

Spices' Action with Internal World -*The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has characterized the lifeless spices as living characters in her novel 'The Mistress of Spices'. The Indo-American Woman Writer Divakaruni has given metaphorical representation to the Indian Spices in order to touch upon the knowledge beyond science. It also depicts the representation of different myths, magic and history related to spices. Symbolic spices are shown to have their tangible, perceptible and manifesting relationship with the protagonist. The Spices encompass paradoxically the space of both subject and object, being and non-being. They unify the performance of the protagonist Tilo in an quintessential aspect that Albert Schweitzer has described as "external accomplishment of action with internal world of renunciation" (Times of India, p.8). It also evaluates the importance of spices in socio-cultural perspective of the novel and in psychological perspective in the life of the protagonist. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been able to produce the better meaning of the text and context by characterizing the Spices (Indian Spices representing idealized, magical beings - belonging to India) as non-human beings; 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 America.

Keywords: *Characterization of Indian Spices, Substantive Relationship of the Protagonist with the Spices as Mistress of Spices, Manifestation of Perceptions*

The word ‘character’ stands for individual distinctive qualities and strengths such as mental, physical, and moral. A novel, play and a film remain incomplete without the characters. According to E.M. Foster characters are of two types- one is ‘flat character’ that is uncomplicated and built around ‘a single idea or quality’¹ (Foster, 1981) therefore that is easy to describe. Another one is ‘round character’ and also called ‘two dimensional’ (Abrahms, p.48) characters that is complex ‘with different characteristics and undergo development’ (Foster, 1981) so difficult to explain.

In the novel *The Mistress of Spices* written by renowned writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Tilo the protagonist or the Mistress of Spices is ‘round character’ because she has 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 her magical power of reading their mind and heart. The ‘spices’ are treated as characters in the novel by Divakaruni. 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 with a certain mythical impression in curing disease or in their use during festivities. Characterization’ is a literary device. It describes the character of someone or something. The art or concept of creating characters, as practiced by actors or writers is called characterization (Harrison, p. 51-2). The writers describe the characters with illustrative, figurative, metaphorical and descriptive imagery or situation in the narrative plot.

According to M.H. Abrams there are two methods of characterization. ‘First is ‘showing or dramatic method’ in which the author indirectly presents ‘the character talking and acting, and leaves it entirely up to the readers to infer the motives and dispositions that lie behind what the character say and do’ (p. 49).The readers have to understand themselves the characteristics of the character through characters’ thoughts and actions. The second method of characterization is ‘telling method’ in which ‘the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe, and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the character’ (49).The author directly tells about the character. It can be done through the character himself or the narrator of the story or by other characters.

In the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni has characterized Tilo directly through ‘telling method’. Divakaruni has narrated the story in the first person. 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 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.”⁷ (TMS 3)

Tilo is the pan name of *Tilottama* (that registers her being with Indianness), but she gets it changed to be known with her nick name Tilo in America. Her original name is *Tilottama* is symbolic of a myth in very early Vedic age of India. She is the goddess of power, mysticism and knowledge (Pattanaik, p. 85). Here in this 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 specific diagnosis (The *Devas* may be closest to God but they are not God. Like demons and humans, their chitta is plagued with restlessness. They too seek the serenity of the param-atma. Their pleasures of life had to be kept in check if they sought happiness (p. 51-2).

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 are 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. It is apt to refer Roland Barthes who brings out the such manifestations of the common man’s mindset in his book *Mythologies* (1957) that – the tendency of socially constructed notions, narratives, and assumptions to become "naturalised" in the process, that is, taken unquestioningly as given within a particular culture (Barthes, 1972). In this way, the author sets connection between the sign and signifier to get the better meaning of the text.

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 acculturation and traditional significance of Spices

in the life of travelers, explorers and settlers. Walsh truly describes 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 Mediaeval era, they were almost magical particles from unbelievable remote locations (Walsh, 2004).

Indian spices have been characterized indirectly by Divakaruni through ‘showing method’. She has introduced the spices to the readers through Tilo in the novel. She has shown the spices talking with their mistress verbally or through their nonverbally. 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 positive streak, they turn mythically auspicious. In 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 new borns 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 opinion of Parthasarath—Spices are well known appetizers and digestives and considered essential in the culinary art all over the world (p. 2)

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 as- Red Chilli is dangerous and cleanser of evil and Sesame is nurturer etc. The novelist uses various types of spices as characters to present the meaning, context and significance in the text. Their reactions and integrations 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 till she is dedicated and faithful to her art of Occult with pure heart and mind. Unlike Tilo they are of a 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. Divakaruni assert in an interview- The spices are very important in this book. As characters, they have personality of their own. 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 (Menier, 2008).

