

Bewitching and Tantalising Mystery of Tilo and the Spices in The Mistress of Spices

Sonia Devi Leishangthem

Research Scholar

Department of English

Dhanamanjuri University

Manipur, India

sonialeishangthem12@gmail.com

Dr. Khundrakpam Nirupama

Assistant Professor

Department of English

D.M. College of Arts

Dhanamanjuri University

Manipur, India

Abstract

The present paper explores the bewitching and enigmatic attributes of Tilo and the spices. Tilo is the combination of beauty, power and mystery. It can be also believed that mystery is the core of a woman's enchanting beauty, and she is a perfect example of the above statement. *The Mistress of Spices* itself illustrates Tilo as a character whose mystical charisma and enigmatic power shape the centre of the narrative. At the same time, her parallel possession of mystical power and the ignoring of personal wish make her presence both attractive and captivating. The paper is also an attempt to examine how her beauty, mystery and power function as both a blessing and a curse. Its focus extends beyond Tilo to the dual enigma of both Tilo and the spices whose ability to enchant, seduce and transform forms the central concern of the novel.

The bewitching and tantalising mystery are not only of Tilo but of the spices also. The spices themselves task as more than magical instruments, they are cultural symbols illustrating tradition, culture and identity. Tilo's selfhood is inextricable from the spices. It also explores how magic realism, feminist theories and diasporic perspectives deepen the sense of charm and mystery surrounding both Tilo and the spices.

Keywords: Beauty, Mystery, Power, Tilo, Spices.

Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first novel *The Mistress of Spices* is about an immigrant from India, whose name is Tilo who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. Tilo is the combination of beauty, power and mystery. Her beauty is unexplainable and extends beyond physical beauty. The spices, like Tilo, possess a distinctive and mysterious beauty of their own. Tilo's power resides in her supremacy on ancient wisdom, mastery to heal, protect and transform lives through the mystical properties of spices. Through Tilo, it can be explored how women can be at once magnetic, authoritative and mysterious. She emerges as a symbol of feminine complexity where beauty, power and mystery unite to redefine the possibilities of womanhood. Her relationship with the spices is both empowering and restrictive embodying the paradox of enchantment and bondage.

Mystery itself is beauty, because mystery is unknown and beauty lies in the unknown. As Albert Einstein rightfully said in his book *The World As I See It* that "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science" (4). Mystery is a space of enchantment, it is magnetic. The attractiveness of mystery lies in its ability to invite exploration; it is not about solving or mastering but about pursuing wonder, desire and possibility. In the novel, Divakaruni portrays this beauty through Tilo's relationship with the spices. The spices are enigmatic, never fully revealed, they whisper, seduce and command. This very ambiguity is what renders them both

mysterious and compelling as their attractiveness transcends the limits of rational understanding. Tilo herself embodies all the mystery as her identity switching from servant to mistress, from mistress to lover, and from bound to free.

Fantastic Reality:

The mystery surrounding Tilo and the spices fulfils the essential qualities of magic realism, bringing its defining elements vividly into play. According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, magic realism is "...in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched *realism* in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales" (258). And as stated by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* also:

a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of objective realistic report...designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folktale and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance...fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels-levitations, flight, telepathy, telekinesis-are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century (146).

According to D. Susmitha in her article titled "Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*" published in 2017 mentioned that "The novel is the magic realist narrative which interweaves the supernatural with ordinary daily events. The novelist fills the gap of the forgotten history through magic realism" (63). This is the proof that the novel is really a magic realism novel. In addition to this, another article titled "Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*" by Arshpreet Kaur in 2024 mentioned that "*The Mistress of Spices* also fall in the category of magic realist texts as it depicts the experiences of

magic woman Tilo” (690). The novel undoubtedly operates within the tradition of magic realism.

Tilo and the spices are both tantalising and mysterious. The spices embody a dual nature serving as agents of healing while simultaneously adhering to strict traditional rules. Whenever Tilo defies the rules or errs in her role as the mistress of spices, the spices themselves caution and correct her. In the chapter titled “Red Chilli”, Tilo feels the signal from one of the spices and says “Alum *phatkiri*, what message do you bring to me today.” (232). In the novel, Tilo’s adjustment with them is tantalising because it embodies the eternal human conflict between duty and desire, heritage and individuality, magic and reality. The spices here are more human than mere spices. Each spice knows human emotions. In the chapter titled “Makaradwaj”, Tilo tells and prays Makaradwaj:

Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine. For one night so that his skin will dazzle, his fingertips be branded with it for always. So that never again will he be with another woman without remembrance and regret (261).

The Experience of Third Space:

The postcolonial theory fits *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo’s displacement embodies both loss and adaptability, a dual experience that reflects the shared condition of many immigrants in the contemporary world, extending beyond the confines of the novel. Anoopama Yadav and Dr. Tamishra Swain in their article “Hybrid Identities: A Postcolonial Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*” published in 2019 mentioned that “Chitra Divakaruni has presented a wide range of Indian characters, which are diverse flexible and hybrid” (345). It is not only for Tilo but most of the immigrants experience it across the globe. Tilo’s spice shop is a room where immigrants search for healing and cultural preservation. Immigrants in the novel, usually experience a “third space” neither fully Indian nor American.

