



Crossing the Emotional Boundaries and Spreading the Aroma: A Study of Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni secured a prominent place among a plethora of immigrant writers who contributed to diasporic literature. Her enriched and versatile portrayal of the immigrant experience is well-appreciated in literary circles. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* portrays her longing for being an insider. She spices the Indian Diaspora by projecting the Indian culture and feminine sensibility.

Mistress of Spices is a novel of awakening, for the development tale of the protagonist in them is not of uninterrupted progress. Part of the development is concealed in coded memories while the rest appears as the result of several epiphanic moments. The very awakening to the quest is the result of a revelation that is usually spread over a series of incidents; the subsequent quest culminates in another epiphany which forms the climax of this novel. Even this final awakening is not always a totally happy awareness, it is an awakening to inner aspirations as well as social limitations.

Keywords: Loneliness, alienation, displacement, immigrant experience, feminine sensibility, belonging

Introduction

Our perceptual apparatus to a large extent is trained to perceive and observe only certain facts in a particular way. Thus, the findings we call objective and empirical are nothing but products of ideology which determines the way we see, hear, think and imagine.

In *Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni envisions the figure of an old woman Tilo a visionary who can transport one's mind from the cramping material immediacy to an exciting release into mystery signified by the world of spices. Tilo carries the potential for a mystic transmigration right into the springs of life and energy. Loneliness and alienation, love seen from a woman's perspective dearth of alternatives in

all spheres of life available to a woman are lucidly presented in this novel. Divakaruni states that the book is a metaphor and the characters are metaphorical as well as realistic.

Mistress of Spices is about the intertwining of characters from different backgrounds as well as the geographical intermingling of minds and continents. This is Divakaruni's way of unweaving an unseen connection between people moving across the globe, a world of displacement and belonging. It is the terrain that becomes the objective correlative of an inner upheaval and discontentment, of unshakable past and its imposition on the present. Elizabeth Sherwin in "Chitra Divakaruni Brings the Immigrant Home" speaks of the author's art of reflecting the immigrant experience through a prism of myth and magic. Chitra Divakaruni observes: "I went back to the tales I was told in Bengal and the love of spices I learned in the villages. [. . .] I mixed it with reality of immigrant life now. I tried to bring together the language of poetry and prose, which in my native language in Bengali is not so separate" (98). She admits in an online article entitled "Dissolving Boundaries," that the speaking serpents are a different kind of magic that she understands only partially. They represent the grace of the universe and by this she means that they are not governed by logic but comes to us mortals as a blessing we cannot understand.

Discussion

The protagonist, Nayana Tara in her childhood was the apple of the eye in the family. Nayana Tara was restless and tired of life as she writes "And these unending nights lying sleepless among a gaggle of girls who groaned out the names of boys in their dreams" (18). She feels that she is responsible for the destruction caused by the pirates. "I who in boredom and disappointment did this to you" (19).

From Nayan Tara she became Bhagyavati bringer of luck (emphasis added). She became the queen of the pirates but dissatisfaction still haunted her. "Vengeance did not appease it, as

I had thought it would" (20). Her discontentment can be known when she says "I would have laughed or cried, except I had no smiles left, nor tears" (20).

The snakes told her about the island of spice; she changed her name as Tilo; she learned "Ah, now I have learned how deep in the human heart vanity lies, vanity which is the other face of the fear of being unloved" (43).

All dreams are fulfilment of wishes. The thought in the story progresses to project the unfulfilled wishes of Tilo which are strongly lying in her heart. As a mistress of spices she is supposed to dedicate her life only to spices but as a woman she dreams to have a house with all accomplishments and also a skin like that of the American. "Dark" is valueless in both the nations i.e. the nation in which she is born (India) and the nation to which she moved (US). "I wish for that American skin that American hair those blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say wow" (66). She comes across an American who enters into her store and she starts feeling lonely. Longing for the love of a person props up after the American leaves the store. "Dissatisfaction, that old poison I thought I'd been cured of bubbles up thick and viscous in me" (73).

As an ordinary human being she longs for that which she doesn't possess. Her inner consciousness warns her but temptations are irresistible. When she returns to the store after meeting Geeta, she hallucinates of seeing her first mother this hallucination is a part of self-introspection which Tilo does. She is wavering to decide between her life as a mistress and her real life. She asks a question "What if a mistress wants her life back" (149) which is unanswered. On Mondays she talks to the old one. She doesn't want to tell every thing to the old one. She lets the American enter the store even though it is restricted on Mondays. "Temptations soft as a silk bed. It would be so easy to let my body sink into it" (157).

As Sonya Domergue rightly points out, hers is an internal conflict “between her real youthful, inner self, which reaches out to the world and life outside, and her outer aged, powerful self, which keeps her within strictly imposed limits” (70)

Raven the American to whom Tilo is attracted is the only one who had really seen into her eyes as she is and not as a mistress. “This body, I know, it’s not the real you” (205). She leans to temptations breaks many rules which the mistress are not supposed to break and finally listens to the voice of the old one who gives her three days time as Shampati’s fire calls back her.

She breaks the rules not just for the attraction that she has for Raven but for the sake of helping others. She tries to balance between her life as a mistress and also as a woman. She doesn’t want to give away one for another even though she knew the probability of enjoying both is meek.

