

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPICES IN SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFE OF THE PROTAGONIST IN THE NOVEL THE MISTRESS OF SPICES BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

*Harshita Chhikara*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sh. L.N. Hindu College, Rohtak, Haryana, India*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Literature is said to mirror the society and the culture prevailing in the society. Ours is a heterogeneous society with varied cultures. Different foods are representatives of different cultures in India. Spices play an important role in adding value to the food, along with taste spices possess medicinal values as well. A classic work of magic realism, *The Mistress of Spices*, a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, narrates the story of Tilo, a young woman from another time who has a gift for the mystical art of spices. Divakaruni has characterized the lifeless spices as living characters in the novel. The diasporic writer has given a metaphorical representation of different myths, magic, and history related to the spices. The Spices in the novel encompass the space of both subject and object, being and non-being. They unify the performance of the protagonist Tilo in a quintessential aspect. This paper evaluates the significance of spices in the socio-cultural perspective of the novel and in the psychological life of the protagonist.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Characterization of Indian Spices, Elationship of Protagonist with Spices as Mistress of Spices, Perspectives, Psychology*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* has been able to produce the better meaning of text and context by characterizing the Spices (Indian Spices representing idealized, magical beings- belonging to India) as non-humans; but also the other human characters for example Raven, an American; Tilo, Jagjit, as immigrant Indians in America; many other minor characters belonging to India, but live as immigrants in India. The novel *The Mistress of Spices* is full of magic-realism. The fifteen chapters are entitled as Tilo, Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalojire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makaradwaj, Lotus Root, Sesame and Maya. It represents South Asian immigrants negotiating their identity in the late twentieth century. The spices are characterized by Divakaruni as “holding magic, even the everyday American spices, but the spices of true power are from the mistress birth land”(TMS, 3). These chapters narrate Tilo’s interaction with her customers, and how she gifts a particular spice to them to solve their specific problems in life. Tilo and her spices are at the center of the interaction between races and cultures, even various Indian cultures, with people of all ages, prejudices, and expectations.

## ANALYSIS

The word 'character' stands for individual distinctive qualities and strengths such as moral, mental and physical. Any work of art is incomplete without characters. In the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo the protagonist or the Mistress of Spices is a 'round' character because she possesses several qualities and develops herself in the story. Tilo is the owner of a 'Spice Store' in Oakland, California. She not only sells Indian spices but helps her customers in solving their problems through the magical power of reading their mind and heart. The spices are treated as characters in the novel. They are 'flat' characters because they remain unchanged and stable in the novel. Indian Spices on account of their myth and history become the tool to extend the narrative plot in a dramatic or in a significant way. Each spice is characterized by a certain mythical impression in curing disease or in their use during festivities. Characterization in itself is a literary device. It describes the character of someone or something. In the novel, Divakaruni has characterized Tilo directly by telling. Tilo herself describes her character and her life. In the first chapter of the novel Tilo says-

I am a Mistress of Spices... I know their origins, and what their colors 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. (TMS, 3)

Tilo is the pan name if Tilottama (that registers her being with Indianness), but she gets it changed to be known with her nickname Tilo in America. Her original name is Tilottama is symbolic of a myth in a very early Vedic age of India. She is the goddess of power, mysticism, and knowledge. Here in the novel, she represents the same cosmic energy and divine strength to acquire authority over spices. Spices are alike mythical, supernatural 'Devas' assigned special power for the specific diagnosis.

The doctrine of renunciation is an austere measure, which is symbolically expected from Tilo as the Mistress of Spices to be practiced so that the purity and piety for Indian Spices may be retained by the performer, who is basically a human. Contradictorily both Indian Spices and Tilo are in this novel demystified to counter the clash of tradition with modernity, to depict the norms versus the human emotions, to evaluate the autonomy against the arbitrary powers of religion and rituals.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays both Tilo and Indian Spices from cross-cultural context. The myth of Tilottama and Indian Spices in the novel undergo metamorphosis due to the blend of Orient and Occidental culture and the novelist recreates their relevance in view of accumulation and traditional significance of Spices in the life of travelers, explorers, and settlers. Walsh rightly asserts this context –