Divakaruni has delineated inanimate ‘Indian Spices’ as characters in the novel. They are personified. Norton describes, Personification is the representation of a place, thing, animal or abstract idea as a person (Norton, p. 55). 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 to 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 a human does. 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 characters’ 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. Gurinder Chada who has made a film on *The Mistress of Spices* in 2005 with the same name, puts his views in an interview on his film with Mike Davies that – There is, it seems, 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. At least that’s the premise behind *The Mistress of Spices* (p.11).

For example in the chapter *Turmeric*, Tilo narrates that girl who is a bride and who desires to be a bride rub Turmeric powder on their faces. Asafoetida is antidote to love and Lotus Root is a spice for long lasting love. A critic writes about the magical realism illustrated in the novel by the author in this way – Divakaruni uses mysticism to achieve her goal of making the commonplace wondrous and the real extraordinary The spices whose magical elements portray them as supernatural beings are personified by

Divakaruni (Rajan, 2002). Tilo narrates that KaloJire protects and saves one from evil eye and she utters about it that –“will split once again tonight Kalojire seeds for all who have suffered from America.” (*TMS* 173) Spices’s interfering motivations in 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 their mistress till 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. A critic opines as regards this – ‘Divakaruni takes up the image of the spices and the woman as complimentary, and fuses them in the enigmatic and mysterious character of the mistress of the spices. But here the spices also represent the heritage of tradition that forms and restrains the mistress (Chakravarti, p. 47).

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 woman. It is true in universal context that domination of one suppresses other; it does not let other free from being enslaved. Huang’s view in this situation justifies how Tilo is bound with morality, law and codes; how Spices control her civil liberties-‘The truths Divakaruni’s writings explore focus on the familial, social and national pressures faced by women and immigrants (Huang, 1998). 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 in 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 get good friends and confidence in America. Tilo’s magic averts unknowingly due to her mistakes. Jagjit the boy in contrast unexpectedly falls into the company of dangerous friends equipped with weapons. That could even turn him into a criminal. Knowing the opposite effect of spices on Jagjit, Tilo speaks in deep sorrow- "Spice, is this, the way, you have chosen to punish me?" (TMS 122) Lara Merlin in this context opines in her review of *The Mistress of Spices* that – Tilo’s difficulties arise when she realizes that she must abandon her own wants to maintain the magical power that she craves (p. 207).

The spices do not let her go beyond the boundaries of a mistress. She becomes ‘other’ when she wishes to cross the cultural and mythical borders set by spices. Tilo starts feeling herself helpless and caged within the shell of spices. In the chapter *Ginger* she mourns-“when I woke in this land the store was already around me, its hard, protective shell. The spices too surrounded me, a shell of smells and voices. And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me. Shell within shell within shell, and in most of all my heart beating as a bird” (TMS 125).

Tilo finds herself entangled into the rules and regulations of a being a Mistress of Spices. If Tilo tries to break the rules, the spices punish her by giving sufferings to her customers which she cannot bear on any condition. The spices warn Tilo through their annoyed and non-verbal gestures-“For a moment I hold their glances and the air around us gross still and heavy. A few Chillies drop to the floor, scattering like hard green rain” (TMS6). Tilo wants to move ahead in her life, she wants to demolish the barriers that mythically spices has created all around her. Tilo’s self-crisis regarding her aberrations to form a new identity, besides being a Mistress of Spices seems to be dissented by the Indian Spices. Her efforts for her transformation appear alien to the ethical norms of Indian Spices as she tries to transgress the periphery of Indian ethnicity in context of mythical and traditional context. Paradoxically Tilo becomes an alien in her magical art of using Indian Spices for therapy upon Indian clients in America. A mistress cannot think about her own desires and entity. The Spices overpower her therapeutic magical art; symbolically her modern interventions for

transformation in her life get rejected by Spices, even though she has been very close, loyal in her conscience as well as apt in making diagnosis with the help of Spices. This consequently makes her customers dissatisfied and complaining, while on the other hand the substantive relationship with the Indian Spices gets endangered and make her realize of guilt. Her customers behavior let her realized that-“A Mistress must crave her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves” (*TMS 69*).

