



The Transformation of Tilo: From Supernatural to Natural in Chitra

Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

Human beings have long been engaged in the quest to discover their true selves. Men's search for their true nature is not an effortless path. They sometimes face difficulties and challenges on the path of finding themselves. They lose their loved ones, they suffer pain, and they make difficult decisions. These painful events enable them to gain a clearer understanding of themselves. Humans sometimes make fake images of themselves. It is very difficult to break free from those images and see themselves, as vulnerable human beings who are of little help to humanity. The journey undertaken by the characters shows their courage, will, and determination. The result is them emerging triumphant and acting as role models for others who would be undertaking similar journeys in their lives.

Keywords: Mistress, Spices, Supernatural, Human, Decision.

Introduction

Indian-English literature has carved a niche for itself in the world. It has witnessed an increase in readership across the globe. A.S. Dasan observes, “The Indian English novel today has bloomed and blossomed into variegated tapestries, tastes, and sensibilities, offering a variety fair to the reader in India and abroad.” Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian born diasporic writer who is famous for her many works. Her famous works include: *Reason of Nasturtiums* (1990) *Black Candle* (1991) *Arranged Marriage* (1995) *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) *Sister of My Heart* (1999) *The Vine of Desire* (2002) *Queen of Dreams* (2004) *The Lives of Strangers* (2005) *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) *One Amazing Thing* (2010) *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (Short Stories) 2011 *Oleander Girl* (2013) Her anthologies include the following: *Multitude: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers* (1993). *We Too Sing America* (1997) and *California Uncovered: Stories for the 21st Century* (2004). In her novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes about women emerging triumphant.

Methodology

In Chitra Banerjee Divakauni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), she writes about the life of a protagonist Tilo, the protagonist, and her journey from being a mystical spice mistress to becoming a normal human being. In the beginning, Tilo, the protagonist of the novel recounts that her birth was not accepted happily by her parents. They thought that she had not brought anything to the family except a dowry debt.” They named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents’ faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child, and this one colored like mud.” (Divakaruni 8).

Her parents soon realise that the girl has supernatural powers, i.e., the powers of a fortune-teller. Tilo’s power brings a lot of wealth to the family, but for Tilo, it brings discontentment as she realises; that her parents do not love her; instead, they worship her powers. She

expresses her pain in the following words: “That same salt wind would sweep through me restlessness. How tiresome my life had become, the endless praise, the songs of adulation, the mountains of gifts, my parents’ fearful deference.” (Divakaruni 17). Tilo’s journey towards becoming natural starts when she thinks of the futility of her supernatural powers and starts yearning for a new life. Pirates pillage her village, and Tilo is abducted. Tilo recounts that the pirates had not come to abduct her because of the tales surrounding her supernatural powers; rather she herself desired a new life. As Tilo thinks, “They came toward me, pulled by the force of the calling thought, that gold hook I had sent so heedlessly over the waters.” (Divakaruni 19). Later on, she, with the help of her supernatural powers, overthrows the leader of the pirates and herself becomes the pirate queen. She is named “Bhagyavati” by them, which means maker of destiny. She says that she “overthrew the chief to become the queen of the pirates” (Divakaruni 20).

To find her true self, Tilo has not only left the company of her parents but has also decided to renounce her position as a pirate queen. Her quest for her true self brings her in contact with the snakes who offer her the status of “Visha Kanya”. Tilo rejects the proposal of the snakes. When they tell her about the mysterious magical island, she becomes curious about it and wants to be a part of it. As it might give her an opportunity to explore her true self, as both her true self and the island are an enigma for her.

On the island, Tilo starts her life afresh as a person who has forgotten her past and accepts the role of the “Mistress.” Girls are taught special powers and are made to obey the rules laid down by the Spices. Tilo learns about the healing powers of the spices and becomes an altogether different person. However, her magic powers a part of her new life, in addition to her healing powers. Tilo has started her new journey, she decides to choose her own name and a new place as her home. Her name “Tilotamma” means the being whose smallest particle is the finest or one who is composed of the finest and highest qualities. The name is significant, as it means

life-giver, restorer of health and hope. All the mistresses are assigned different places to execute their duties, and Tilo chooses a foreign land for her residence and takes the body of an aged woman. She chooses America because she wants to remove suffering from the life of the immigrants. When she compares her life on the island with the life in America, it is clear that she is leaving her comforts to bring happiness in the life of people whom she thinks are in desperate need of it and, she would be doing this without getting anything in return.

