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## The Transformation from Tilo to Maya: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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This paper analyses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) with reference to the theme of changing and conflicting identities in a changing world. Divakaruni is a prolific and acclaimed writer who has popular novels like *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Conch Bearer*, a trilogy (2003-2009), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) to her credit. *The Mistress of Spices* belongs to the genre of magic realism. The journey of the protagonist of the novel from being Tilo to being transformed into Maya has been traced through this paper. Similarly the predicament of the immigrant population caught between two radically different ways of thinking, the western and the eastern has also been highlighted.

Magic has always been an integral part of different genres like epics, fairytales, adventure stories handed over orally from generation to generation, drama and poetry. While myths might contain magical happenings and events, they are regarded to be authentic and true by the recipients of that culture while literary texts which contain magic are categorized under the fantasy genre of literature. Fairytales like *Cinderella*, *The Sleeping Princess*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*; works belonging to the oral tradition like *The Arabian Nights*, and *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* which have been recorded in the written form much later; the fairies and elves of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), magic and sorcery in *As You Like It* (1600), and the witches of his famous tragedy *Macbeth* (1605); and famous poetic texts like *The Faerie Queene* (1589) by Edmund Spenser and S.T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) incorporate many elements of fantasy, magic and adventure.

Fantasy literature owes its origin and development to all these genres. The fantasy genre of literature differs from magical realism, a literary trend in postmodernism, in which magical elements are introduced into a realistic atmosphere with a view to having a deeper understanding of reality. These magical elements are explained and accepted like normal occurrences, and are presented in a straightforward and matter-of-fact manner. The term magical realism was first used in 1925 by the German art critic, Franz Roh to refer to a new style in painting known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity.

The term magic realism was first applied to literature in the 1940s by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier to understand and explain the finer nuances of Latin-American literature. A very good example of this genre is Garcia Gabriel Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Some scholars have argued that magic realism is a natural outcome of postcolonial writing which tries to come to terms with two separate realities, the reality of the conquerors, as well as that of the conquered.

Magic realism unearths the magic present in reality. Magic is given a vestige of normality, while the real world is defamiliarized, expanded, and transformed to bring together elements which are mutually contradictory like life and death, waking and dreaming, civilized and wild, male and female, and mind and body. The boundaries of realism are extended in order to accommodate a fuller version of reality. Magic realism is however set in the real world unlike the genre of fantasy which is set in an unreal, imaginary, or magical world brought to life by the creative genius of the author of the text.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) has been read as a novel of magic realism by many literary scholars. The entire novel is based on the premise that the spices we use every day possess magical powers which yield themselves in the hands of a trained mistress of spices. The protagonist of the novel, Tilo, is a Mistress of spices, who is able to solve the problems of her customers miraculously with the help of the spices which they come to buy from her shop.

Tilo, the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices*, believes that spices hold the secret power to grant us whatever we desire the most in life. This is how she talks about her unique ability to interact with the spices: "I am a Mistress of Spices. I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells...At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers." (*The Mistress of Spices*: 3)

Tilo says that most of us are unaware of the other side of these common spices used in cooking and other household activities. She claims that they have the power to revolutionize the life we live. But this can be accomplished only by a person who has the ability to tap their potential to the fullest. Tilo identifies herself as a Mistress of this secret power. She is a person with a number of identities.

Identity is a very intriguing concept both in psychology and literature. Many modern literary texts revolve around this concept. A number of themes in literature centre on identity. Identity has been defined by Spencer A. Rathus and Jeffrey S. Nevid in their book, *Adjustment and Growth: The Challenges of Life* as "an individual's perception of who he or she is" (Rathus 1980: 28). They talk about the need of every individual to have a stable identity, and what will happen if that person loses his sense of identity.