Basically Tilo wants to go beyond the Indian cultural attributes in her associations in America, but Spices want her to remain possessed with her ‘self’ and with ‘her relationship with them’. So Spices perform their role many times as supernatural being to control her cultural beliefs, existential fate and her falling into ennui. It suggests that gradually Indian Spices become alien to her emotional urges and performance inspite of her strictness or discipline in curing the diseases and problems of the clients with the help of spices. Tilo is reminded of her old teacher’s words as regards following austerities to learn magical art of using spices. She asked her girl pupil’s then- "Are you ready to give up your young bodies, to take on age and ugliness and unending service?" (*TMS 40*)

She becomes too alien in her magical art due to her choices and interpersonal affairs while settling as immigrant far from homeland. Indian Spices act like angry supernatural beings to disrupt her diagnosis. If any mistress goes beyond her limits, then the Spices decide the punishment. As a penalty some mistresses have to return to the remote island of spices. Surrendering and returning metaphorically means death of one’s art and magical power. As per mythical norms, a mistress is not allowed to get involved into the lives of her own customers. Tilo without caring about the penalty helps her each and every customer with all love and compassion. Tilo fulfills her duty only to lessen the sufferings of others. Her commitment to her customers and to the spices let her always remember that-“I will chant. I will administer. I will pray to remove sadness and suffering as the old one taught. I will deliver warning” (*TMS 7*). Tilo’s desire to help others let her to cross her physical and mental boundaries; subsequently her going out of her store to fulfill her dreams in the Land of Opportunities and Promises, i.e. America. The first time she decides to break the barriers made for the Mistress of Indian Spices, she muses- “Today I plan to stretch my

wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the out-side world” (*TMS* 125). Tilo does not have any inclination to betray the Spices and her art. It is Spices’ response that causes ambiguity and dilemma in making Tilo feel what wrong she has done. Her mind questions her heart- why is her diagnosis concerning a specific element not going right? Has she forgotten to make appropriate mixture of spices as medicine? Or have spices stopped their magical effect as medicine upon customers? The novelist invents a kind of confusion in the actual relation between the two types of characters here - static mythical Spices versus dynamic Tilo as self-enhancing figure. The Spices do not want to change themselves and they create hurdle for Tilo to let her to change and develop her. Tilo’s weal and woes make her believe that spices are mythically playing an equal role while performing therapy on the clients. Each Spice's therapeutic use depends upon Tilo’s right ethical mindset and if she wavers in her thought process, the therapeutic effects of Spices may too turn deviated. Spices generally act as mentor when she remains ethically and spiritually bound to her limits as decided when she learnt occultism in the use of spices. There is another example of her existential choice viz-a-viz her radical thought of making a relationship with a handsome American Architect- Raven who comes into Tilo’s shop as a customer to get a spice of his life. Tilo doesn’t find a spice for him because her mind was disturbed with his thoughts. Raven also feels attraction towards Tilo’s antique Indian beauty. She falls in love with him. The Spices restrict her to indulge in any sexual intimacy with Raven. The spices stop reciprocating with Tilo and show their anger. The intimidating voice of Tilo’s teacher and warning signs of Indian Spices thwart her primordial urges. Their compelling persuasion prohibit her involvement in such relationship with an opposite sex, because that may harm her spiritual essence, purity of her body, and will also divert her from her discipline and duty. Tilo cannot stop herself from loving Raven. She expresses her deep concern for her relationship to Raven, even though she is acquainted with reluctant spices in relation to her likes and dislikes-“I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know” (*TMS* 69).

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 a 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. The critic Marline writes to delineate her sexual encounter with an opposite sex, which is a prohibited area for the Mistress Tilo - Overcome by her attraction to Raven, Tilo yields to her own wishes rather than those of the Spices (p.207). Tilo returns in her Spice shop after that night and offer her life to the 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 the 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-“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 body also” (*TMS* 305).Eventually Tilo feels that her earthly paradise is in America only. She stops Raven in their way and make him understand that there is no earthly paradise in north, but it lies among their people who need them. Divakaruni wants to say that we as human beings have the power of recreating an earthly paradise in our lives through our own constructive actions.

At the end of the novel Tilo and Raven returns 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 normal occupation in America. 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 American lifestyle, which causes ambivalence as well as distances herself from her previous associations with the Indian Spices. Metaphorically the present conflicting ordeal agonize her life just as she had gone through the ordeal in her childhood to gain access to occultism in using Spices. In the early days of her life she experienced mental and physical pain to purify herself. The same realization she has undergone once again when she goes across her limitations as an Indian woman and as a Mistress of Spices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wants to demystify myths. She says this thing through her protagonist Tilo and through her conflicts. Merlin in this situation opines that – ‘Tilo is forced to rethink her role as a healer beyond the simplistic split between her desires to help others and to help herself. In doing so, she conjures up a new American identity (p.207).

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