For hundreds and indeed thousands of years, intrepid sailors and merchants have braved the seemingly endless seas to find the mysterious islands where spices could be found. Mace, nutmeg, and cloves for the Romans and for the Europeans of the Dark Ages and Medieval era, they were almost magical particles from unbelievable remote locations. (Walsh, 2004)

Indian spices have been characterized indirectly by Divakaruni. She has introduced the spices to the readers through Tilo in the novel. She has shown the spices talking with their mistress verbally or non-verbally. Their reactions expressed by them are in the form of sound gestures showing turmoil and tension i.e. reflecting negative vibes, but when they are in the positive streak, they turn mythically auspicious. In the context of the manifestation of perceptions, the readers are introduced

to 'Turmeric' in the second chapter of the novel by Tilo, who speaks thus-

Turmeric the auspicious spice, placed on the heads of newborn for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at pujas, rubbed into the borders of wedding saris. (TMS, 13)

The spices, of course, have relevance in creating their sphere in Indian food, in Indian medicinal therapy, and in Indian civilization.

In the chapter Turmeric, the readers come to know that Turmeric is pious and divine. Every spice has its own chapter and quality in the novel. Tilo says- Red Chilli is dangerous and cleanser of evil and Sesame is nurturer etc. The novelist uses various types of spices as characters to the present meaning, context, and significance in the text. Their reactions and integration in the story are often brief but not always. They play an equally important role in the novel and in Tilo's life in curing her clients. They help their mistress with their magical powers until she is dedicated and faithful in her art of Occult with pure heart and mind. Unlike Tilo, they are of one-track nature lacking reason, explanation or depth. They believe and behave in a tradition-bound orthodox Indian way. They restrict Tilo from breaking the particular rules and regulations of a mistress to help others. As characters, the spices have their own personality. Different sections are named after them. They play an important role in the novel. They develop a relationship with Tilo and talk to her in their own voices.

Divakaruni has delineated inanimate 'Indian Spices' like characters in the novel. They are personified. In the novel the Spices talk, sing, chide, love, warn, and get annoyed with their mistress Tilo. Alike human being, every spice has its emotions, unique qualities, different voices, and appearances. In the novel, Tilo is not allowed to go out of her spice shop and leave her spices alone, because it is against the rules of being a mistress of spices. She could not stop herself from going out to help others. Tilo, as narrator, expresses her concerns after returning from outside her shop, when she has left it for a while to inspect Haroun's (taxi driver) new car-

In the store, the spices displeasure waits for me. I must beg pardon. (TMS, 30)

The spices wait for Tilo as humans do. The writer uses personification as a literary figurative device to identify the emotions and actions of non-human objects. Subsequently, this mediates literary understanding of the author's concerns as well as the character's details.

The novelist has retold Indian myths regarding spices to represent history. Red Chilli is mythically believed to be the child of Fire God, Turmeric is supposed to come out of the ocean when the Asuras and Devas churned for the precious treasures of the universe. Fenugreek was sown by Shabari the oldest woman of the world and Fennel was eaten from sage Vashistha after swallowing the demon Illwal so that he would not come back to life again. The premise behind *The Mistress of Spices* is that there is a spice for all occasions, all moods, and all problems. The right one can bring you, love, solve domestic troubles or even get you a job.

For example in the chapter Turmeric, Tilo narrates that girl who is bride and who desires to be a bride rub Turmeric powder on their faces. Asafoetida is an antidote to love and Lotus Root is a spice for long-lasting love. Tilo narrates that KaloJire protects and saves one from the evil eye. Spices's interfering motivations in the protagonist's life appears as an important intervention. Her every movement, every action, every thought, and every emotion is checked by these mystical characters. The spices submit their magical power to the mistress until she remains honest with them from her heart. The

novelist treats these spices with so much social and cultural importance that the protagonist cannot avoid them. The novelist presents Tilo's Old Teachers voice-

You are not important. No mistress is. What is important is the store. And the spices. (TMS, 5)

In the chapter Tilo, this utterance of First Mother is an inherent reflection of Tilo's association with the spices, since when she got occult power in controlling them and since then she could not evade this innate truth of connection with spices. Tilo is not allowed to love anyone except Indian Spices. If she neglects the spices then it seems that she is distancing herself with a kind of mystical relationship that they had been playing in her life. The spices are her power, through which she cures the problems of her customers and which is her sole customary duty.