"When that self-identity is threatened by disease, tragedy, personal crisis, or awareness that our actions are inconsistent with our values, we may experience anxiety, panic, a sense of loss of self, and a feeling of being cut adrift from life's purposes and meaning." (Rathus 1980: 30)

An identity crisis is a period of serious personal questioning where the individual makes an effort to determine one's own values and sense of direction. When a person is going through a

period of identity crisis, that person begins to create a number of self-satisfying illusions, rationalizes his/her failures, creates a new self, or is ultimately eliminated from the face of the earth. Identity is also closely related to the term self. Rathus and Nevid see the self as “the individual’s center of awareness, a fluid way of organizing perceptions of the world”. They point out that “the questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What do I stand for?’ are central to our self-identities”. (Rathus 1980: 31)

Tilo has been addressed by nearly four different names representing four conflicting and confusing identities in a single life-time. She remains an enigma both for the readers and herself. Her truth and identity is multi-layered just like the spices whose potential she has the ability to unfold and which posit a number of possibilities. Similarly Divakaruni suggests the idea of being reborn every time after the symbolic death of her protagonist’s previous identity just like the mythical bird phoenix which is reborn out of its own ashes. Tilo and her struggles to lead life on her own terms represent the innate ability of human beings to swim against the tide and succeed in life with hope and optimism. After a particular failure, Tilo does not give up or leave trying. She renews her life and efforts from where she left behind in her previous attempt.

Tilo was named Nayan-Tara at the time of her birth, and later she was called Bhagyavati when she was kidnapped by the pirates to serve as their lucky charm. She survives a severe storm to be washed ashore to her new destiny as an apprentice learning the secret power of the spices in a secluded island far removed from the materialistic world in which she had grown up. After her apprenticeship, she ends up in America where she tries to cater to the needs of the local expatriate Indian community under the assumed name Tilo, with a seemingly aged and bent physical body, the effect of the magical fire of Shampati.

The novel traces the conflicting emotions and feelings which she goes through. Being a mistress she could not aspire to live a normal life with human relationships, feelings and emotions if she wishes to retain her power over the spices. If she went against the bounds of the spices, then she would be bereft of all her power over them. However, she is drawn into a love affair with a lonely American, Raven, against her will as his life reminds her of her own life and her struggle with its conflicting realities.

Due to this, Tilo temporarily loses her powers only to regain them at the end of the novel, and in the process reinventing herself as Maya, who could make the spices obey her commands, and at the same time have a personal life of her own. The novel traces all these transitions of name, character and personality with great subtlety.

Tilo’s psychic powers confer the ability to sense others’ problems and suggest solutions to them by finding the right and appropriate spice. Her main concern is the local expatriate Indian population living in California, far away from their homeland, and yet unable to sever the invisible ties with India, the land of their origin.

Many of Tilo’s customers are searching for something authentic and real to which they can hold to, and which would serve as a firm anchor around which their lives could revolve. They find in Tilo’s spice shop memories of a past they could never leave behind despite trying to lead a westernized existence in distant America.

*The Mistress of Spices* symbolically represents the struggles and inner turmoil faced by a population which has moved geographically, politically, socially and culturally from its homeland India, and is trying to come to terms with a new existence in an alien land. Hence it

can also be read and analyzed using the concept of Diaspora. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo and the customers whom she tries to help are all trying to re-establish their ties with India with the help of an ancient heritage which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is a unique link which makes them reminisce about their common past with nostalgia.

Diaspora literature involves the idea of displacement of a person or a group of people from their homeland to an alien place due to various compulsions. Hence such a group of people could also be regarded a minority community living in exile. Writers of Indian origin living abroad like Salam Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri to name a few, have explored this concept and its ramifications through their literary and critical works.

If the logical and rational aspect of spices possessing magical powers is kept aside, it can be argued that the spices at a symbolic level represent something which is un-American. They succeed in recapturing the Orient in the minds of those who are enamoured by them. It represents a different lifestyle and way of thinking which most of the customers believe they have consciously left behind but whose invisible and unbreakable bonds persist even now though at an unconscious level.

There is a radical difference in the way of thinking and perceiving things between the Occident and Orient. While western culture revolves round rationality the eastern culture is predominantly spiritual in its approach. The word culture is derived from the French word '*Cultura*' which means to cultivate, to till, and to grow. Therefore culture suggests a continuous process of growth through the means of education, discipline and training. Both the cultures are diametrically opposed to each other. While western culture is based on the principles of materialism, Indian culture is based on the principles of spiritualism. This results in the moral dilemma faced by the characters in *The Mistress of Spices* about which culture to follow.

