get mental strength. Through Raven, Divakaruni shows the true love of Tilo. Raven hints at his heritage, as he tastes a dish prepared solely for his tongue. Tilo, warning him of the food's spiciness states, "It is too hot for a white man's mouth"(151). After the moment Raven says. "So, you think, I am White" (MS 151). Tilo, taken aback is unsure what he means by this because to her, he does appear

white. Overcome by her attraction to Raven, Tilo yields to her own wishes rather than those of the spices. Tilo finds herself irresistible in reciprocating to Raven's love and she says

"For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the Old One, not the awe I felt for the spices...the anger of spices, their desertion.

The true risk is that I will somehow lose the love" (MS 219).

She asks makaradwaj to make her beautiful, "Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine" (MS 261). But Makaradwaj remains silent because Tilo humiliating the island customs. The spice laughs and warns her as "*Do you desire it more than you desired us on the island, that day when you would have thrown yourself off the granite cliffs had the First Mother said no*" (261). At this flouting of their rules, the spices themselves rise against her, demanding that she chooses between love and power. At last, she thinks about all the people and makes arrangement to arouse Shampati fire.

After that, the spices leave Tilo and also her magical power. So she lies down in the centre of the store of which she is no mistress. She feels unconscious before Raven knocks the door and when her power goes away from her body, her body changes into a normal woman. Raven still loves her and calls her Maya. She thinks about the spices, which does not punish her. She hears an answer floating in her ear,

"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 that suffering body also" (MS 305).

Finally, she consoles the spices and First mother, she got a new life and named herself as Maya. "In the old language, it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (MS 317).

Tilo, *The Mistress of Spices*, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. Tilo's multiple identities like chameleon make clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land. Tilo was born in a village and she was named 'Nayan Tara'. Then the pirates carry her away and then she is called 'Bhagyavathi'. When she decides to reach the island, the snakes named her 'Sarpakanya'. For becoming the mistress of spices, she changed her name into 'Tilottama' meaning 'a life-giver' and a restorer of health and hope. And finally, as 'Maya' the illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this

imperfect world going day after day. She finds her identity of marrying Raven and abandons the practice of spices. She has to change her identities many times to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood.

Tilo presents the different cultures – the culture of origin, her home country and the culture of adoption, the host country. Though she has a conservative background she takes a bold independent decision. She learnt to adapt to the new and changing culture. She tries to understand the new world in her life. She symbolises the need for inventing and re-inventing one's self by crossing the boundary of origin.

Works Cited:

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Black Swan: 1997. Print.
- Kezia, Doris. Self- Identity Through Adapting and Adopting of Host culture by immigrants:
A study of Chitra Banerjee's *Queen of Dreams*. *Preterit* 22, 1 (Jan 2009):53-60. Print.
- Lamb, Sarah, *Aging and the Indian Diaspora - Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad*.
New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited: 2012. Print
- Lau, Lisa, "Making the Difference. The Differing Presentations and Representations of South Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers".
Modern Asian Studies. 39 (2005) Print.
- Rai, Rajesh & Peter Reeves, *The South Asian Diaspora – Transnational Networks and Changing Identities*. New Delhi: Routledge: 2009. Print