

Feminist Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*

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Feminism involves various movements, theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference, that advocate equality for women, and that campaign for women's rights and interests. With the rise of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists has emerged. Women have developed themselves according to the situations and have become advanced in various fields. Women's writing as a discrete area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically, has been shaped by their gender, and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study.

In *Mistress of Spices* Tilo's life begins in a small village in India and after becoming a mistress of spices she leaves for America to serve people. Divakaruni employs a variation of the magical realism technique to reinvent an equitable, multicultural, multiracial America. It is not a feminist story, in the usual sense. The women in the story are not victims of circumstances or of their gender. Neither are the males insensitive egotists. Each character has their dignity. There are no heroes or villains, just human beings, like ordinary man, each with their own shades, each being what they are, because of the circumstances in their life.

Nayan Tara, a little girl, born to her parents as the second daughter discovers her hidden psychic powers as she grows up in India, little aware that one day she shall be the Mistress of Spices. As she meets First Mother and her team of little girls- Mistresses of Spice in the making, Nayan Tara discovers her calling. Now start her unusual tutorials where she learns the enchanted language of the spices- spices ranging from the very Western vanilla beans to the utterly Indian turmeric or halud. She learns to love them and be loved by them in return.

In due course, armed with the sensitivities that make a good Mistress of Spice, Nayan Tara is launched in the avatar of Tilo (short for Tilottama meaning sesame, a spice known for its nourishment and energizing qualities). She walks out of the comfort of First Mother's arms into Oakland in California, where she is typically the Indian woman trying to find her feet in the US, an alien country. She runs a Spice Bazaar, where spices of every kind are available, and Tilo loves them administers them and is true to them. She is their mistress. She is so completely owned by the spices, and so utterly in love with them, that her entire life centers around the spices who are unrelenting lovers. She loves them absolutely, they love her conditionally. She cannot love another person, not even herself the spices are whimsical and will not tolerate infidelity. They will ruin her. They are jealous lovers. The spices are sensitive to Tilo. As she says, 'When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world' (MOS 13).

Before leaving the comfort of First Mother's haven, Tilo the volatile one has dedicated her life to spices, and vowed abstinence from worldly desires. The reason why First Mother has tutored Tilo, despite her inconsistencies, is simply because

“she is the only one in whose hands the spices sang back “(MOS 36). She meets Indian families , takes care of them as the Mistress of Spice , and is loved enormously in return- also trusted . Along with them she goes through the pangs of immigrant nationals, and her spices help her sort out issues of health culture, in fact their very existence. The greatest irony being, that those very spices which help other people find peace and love, restrain her from finding her love on grounds of abstinence. Tilo loves these spices selflessly and sometimes the spices tend to get possessive and selfish about her.

At the very beginning of *Mistress of Spices* Chitra Divakaruni describes India as a land of ardent poetry and aquamarine feathers. That brief phrase sums up all the magic of the east, the exotic land viewed by western eyes. *Mistress of Spices* is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and bent creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires. Tilo, the mistress of spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. Chameleon like, she keeps her changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex is the problem of identity crises that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land.

Accordingly, the narrator changes her name many times, from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavathi to Tilottama and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, Since it means spell or enchantment; she has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood.

The spiceshop, where the whole Indian community converges, is like a microcosm in itself. The reader sees myriads of faces there, the bougainvillea girls, the rich men’s wives, the Mohans and Jagjits and Kwesis. Each face tells a story. Many of their immigrant dreams lie shattered in the dust, but there are also some success stories. The ones most vivid among them are the faces of four whose fates are inextricably linked with that of Tilo, the spice and spell maker: Geetha, Lalitha, Haroun and Raven.

In *Mistress of Spices*, spices also play a vital role as they are used by the mistress to solve the problems of people and also as a curative. Through the story of Tilo’s life the problems faced by women due to desires is traced. Tilo is born in a small village. Her parents were not happy as their next child is also a girl. Tilo roams the village as she was not taken care of by her parents. She then begins to predict forth coming dangers, finds lost things, shows people the misbehaviour of the rich and reveals hidden treasures. After a while people consider her as the child of God and start praising her. Her fame spreads to other villages through the merchants and sailors.

In America, Tilo meets many characters who have different problems in their life. She tries to solve them with the help of the power of the spices. Through the characters we know that it is women who face more problems when compared to men. For men, the main problem is to earn. Whereas for a woman it starts when she is formed in her mother’s womb. Parents abort their child when they come to know it is a girl baby. This is true of not only for ordinary women but also for Tilo, who has got magical powers. She suffers in her life after meeting Raven.