When the novel begins, Tilo is in her store. Tilo owns a shop in the Spice Bazar. She helps customers with the help of Spices. Through her magical powers, she can see the problems of her customers and provides a remedy for them in the form of Spices. Similarly, in the novel *Chocolat* (1999) by Joanne Harris, the protagonist Vianne Rocher helps her customers with the gifts of chocolate from her shop. She finds her customers' problems through her intuition. She supports the gypsies who are unwelcome in the town due to the authority of the priest. She helps a woman to come out of the hands of an abusive husband.

In the beginning of the novel, Tilo says, she is a "Mistress of Spices" and the Spices bow to her commands and at her touch they reveal their inner properties to her. However, as the novel progresses, one comes to know of her subservient position as Old Mother had taught the novices on the island, "you are not important no mistress is what is important is the store and the Spices." (Divakaruni 5).

Since the spices are infused with magical powers, Tilo's status as a "Mistress" is relegated to the background. She calls herself a "handmaid" who cures others with the help of spices. There is a barrier of power or authority between the Spices and Tilo, which Tilo had accepted in the beginning, but as the novel progresses, she starts questioning the rules and the authority. She is not unaware of the fact that by doing so, she will be invoking the wrath of the Spices.

In the beginning, Tilo does not cross the threshold of her store; whatever information she has of the outer world is through the customers who visit her store. Chitra Divakaruni has not changed the setting, which remains the store throughout. Past and present mingle in the story at many points.

In the store, the narrative unfolds through Tilo's stream of consciousness, enabling her to visualise her past life on the island and in the village. The novelist has broken the boundary between past and present. In the store, Tilo peeps into the psyche of her clients and helps them overcome their respective problems, but certain requisites are expected from her; she can lend a sympathetic ear to the problems of her clients and can give them advice, but cannot cross the threshold of the store to help them. She cannot mix her desires when peeping into the psyche of the person. She is not allowed to fall in love. If she obeys the rules only then Spices will help her clients. Her deviation from these rules can cause havoc in the lives of all connected to her. In an interview with Marcus, Divakaruni explains: Tilo wants to liberate herself from the supremacy of Spices and is craving a new life. She gets an opportunity to make her path and break the laws of Spices through the customers who come to her store with their respective problems. She not only helps them, but wants to know herself as an individual.

Geeta's grandfather is Tilo's client who comes to Tilo's shop to seek her advice. He tells his problem to her. He tells her that Geeta (a second-generation immigrant), being born and brought up in America, has adapted to American ways. The parents of Geeta want her to get married to a boy of their choice, but she has chosen a Chicano boy for herself.

The disagreement leads Geeta to leave her house. On Geeta's grandfather's request, Tilo decides to help his family. Tilo gets an opportunity in the shape of helping Geeta and Juan, her lover. Tilo breaks the boundaries of her store that are acting as her protective sheath and not allowing her to see her true self, despite the warning of the Spices and the instructions of the

Old Mother, who wants her to stay inside the store and follow the instructions of the spices. She decides to cross the threshold of her store. She has always lived her life in the protection of supernatural powers. She knows that she might face problems later on. As her journey for finding her true nature has begun she does not hesitate from the same. Tilo thinks, “Today I plan to stretch my wings to crack perhaps those shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world. It frightens me a little. I must admit it.” (Divakaruni 133)

She breaks the rules, steps out of the store. While making an excursion in the outer world, Tilo does not let even her dress to act as barrier; she does not wear the *sari* which was given to her by Old Mother. She purchases a new dress for her. This shows that she is paving her path in the human world.

Besides purchasing a new dress, she purchases a mirror for her. Mistresses are forbidden from seeing their images in the mirror; she is also seen questioning the rule. “Once a Mistress has taken off her magic Mistress-body, she is never to look on her reflection again” (Divakaruni 61). As she says: “Here is a question I never thought to ask on the island. First Mother, why is it not allowed, what can be wrong with seeing yourself? (Divakaruni 151).

Jacques Lacan asserted that between six and eighteen months of age, a child “sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive itself...as separate from the rest of the world” (Barry 109). However, Tilo is not clear about herself; she can see herself through the eyes of others. Raven sees her as a learned woman; for Geeta’s grandfather, she is a woman who knows spells; for Haroun, she is a woman, who can make things happen; for Ahuja’s wife, she is Mataji, an aged woman. As Sandhya Tiwari observes: “Tilo views herself through the lens of her surrounding society, thereby leading to various and often conflicting simultaneous visions of her identity” (Tiwari 84).

So, besides helping others, her journey towards self-exploration also continues. During this period, she falls in love with Raven, a Native American, and for him she breaks the rule laid down by spices that forbids mistresses from falling in love. It is only after Raven comes into Tilo's life that she sees herself in a true light and realises that she is also made of flesh and blood. She understands the vulnerability of her nature and her position. She also wants to lead a normal life like any other human being.