The “Third Space” is a term coined by Homi Bhabha to describe the marginal, in-between space where cultural hybridity, negotiation and new, transformative identities emerge, challenging established binaries of colonizer and colonized. As in the case of Geeta’s family, all the family members face the problem to be both Indian and American. Geeta’s grandfather wants to live like an Indian in America, but other family members are in tension to identify their own identities because they cannot be fully neither Indian nor American as they have the attachment of both the identities. Divakaruni shows the audience the importance of one’s own root through the character of Geeta’s grandfather, in the chapter titled “Asafoetida” Geeta’s grandfather states:

‘May be OK for all these *firingi* women in this country, but you tell me yourself *didi*, if a young girl should work late-late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too? *Chee chee*, back in Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on our faces for that. And who would ever marry her. But when I tell Ramu he says *Baba* don’t worry they’re only friends. My girl knows better than to get involved with some foreigner’ (85).

Not only Geeta’s family but also characters like Jagjit and others in the novel encounter similar struggles. Through this, the novelist suggests the importance of remaining connected to one’s roots. In the case of Jagjit, he ignores his root and states that “Shit I don’t need no smelly Indian tonic” (122). However, he cannot fully become American, as he encounters many challenges in trying to ignore his own roots. Tilo, as an immigrant in America, is able to help others only when she remains connected to her roots; whenever she strays from them, the spices punish her. Tilo expresses her fear for the spices that “Spices is this. The way. You have chosen. To. Punish me” (122). The novel explores the identity crises experienced by immigrants as they struggle between assimilation and the preservation of their cultural roots.

Women through Different Lenses:

The novel can also be seen through the lenses of feminist theory. Tilo herself is the masterful woman, everyone comes to her to seek solutions for their problems. The novel prospects women's agency, autonomy and resistance to patriarchal structures. In the novel, Divakaruni explores the invincible power of women through the help of spices, the spices speak for the hidden and unheard strength and the ability to take care of and resist of women at the same time. The whole story moves around Tilo, not Raven or any other male characters. She helps both women and men of all ages. Dr. S. Syed Shaw and J. Shameem Banu, in their article "Exploration of Feminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*", published in 2022 stated that "The feminism theme has an impact on even the novel's minor characters, Lalita, Geeta, and Hameeda" (167). Not only Tilo but other female characters take major roles in the novel. Further, it is also mentioned in their article that "This paper may be used to investigate the many aspects of feminism in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*" (167). This is also an indication that women are in serious and higher position in the society despite of the burdens women have in their lives. In the narrative, Divakaruni portrays a deeply enigmatic character who embodies both blessing and curse, yet plays a central and crucial role in the novel. Not in arrogance, but in her responsibility as the mistress of spices, she sacrifices much of her youth, a choice that reflects her courage and sense of duty. In real life as well, many women play crucial roles in society while simultaneously managing profound private burdens such as household chores, caregiving, personal struggles. This reflects a form of modern feminism grounded in resilience and a pursuit of equity rather than in notions of arrogance. Not only Tilo but the Old One are perfect examples of modern feminism as both of them handle their lives and others gracefully. Despite their strength and power, Tilo and other female characters continue to face countless challenges; in Tilo's case, her powers are sustained only as long as she strictly adheres to the rules of being in the mistress of spices and any deviation

brings difficulties and consequences. In another view, the spice shop symbolises patriarchal force which is inevitable by any power in the society. For a woman like Tilo in an alien land, her condition reflects that of women in the diaspora, who often experience double marginalization through both gender inequality and cultural displacement. Ultimately, the novel emphasizes the profound connection between women and nature. *The Mistress of Spices* can be read as an ecofeminist novel. Tilo's deep connection and attachment to the spices reveal a strong bond and parallel between women and nature, with the spices symbolizing the natural world. Fiona P Jojan and Kavya Purushothaman in their article titled "Tilo and Spices: An Ecofeminist Reading of *the Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" published in 2021 remarks:

This paper aims to conclude by projecting various evidences which prove the work as an ecofeminist novel. Divakaruni has used ecofeminism adeptly that makes her narrative interesting, gives depth to her writing and beauty to her stylistic features. This paper can be used by literature students to study the different elements of ecofeminism in the novel (9128).

In the chapter titled "Neem", the relationship and connection between nature and women can be seen clearly. Here, the spices whisper to Tilo:

Come Tilo use us, we give ourselves gladly to you who have tended us so faithfully. Lotus root and abhrak, amlaki and most of all makaradwaj kingspice, we are yours to command. Use us for love for beauty for your joy, because that is why we were made (189-190).