There are many women characters in *Mistress of Spices*. We have Lalita who gets married to Ahuja, an old man. She realizes this only by showing his photo which was taken years back. She realizes this only on the day of her marriage. She was not

interested in getting married as she was happy with her sewing. She agrees to marry for the sake of her parents. She accepts him as her husband, as she wants to obey her parents. Their married life was not a successful one. Lalitha confesses to Tilo about her marriage. She also tells that her husband is extremely possessive and harrases her physically. Tilo suggests that she can talk about this to her parents. However Lalitha replies thus

Ah how much money my poor father had spent
because I was his oldest. And if I said no, my sister
would get a bad name too. Every one would say, O
those headstrong Chowdhary girls, better not to
arrange match with that family. So I married him.
but inside I was furious. Inside I was calling him
all kinds of insults-liar cheater son-of-pig (MOS 105).

This shows how women in general care for their family and how they are restricted by the society. Lalitha accepts Ahuja as her husband as she had no other option. She wants a child but she does not conceive. She goes for a checkup and comes to know that the problem is not with her but with her husband. When she tells this to her husband he gets furious and assaults her physically. Lalitha leaves without informing him to a home for destitute women.

Dhaksha is another character who is a nurse. She works at the hospital and also takes care of her old mother – in – law. It causes too much trouble if she says she can't do anymore work. Tilo gives her black pepper to help her to say no to people and amla to develop immunity to face problems. Geetha is yet another character who is brought into light by her grandfather. He always shouts at her American style of life. He tells whatever happens in the family to Tilo when he goes to her spice shop. One day he tells her about Geetha's answer for her parents, when they asked her idea, about marriage, to her. To quote

Her father tells her about the letter. Dad, she says, tell me
you're joking. She laughs and laughs. Can you see me with a
veil over my head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a
bunch of house keys tied to the end of my sari. Ramu says
come on Geetha, its not going to be like that. But I say
what's wrong with that, Miss High Nose, your grandmother,
God keep her soul at His lotus feet, did that all her life. She
says, No disrespect, Gramps, it just isn't for me. And while
we're on the subject, arranged marriages aren't for me either
when I marry I'll choose my own husband. (MOS 91).

She then tells him that she is in love with Juan who is a Chicano. Everybody at home gets upset. She quarrels with her dad and mum and leaves the house without telling anybody. Geetha's grandfather asks Tilo to go and speak to Geetha. Tilo refuses to go as she cannot go out leaving her shop according to the vows of the mistress of spices. Here we see an Indian family in America who still try to follow and keep their culture.

Tilo meets Geetha, convinces her and gets the information that she is staying with her friend and not with Juan. Tilo solves the problem by using the power of spices. Hameeda, who is a neighbour of Haroun, stays with her brother in

America. She was given talaq by her husband for she had no son. She was interested in Haroun. Tilo gives Haroun the lotus root to attain love in his life. She wants him to lead a happy life with Hameeda who cares for him.

Tilo comes to America with the help of her magical powers which she gained after she became the mistress of spices. According to the rules of the mistresses community they get dispersed to different countries and save from evil forces. It is the old mother who teaches everything about spices and how they should lead their life without exceeding their limits. Through the people whom Tilo meets the readers come to know about the problems of women in general. Men are responsible for the problems of women.

Tilo is shown special attention by the old mother as she is a naughty girl. When all the mistresses are given going-away gifts like flute, incense burners, looms and pens, Tilo received a knife to keep her chaste. Before leaving the island to America grandmother gave Tilo a slice of ginger root to make her steadfast in her vows. Through the character of Geetha's grandfather we know that people still value their culture though they go abroad, leaving their country. He complains to Tilo saying that Geetha is coming late at night with her friends after work. He also says that

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 even marry her (MOS 88).

It is Tilo who tries to convince him by telling him that it is America after all, and even in India women are now working. She changes his mind and tries to adjust with the younger generation.

Tilo remembers the warnings given by the old mother when they grow disobedient and seek their own pleasure. Now and then she gets the warning from the spices when she is about to disobey her vows. The sudden twist in the story comes only after the entry of the American to the spice shop. Tilo who does not have any desire before now starts thinking about the arrival of the American, Raven to her shop.

Raven talks of his mother Celestina, who is not a white, but pretends to be a white as she thinks it gives her self-esteem and happiness. She hates her own community. Raven does not like his mother for this reason. He leaves her alone after he had started earning. He starts living his life without any aim. He earns and sends some money to his mother but will not even reply to her letters. And one day when he goes in search of his mother he gets to know that she is no more. He confides everything to Tilo as he thinks that his burden will be reduced.

Raven is left all alone in this world with no one to share his life. He expects love from Tilo, who is an Indian mistress of spice. She gives him a spice to get some interest in his life. Tilo fails to save Haroun the taxi driver from the danger which she learns from his hand. As she was busy with her own desires she fails to help Haroun

at the right time. She realizes her mistake only after he was attacked by the smugglers.