Clash of cultures is a popular theme in literature. In Indian literature, it was depicted as early as 1894 in *Kamala* by Krupabai Saththianadhan who explored the cultural clash suffered by a Hindu woman with a western education in India. In 1909, Sarath Kumar Ghose's *The Prince of Destiny* dealt with the same theme. His hero, the prince of a native Indian state, has to make a choice between the love of an English girl and marriage with an Indian princess. In the novels written during the Gandhian era, the dialectics between the east and the west encounter can be found in K.S. Venkatramani's *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and V.V. Chintamani's *Vedantam, the Clash of Traditions* (1928). Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) portrays the quest of her protagonist in search of her cultural roots.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, each spice is described with a help of a special song and has a special property. There are certain rules and restrictions associated with each spice. Tilo, being a Mistress of Spices has to adhere to a very rigid regimen and model of conduct. She is forbidden from personally touching any of her customers or involving on a personal level with any of them. She has to be very dispassionate about whatever she does. Further she has to remain in the spice shop always, and should never leave its premises at any point of time. If she breaks any of these rules, its negative effects would be felt by the very customers whom she wants to help. Apart from that, Tilo would have to face the consequences for these actions by suffering some sort of physical or mental pain as ordained by the spices.

But gradually Tilo's association with many of her regular customers and her secret and forbidden love for Raven shake the solid foundation of the spice world in which she inhabits.



She is unable to maintain physical and emotional distance from them. She starts feeling their pains and sorrows. She is unable to prevent herself from reciprocating to their feelings and emotions. This leads to fatal mistakes in the choice of spices. Though well-intentioned, her efforts to solve their problems prove to be futile.

The first and last chapters of the novel are titled after the two names 'Tilo' and 'Maya' which represent two different and diametrically opposite poles of her personality. The other thirteen chapters are named after different spices. Each of these chapters narrates Tilo's interaction with her customers, and how she gifts a particular spice to them to solve their specific problems in life.

Tilo reminisces her past life and ponders over whether the existence we lead is at all objective and real. She finds her own past confusing and conflicting. Nayan-Tara and Bhagyavati, an integral part of her own past, seem to be of some other life-time. Speaking about this quest for identity, she says, "Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all we encounter has already been changed by what we imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being." (*The Mistress of Spices*: 16)

Tilo was saved by the sea serpents after the pirate ship drowned in a big storm in the sea. The snakes aroused her interest in the island where she became a Mistress of Spices with their thrilling and enchanting account of its beauty and mystery. She became determined to follow this new course of her life at any cost. A woman would be accepted as a Mistress by the Old One only if she possessed exceptional qualities.

The Old One teaches the apprentices the secret of the spices. At first, she was about to dismiss Tilo as her hands were not appropriate for being a Mistress of spices, but suddenly, she discovered that of all the apprentices who wanted to be Mistresses, Tilo was the only one in whose hands the spices sang back. Hence she is accepted into this sisterhood despite certain misgivings.

Tilo says that she had always been a rule-breaker and would never accept anything without argument. The Old One had always despaired sending her so far to America, but it was the land of dreams that Tilo had chosen to go and render service to the immigrant Indian population. The name, Tilo that she had chosen for herself to go along with the new and seemingly aged body which would be born out of the sacred and magical fire of Shampati, is an apt example of her defiance and her yearning to shatter old ways and chalk out a new path for herself.

If we carefully analyze the various names associated with the protagonist of the novel, we find that they convey a great deal regarding her character and personality. Nayan-Tara means a Star of the Eye, but it could also be interpreted as a person who is starry-eyed. Just like the name, she has very high aspirations and is not content with whatever she has. She yearns for something more in life despite being worshipped by thousands of villagers as a goddess. She wants something drastic to break the monotony of her life.

It is at this juncture that the pirates loot her village and kidnap her. She is renamed as Bhagyavati or one who is in charge of destiny. The pirates regard her as their lucky charm which would bring them to their destiny, while she herself is far away from her own destiny in life. There is one more meaning which can be associated with Nayan- Tara; a flower that grows by the dust road. Just like a delicate flower which is crushed by the fury of the storm by the

roadside, the attack of the pirates on her village renders her as helpless, fragile and vulnerable as a human being living in a world of uncertainties.

After being chosen as an apprentice by the Old One, the protagonist makes the request that she be addressed Tilo. She tries to justify her choice of the name Tilo by drawing a comparison to the Til or sesame seed which restores health, hope and gives a new lease of life to people suffering from several incurable diseases. But the Old One also reminds her that Tilo is the short form for Tilottama who was the most elegant of the dancers in Lord Indra's court. Indra is regarded as King of the gods in the Hindu pantheon.