Nature equally treats everyone and gives punishment fairly too. The spices help everyone impartially and at the same time express the suppressed and repressed voice of nature which should not be ignored and suppressed. In this context as well, Tilo, as a woman, faces multiple challenges arising from nature, patriarchal structures and the experience of living in an alien

land. At the same time, both nature and women are shown to be subjected to similar forms of control and marginalization within a patriarchal society.

Mysterious Tilo:

Tilo, as the mistress of spices is really a mystery. Her power comes from submission, but tension lies in her desire for personal freedom and love, which the spices prohibit. Both Tilo and spices make the novel more mysterious. In the article titled “Dynamics of Feminism: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and Kamala Markanday’s Major Novels” published in 2025, Dr. Manoj Kumar mentioned that “Tilo is a mysterious character who runs a grocery store and uses her knowledge of spices to help her customers” (871). Indeed, Tilo remains an enigmatic figure, raising the question of whether she truly controls the spices or is, in fact, controlled by them. The spices empower Tilo to help others, especially women. The spices grant Tilo immense influence while simultaneously binding her, making her role as the mistress of spices feel at times like both a blessing and curse. In the chapter titled “Maya”, Tilo faces significant trouble. For instance, when she breaks the rules under the influence of her own desires, her customers often experience outcomes opposite to what they seek, as she herself acknowledges, “Spices this game is beyond my comprehension. Why have you not punished me. Or is this your doing First Mother. But why this kindness to an erring daughter who does not deserve” (305).

Tilo is born with psychic abilities that enable her to foresee danger, earning her the name Nayan Tara which means “Star-seer”; this gift is introduced in the very first chapter of the novel:

I knew who stole Banku the water-carrier’s buffalo, and which servant girl was sleeping with her master. I sensed where under the earth gold lay buried, and why the weaver’s daughter had stopped talking since last full moon. I told the *zamindar*

how to find his lost ring. I warned the village headman of the floods before they came (8).

Later she was kidnapped by pirates and escaped to a magical island and trained under the Old Mother to become a Mistress of Spices, where she is bound by rules and restrictions. Yet, through her strength of will, she does not lose sight of her true desires and is courageous enough to acknowledge her flaws as a human being. In the last chapter of the novel titled “Maya”, she longs for another name instead of Tilo as she wants a new experience. She changed her name from Tilo to Maya with an Indian meaning she tells:

‘Yes,’ I say, remembering. ‘In the old language it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day. I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up’ (317).

Mysterious Spices:

The Mistress of Spices illustrates the mystery of the spices completely dissimilar to the normal spices used in everyday life. Divakaruni endows the spices with magical power, creating an ambiguity over who truly holds authority – whether Tilo commands the spices or they, in turn, control her. For instance, in the chapter titled “Neem”, Tilo prays to the spices:

O spices who have these many years have been my one reason to live, do not punish me with temptation. I Tilo who still hold you high in my heart. Do not battle me, push me down where later I will hate us both (190).

She treats the spices with deep respect; from another perspective, they can be seen as symbols of her cultural roots in India. In an alien land like America, Tilo’s identity and power seem inseparable from the spices, without which she feels incomplete.

Conclusion:

In the end, the journey of both Tilo and the spices resembles the fragrance of cinnamon in the air, which is elusive, exhilarating and impossible to fully grasp. In everyday life, spices

are simply used to enhance the flavour of food and serve practical purposes; however, in the novel, Divakaruni animates them with life, portraying them as healers, companions and at times, sources of restriction. Tilo herself becomes a paradox, both bound and liberated by the ancient magic of the spices, a mistress who serves even as she is guided by their secret will. The novel leaves the audience suspended in a tantalising tension between submission to cultural codes and the pursuit of selfhood, reminding us that mystery itself is a form of power. It closes not with resolution but with an evocative invitation suggesting that mystery, in itself, is the true spice of life.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Sonia Devi Leishangthem, Dr. Khundrakpam Nirupama Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. and Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Delhi, Cengage Learning, 2013.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. United States, Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. London, Black Swan, 2005.
- Einstein, Albert. *The World As I See It*. London, John Lane The Bodley Head, 1941.
- Joan, Fiona P, and Purushothaman, Kavya. "Tilo and Spices: An Ecofeminist Reading of *the Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." *Annals of R. S. C. B.*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2021, pp. 9121-9128.
- Kaur, Arshpreet. "Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*." *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2024, pp. 689-694.
- Kumar, Dr Manoj. "Dynamics of Feminism: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Kamala Markanday's Major Novels." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2025, pp. 870-872.
- Sanjeetha, M. Fathima, and Haneef, Dr. S. Mohamed. "Nature in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*." *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2018, pp. 448-450.
- Shaw, Dr. S. Syed, and Banu, J. Shameem. "Exploration of Feminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*." *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers JETT*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2022, pp. 164-168.
- Susmitha, D. "Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (JCRT)*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2017, pp. 60-63.

Yadav, Anoopama, and Swain, Dr.Tamishra. “Hybrid Identities: A Postcolonial Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*.” *Journal of Emerging Technologies and innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2019, pp. 339-346.