During the course of their love-affair, she falls prey to the desire of the flesh. Tilo also transforms herself into a beautiful girl with the magic power of the spice. It is for Raven only that she acquires the body of a young woman with the help of the Spice "Makardwaj,". After consuming a potion of it she sees her face in the mirror: "It is a face that gives away nothing, a goddess-face free of mortal blemish, distant as an Ajanta painting. Only the eyes are human, frail. In them I see Nayan Tara, I see Bhagyavati; I see the Tilo who was. Wide elated eyes, also telling me something I did not expect" (Divakaruni 297). When Tilo realises that spices are against her relationship with Raven and wants her to handover a nugget of asafetida to Raven. "Asafetida" is bitter and pungent, so Spices want that Tilo and Raven's relationship become equally bitter and strained. Tilo not only delays the moment of handing asafetida, but also decides not to give it to Raven, as doing so would mean ending their relationship, something she herself opposes. Tilo urges to the spices, "O Spices, I say as I lower my stiff body onto the hard floor where I will toss unsleeping all this night. My voice is tired with persuading, tinged with doubt. Can I not love you and him both. Why must I choose. The Spices do not answer." (Divakaruni 202). So, she decides to continue her relationship with Raven and bears the wrath of the spice.

This shows Tilo's loyalty towards her duty. After coming back to the spice store, Tilo invokes Shampati's fire as a sort of penance. Spices, instead of harming her, leave her and also take

away their magic and the special power. Tilo does not regret her decision to help others, as she says:

This is my atonement. Willingly I undergo it. Not because I have sinned, for I acted out of love, in which is no sinning. Were I to do it over, I would do the same again. Step across the forbidden threshold of the store to take to Geeta in her glittering tower mango pickles and reassurance. Hold Lalita's hand steadfast in mine and tell her she is deserving of joy. I would give again to Haroun lotus root for a love that is worth more than his immigrant dream. And again, yes, I would make myself as ravishing as Tilottama, dancer of the gods, for Raven's pleasure. (Divakaruni 318).

This shows that Tilo wants to enjoy her normal life rather than living under the supremacy of the magical spices. She chooses a life of empathy over magic. She falls in love like a normal human being, and when she is punished for it by the spices, she gracefully accepts her mistake and bids goodbye to the world of magic.

As the story comes to an end, an earthquake hits America. Tilo is rescued by her lover Raven. Tilo believes that she may have caused the earthquake, but now she realises the vulnerability of her body, and her position in the human world. After entering into the world of human beings, Tilo readily accepts her true identity and sees her face in Raven's car's rearview mirror and after analyzing her entire past life, that Tilo is able to discover her true self -- neither young nor old. She is just an ordinary lady. "She is different, the woman in the mirror. High cheekbones, straight brows with crease lines between. Some gray hair. Not particularly pretty or ugly, not particularly young or old. Just ordinary" (Divakaruni 326). She even realises that she is not God like Shiva, who drank poison for the sake of humanity. She is just an ordinary human being: "I Tilo am no goddess but an ordinary woman only. Yes, I admit it, this truth I have tried to escape all my life. And though once I thought I could save the world, I see now that I have only brought brief

happiness into a few lives” (Divakaruni 318). Tilo can comprehend the vulnerability of human life and realises that, no matter what their achievements are, human beings cannot stand on the same level as Gods.

Tilo does not want to continue her relationship with Raven, she believes that he has exoticized her, although she does not consider herself exotic. Tilo also tells Raven that there is no earthly paradise. This shows that she no longer yearns for immortality. When she says that if any earthly paradise exist it exists in the present shows her acceptance of the transient human world. She says, “Except that we make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white-drug dust. The young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells yes in the hate and fear.” (Divakaruni 336). Tilo wants to give importance to the world of human beings. She is not worried about the death and decay this world brings with it.

The journey of Tilo from supernatural to natural has not been easy. She leaves her house, her positions, and stands against the magical spices. Her decision not to search for the earthly paradise shows that she no longer wants to possess supernatural powers, but instead wants to lead a normal life. She even decides to change her name from Tilotamma to Maya. She has realised that neither she is a Goddess nor an angel. She is a normal human being and her new name Maya-- suggests illusion. She does not want to escape from the human world. She wants to enjoy life like a normal human being.

Conclusion

In this journey, Tilo realises that supernatural powers are not necessary to help humanity. To serve noble purposes, noble intentions are sufficient. A person can only be at peace when he or she is able to comprehend his reality and understand that life need not be perfect. This marks the victory of Tilo over the mistress and a victory of human being over the supernatural.

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