Tilo knows definitely that Shampathi's fire will take her as she has disobeyed her vows and also failed to save Haroun from danger. She has got only three days left to complete all her work in America. She keeps a board which announces "biggest sale of the year, Best bargain in town. Everything must go" (MOS 258).

Tilo meets Raven for the last time before entering into Shampathi's fire. She decides to give up herself to him in his apartment. For the first time she uses the powers of spices for herself. She uses Marakadwaj to make her extremely beautiful, thinking that Raven is more attracted towards beautiful girls and loves beauty. By using the spice Tilo becomes young and beautiful. She disobeys her vows by giving herself to Raven. Tilo leaves a note to Raven telling that,

I do not expect you to understand, only to believe
that I had choice. I think you for all you have
given me. I hope I have given you a little too. Our
love would never have lasted, for it was based
upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it to be
Indian. To be American. But where I am going – life
or death, I donot know which – I will carry its brief
aching sweetness. Forever (MOS 311).

Tilo enters the Shampathi's fire and loses consciousness. In the morning Raven comes in search of Tilo. There was a huge earthquake which destroys almost the entire Oakland and even her spice shop collapses. He finds her lying down unconscious takes her in his hand and moves out to his car. They leave the place and go in search of his earthly paradise. But Tilo after going a little distance stops the car and looks at Oakland which is on fire. She changes her mind to return to Oakland and help people over there. She thinks that it is because of her that everything happened and she wants to help people as she did before. Even Raven changes his mind and returns with Maya, the new name given to Tilo to lead a new life.

Tilo returns to save people from danger again. This shows her love to serve people and her love for the power of the spices. Throughout the novel we have seen many women characters with different problems in their life and how they managed to solve them. Tilo who acts as the problem solver of people too faces a problem in her life. So from this novel we can come to the conclusion that a woman is supposed to face problems in life even if she has got the magical powers.

Mistress of Spices is cloaked in fantasy and the prologue, with its strong poetic overtones convinces us that this is literature of fantasy. However, a strong undercurrent of realism runs at the very beginning of the novel and becomes manifest later on. Divakaruni modifies ancient Indian legends and reinvents the myth of the bird of Shampati, whose name stems from the 'Ramayana', who, phoenix like, rises from the ashes. The legend of Shampati, as a dominant theme, holds the story together. However, as the novel progresses, the fantasy element diminishes and the realistic element becomes prominent.

In this novel the readers see women facing all kinds of problems in their life. Though women are happy for a short period, they get into the circle of problems soon. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has presented her best to the readers.

Her language is remarkable and noteworthy, lucid and smooth flowing and this makes her novels extremely readable. She has beautifully brought out the problems of women, which is one of the hot topics in India. Her characters especially women, are very sensitive and intuitive. She has also used many literary devices in her novels.

In *Mistress of Spices* too there is a flashback told by Raven to Tilo. It tells about Raven's life and his aim to search for the earthly paradise. This novel contains magical realism. Tilo uses her magical powers to solve the problem of her people. There is also irony in *Mistress of Spices*. Tilo loses her magical powers when she enters into a relationship with Raven. She did not expect that she will fall in love with him which will make her lose her powers. Due to her desires, her powers wane. The novel is open ended as she runs the spice shop again in America. Shalini Gupta says about the author "She writes about positive things too, about strong family bonds and the courage of people who find themselves in a different world after immigration. In short we can say she portrays Indians in a balanced diet."

Spices are not mere taste enhancers in this story by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni - nor are they medicines. They are real characters with emotions, and the little girls understand this. First mother seems a wizened soul, kind yet strict, with firm beliefs in self denial for the sake of the spices. Spices, here, possess powers that are real- they heal, soothe, enhance, possess, enliven, energize on the positive side and wreck vengeance, take offence, be mean, and strike on the negative side. It is remarkable how international, how global the spices are, in their respective characters - they are accepted by all irrespective of country, religion or sex. First Mother has not defined spices as belonging to any country or faith- she believes in their universality their omnipresence and their omnipotence. They are citizens of the world.

Spices are like pixies too - they play pranks. At one moment, they are so adorably compliant - Tilo weaves her spell and they oblige. The next moment, they frown on her wayward emotions and remind her of the sacrosanct rules she must remember as Mistress of Spice. When they are unhappy that Tilo is getting close to the American, they decide not to help her cure her other clients- which causes her embarrassment and some guilt as well. Elizabeth Softky says for Divakaruni, "Tilo is the quintessential immigrant - she must decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will leave behind".

Works Cited:

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