Tilottama was cautioned by Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe according to Hindu mythology, that she would be condemned to seven lives of illness, disfigurement and leprosy if she falls in love with a human being. Tilottama disregarded the words of caution of Brahma and fell to the earth for her misdeeds and had to suffer greatly for it. The Old One reminds Tilo to think about Tilottama's fate if ever she is led by her overconfidence and arrogance to go against the norms set for a Mistress of spices. The Old One's gift of a knife to Tilo while leaving the island is reminder of the narrow and dangerous path she had to tread for being a Mistress of spices.

The sea serpents that had saved her from the storm had anticipated what form her life would take after becoming a Mistress of spices before itself. They foretell the following about her future life when they discover that she was determined to become a Mistress: "She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps even self." (*The Mistress of Spices*: 24) Despite being deprived of being in charge of her own life, self and even physical body by the spices, Tilo is proud of her ability and power to bring solace to the people around her. She says, "I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream." (*The Mistress of Spices*: 28)

Raven is a lonely American who occasionally comes to the spice shop. Tilo is unable to read or solve his problem as he arouses in her the forbidden desire for love. He is the only person in America to whom she reveals her true name:

"Raven, now I must tell you my name. Will you believe it if I say you are the only man in America, in the entire world, to know it?...Yes say his eyes, my American letting fall the cloak of his loneliness. He holds his gleaming goldbrown hand (somewhere a woman is weeping) and into it I place my name." (*The Mistress of Spices*: 164)

As the novel progresses, she starts falling in love with him. She keeps waiting for his forthcoming visits to the spice shop. Raven is also drawn towards her for her oriental, antique, and mysterious appearance. He figures out that neither the body nor the person whom he sees are the real Tilo. He finds his affair with her as intriguing as his own past. He confides in her of how his own grandfather wanted to give him a very powerful legacy of magic which took the form of a raven. He had ardently believed that it would lead him to the earthly paradise of which he had dreamt of. But his mother had prevented him from accepting this legacy.

Raven blamed his mother for his loss. He even confides how he sought the answers to his questions in drugs, alcohol and even poisonous mushrooms but in vain. He tells Tilo that his earthly paradise seems nearer and real when she is at his side. Her proximity gives him the hope that one day he would finally discover the whereabouts of this earthly paradise of which he had

always dreamt of. Tilo goes out on a pleasure trip for one day with Raven though it would condemn her to a life-time of suffering:

“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. But human love, all tangled up, at once giving and demanding and pouting and ardent...And I see that the risk lies not in what I always feared, the anger of the spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose this love.” (*The Mistress of Spices*: 219)

Tilo takes on a beautiful body like the ‘apsaras’ or the celestial damsels with the help of the spices in order to make him fall in love with her body and soul at least for once in her lifetime: “By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at beauty’s summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone.” (*The Mistress of Spices*: 263) The Old One decrees that Tilo has to return to the island to atone for this and many of her previous transgressions if she wishes to save the joys of those whom she had helped. She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven’s love.

The customers for whose welfare Tilo had prayed are happy and at peace with their lives though not in the way in which she had anticipated. All of them are on the verge of making a new beginning, while she is at the fag-end of her life as a Mistress of spices in America. A terrible earthquake strikes as she is waiting for the fire of Shampati to blaze and take her back to the island of spices. Amidst the huge scale destruction, Raven manages to trace her and takes her with him.

The question which keeps recurring in Tilo’s mind is the reason why the spices had not punished her. They answer 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.” (*The Mistress of Spices*: 305)

She dismisses Raven’s offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. She argues that we, as human beings, have the power of recreating an earthly paradise in our lives through our constructive actions.

The novel ends with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She gives herself the name Maya. The name has a number of connotations like illusion, spell and enchantment. She tells that this naming is very different from her previous naming ceremony where the Old One and other sister-Mistresses were present to witness and bless her. This name suits her in this new world order where she has only herself to hold her up and show the right path. *The Mistress of Spices* depicts the paradox and incongruity of life. Divakaruni’s characters reflect the predicament of being caught between two conflicting cultures, the Indian and the American, two different approaches to life, the internal and the external.

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