The spices always act in Tilo's personal choices like foreign bodies. Spices just like Indian-patriarchal society seem to be traditionally, ethically and emotionally keep intervening in Tilo's affairs. They check her efforts of self-enhancement in a foreign location. Implicitly Indian spices act like men, who believe that it is their right to keep an eye on the woman. It is true in the universal context that domination of one suppresses other: it does not let other free from being enslaved. Tilo finds the aftermaths of her mistakes of crossing her limits, through the harmful effects happened upon her clients due to the wrong application of spices. She feels guilty often when she fails her proper medical therapy on her clients. There is an instance when once Tilo tries to help a shy Indian boy Jagjit who is insulted and beaten by American boys in his school. They bullied him saying that-

Talk English son of a bitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole. (TMS, 39)

So to cool Jagjit's depression, Tilo gives him Cinnamon to good friends and confidence in America. Tilo's magic averts unknowingly due to her mistakes. Jagjit in contrast unexpectedly falls into the company of dangerous friends equipped with weapons that could turn him into a criminal. Knowing the opposite effect of the spices on Jagjit, Tilo speaks in deep sorrow-

Spice, is this, the way, you have chosen to punish me? (TMS, 122)

Tilo's difficulties arise when she realizes that she must abandon her own wants to maintain the magical power that she craves.

Tilo asks for a single day of her life from the spices in which she can live for her own wish and can do whatever she wants. Tilo promises to spices to sacrifice her life as punishment after that day. 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. (TMS, 219)

Tilo takes on a beautiful body like a celestial damsel with the help of spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her body and soul to fulfill her emotional needs at least once in her life-time. The spices says Tilo that-

By tomorrow night tilo, you will be at beauty's summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone. (TMS, 263)

The Old One warns her finally that she has to return to the island to make amends for this mistake and many of her previous transgressions if she desires to save the joys of those whom she has helped. Tilo returns in her Spice shop after that

night and offers her life to spices. She thinks that, if the price of getting Raven's love is to lose the spices she will not leave the spices. She proved her loyalty to her art and spices. A dangerous earthquake hits America when she was waiting for Shampati's fire to blaze and take her back to the Island of Indian Spices. Raven manages to find her amidst the large-scale destruction. He takes her with him on a journey to find his dream of earthly paradise towards the mountains of North. Tilo feels that the spices have left her alone or without the magical power. For her, there will be no Shampati's fire to burn her.

The question which keeps coming into Tilo's mind is the reason why the Spices have not punished her, although knowing that their mistress will never betray them. Spices forgive Tilo and answered her with the following words-

A 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 in the body also. (TMS, 305)

Eventually, Tilo feels that her earthly paradise is in America only. She stops Raven in their way and makes him understand that there is no earthly paradise in the north, but it lies among their people who need them. Divakaruni wants to say that we as human beings have a power of recreating an earthly paradise in our lives through our own constructive actions. At the end of the novel, Tilo and Raven return to Oakland. She names herself as 'Maya' which means mythically as- illusion, spell, enchantment, spell-binding power etc. She settles and continues her magical art of therapy as the normal occupation in America.

## CONCLUSIONS

Tilo's character shows the predicament of being caught between two cultures- the Indian and American. Tilo wants to adopt a culture that values and respects individuality. Tilo tries to build her persona in the pattern of the American lifestyle, which causes ambivalence as well as distances herself from her previous associations with the Indian spices. Metaphorically the present conflicting ordeal agonizes her life just as she had gone through the ordeal in her childhood to gain access to occultism in using Spices. For Tilo is a Mistress of Spices, a priestess of the secret, magical powers of spices. Through those who visit and revisit her shop- Ahuja's wife, caught in an unhappy, abusive marriage; Jagjit, the victim of racist attacks at school; the nosy bougainvillea girls, rejecting the strict upbringing of their tradition-bound Indian parents; Haroun who drives a taxi and dreams the American dream- we get a glimpse into the life of the local Indian expatriate community. To each Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice: coriander for sight, turmeric to erase wrinkles; cinnamon for finding friends; fenugreek to make a rejected wife desirable again; chilies for the cleansing of evil. Compelling and lyrical, full of heady scents and with more than a touch of humor, this novel explores the clash between East and West even as it unveils the universal mysteries of the human heart.

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