Tilo oscillates between the two poles of her life, before reaching a still point, “Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all that we encounter has already been changed by what we had imagined to be. If we have dreamed it into being” (16).

As Gita Rajan said: “Tilo’s intervention [in various Indian immigrant lives] emphasizes the activism of women of colour as they pledge their help to each other. Divakaruni interlaces an emerging modernity with minority traditions to reshape life’s conditions into a free-flowing, rippling, equitable, present reality [...] Divakaruni gestures towards feminist solidarity by moving Tilo away from the established epistemological apparatus that contrasts tradition pejoratively with modernity” (Rajan, 2002:228).

The unifying principle of this novel then is an attempt to probe into the innermost regions of Tilo’s self. Divakaruni forges a synthesis

between Tilo’s inner world and her relationship with the objective world in a unique style of her own. Raven falls outside the periphery and the helpless condition of Tilo is always at the fore. Only she will have to make a final choice, to ‘live’, to ‘survive’ or to ‘perish’. She chooses the latter and enters into ‘shampathi fire’ to end her life.

She takes the help of spices to turn young. After the act of love is over at Raven’s place she returns to her store to offer herself to Shampati’s fire. A woman’s profusion of love, a mistress commitment to the magical world of spices makes Tilo vacillate in taking a decision. Staunchly clinging to a discourse of her woman’s imagination and rejecting all discourses of power she gets ready to walk on shampati fire and is ultimately relieved from the burden of guilt that she carries. This act of her makes her to settle into a richer relationship with Raven and also in retaining the powers as a mistress.

She wakes up to see that her body is not in age’s last unflowering. She wonders at the kindness of the first mother. She listens to the spices saying “Having readied your mind to suffer you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also” (325). There was an earthquake which destroys the entire city. Tilo and Raven choose to leave but Tilo refuses to proceed further and decides to return to Oakland. Raven proposes a new name Maya to her and starts a fresh life. Thus hand in hand they walk together to lead a life of their own.

Divakaruni mesmerizes the readers in the *Mistress of Spices* with the story of a young woman who is trained in the ancient art of the spices. Before entering into the world to practice her art she cleanses her body in Shampati’s fire. She chooses California, transforms into an old woman and sells her spices. She cannot resist involving herself in the lives of her customers which brings her into conflict with her teacher and mentor (old one) who watches over her from the island of spices. She knows the wrath

which she has to face but temptations are irresistible and she yields to them. Her romantic pursuit to a handsome stranger Raven, an American, threatens not only the course of true love, but her very existence.

Tilo the mistress of spices in her best possible way tries to make people at home with the spices which she picks by exclusively choosing them according to their state of mind and in discharging her duty as a mistress of spices she never failed. "Sometimes", she says, "it fills me with a heaviness, lake of black ice, when I think that across the entire length of this land not one person knows who I am" (5).

Tilo was to become a victim of the grand catastrophe by choosing to walk on Shampati fire and though the establishment which had been her home was to be looted and become rather dilapidated, the anarchy of the times could not dull Tilo's spirits or diminish her zest for life. Tilo emerges finally as a woman with formidable reservoirs of strength, almost ponderously reflective, about the strange twists of destiny that carried her from the confined world of the hearth to a realm where, though the regimes of power were just as portent, she could experience herself as an agent. It is this wild horse of ambiguity that Tilo rides with admirable candour.

Love is not a means to an end rather it is a means to express her distinctively assertive feminine sensibility. As a mistress she is not supposed to use mirror, so in one way she is unknown to herself and a non-native, when Mr.Raven the American sees her under the skin, her happiness abounds as his eyes are a mirror to her.

The first chapter is entitled as 'Tilo' the protagonist chooses this name after the mythological reference of a dancer Tilottama who pleases and entertains everyone in Indra's sabha. Tilo too as the mistress of spices pleases everyone with her spices. She takes care of them as it is mandatory for a mistress to look after the

needs of the customers irrespective of whether she is happy or not.

The last chapter is entitled as 'Maya'. Maya has two meanings. One being magic, the second being illusion. She weaves the magic with spices and magnetizes the customers who come to her shop regularly. The illusion that she has regarding the breaking of rules as a mistress and the consequences that she has to bear if she crosses her limits is broken in the last chapter. Shampati fire is a testimony to this. Finally the revelation is so appealing that as Maya she can still weave the magic of her spices and her life with Raven is not an illusion but a reality showing the inherent desire that a woman possess.

So, this transformation from Tilo to Maya is a true transformation wherein, as a mistress she is discharging her duties and satisfies the customers who come to her shop and as a woman she is also satisfied as she chooses to lead her life with Raven that gives wholeness.

Conclusion

Though it appears that Divakaruni is speaking about the immigrant experience outwardly, it is inherent that what she as a woman is longing is love. Love which connects everybody, love which erases all boundaries and love which makes you feel that you belong. Just as spices when blended properly will make a perfect recipe this world will also be made as a perfect place to live in by blending different cultures. As a mistress of spices Divakaruni desires to fill the appetite of the world with the aroma of her spices. To make the world see the Indian culture which leads to knowing, knowing leads to understanding, understanding leads to sharing, sharing in turn leads to caring, caring leads to belonging. Belonging is nothing else but being an insider. Divakaruni craves to see that all human beings are insiders no matter to which part of the world they may belong to all of them are the species taking the binomial nomenclature *Homo Sapiens*, belonging to this beautiful planet earth.

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