



FROM FICTION TO FILM: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Mistress of Spices is an absorbing novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian American writer. This work of fiction was highly acclaimed in the literary circle. Paul Mayeda Berges adapted the novel into a film. The adaptation clothed the much loved tale in a different garb altogether, to make the film marketable perhaps.

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Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices* is a diasporic tale built amidst a stream of voices, both male & female, sharing their joys and sorrows as immigrants to the United States. The author interweaves her text with strands of Magical Realism, Postcolonial Criticism and Feminine discourse to produce a patchwork of messages that overlap but never contradict.

The novel relates the story of Tilo, a Mistress of Spices. She is a priestess who knows the secrets of all spices. Her background was etched out in a way as to leave an indelible impression on the mind of readers:

They named me Nayan Tara, star of the Eye, but my parent's faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl-child, and this one coloured like mud. Wrap her in old cloth; lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except

a dowry death. Three days it took the villagers to put out fire in the market place. And my mother lying fevered all the while and the cows run dry, and I screaming until they fed me milk from a white ass. (Divakaruni 7)

In the opening scene, the story appears to be a normal story located in India where the birth of a girl is still looked upon as a curse. People visit temples, offer prayers and perform rituals and beg for a male child. The Hindus fervently pray to Goddess Durga with fervor.

Then the magic unfolds. The girl discovers that she has special powers which make her popular in the area. She was kidnapped by pirates. She fled. She plunged into the sea and was saved by the sea serpents. She reached the island of the Old One.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revealed about the motivations and inspirations behind writing the outstanding novel:

Yes, I had not thought about writing this particular novel, *Mistress of Spices*, in this particular way. It wasn't that I went through steps in logical thinking to arrive at that [vision]. It was a very intuitive and inspired kind of image that came to me and that is what I mean, that in some ways I was in touch with something within me that I cannot explain and that is beyond logic. When I think of writing, I think of it as of all my worldly activities—all my secular activities—the most spiritual one, because it puts me in touch with...And then going to the other part of the question about Gurumayi as my spiritual teacher—it's very hard to explain because I think the blessing that has come to me through her and through following that path of meditation is just beyond words. (Seshachari)

Luckily, Nayan Tara was accepted by the Old One, an aged, ancient female who owned the island. It was an island occupied by females only and it immediately brings to our mind tales related to feminist utopia. An island populated by females only. The Old woman would hold hands of the young girls and watched. If the hands were smooth and pliant; if the spices placed on their palms hummed songs of origin, the girls were accepted or else they were hurled into the sea:

... Because death is easier to bear than the ordinary life, cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children who will one day leave you, and all the while remembering her, on whom you had set your heart...They become water wraiths, spirits of mist and salt, crying in the voices of gulls. (Divakaruni 34)

Nayantara was accepted by the Old One. She walked upon the 'Fire of Shampati' in order to be cleansed and be transported to the land where she would set up a store of Spices. Nayan Tara renamed herself as Tilotamma. The Old One was not very pleased with the choice of name but relented. In a moment of

foreshadowing, the old woman related the myth of Tilotamma:

Tilotamma, disobedient at the last, fell. And was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives. Seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limb. (Divakaruni 45)

The day on which Tilo departs is especially poignant. She had been asked to go to California. She is rather magically transported to the new land. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in California:

And when I woke up in America on a bed of ash, an age later or was it only a breath, the store already hardening its protective shell around me, the spices on their shelves meticulous and waiting... (Divakaruni 58)

In California, Tilo's Spice store became an oasis for diasporic lives. Indians came to her store in quest of happiness. And Tilo had an answer to all their problems. In such gatherings, new bonds were forged. But the sense of self and belonging was always incomplete in the new land. After landing on these mythical lands, immigrants encounter a series of injustice that stretches beyond the edge of eternity. They see their dreams as crumbling to dust —

I am thinking I will be a big doctor in *phoren* . . . but authorities say, take this test, and this one, and this one, and oral examination also. In the exam hall, I do not understand their *taan taan toon toon* American accent and now I run my own gas station. Who can say I am better off or worse? (Divakaruni 230)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the themes of cultural conflict, alienation and assimilations faced by the Indian immigrant community in America —

They long for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America". They dream of their motherland where — "each day still is melted sugar and cinnamon, and birds with diamond throats sing, and silence when it falls is light as mountain mist. (Divakaruni 46)

Young boys lay awake at night thinking about their grandparents in Jalandhar: gathering bunches of *saag* & singing . . .

Their voice sounds like rain. Humiliating remarks like — “*Sonofabitch Indian should a stayed in your own Goddamn country!*” make them cringe further and they introspect — “No one told us it would be so hard here in *Amreekah*, all day scrubbing greasy floors, lying under engines that drop black oil. Driving the belching monster trucks that coat our lungs with tar. Standing behind counters of dim motels where we must smile as we hand the keys to whores. Yes, always smile, even when people say — “*Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs*”.(Divakaruni 62)

The aspect of *American Dream* is persistent throughout the story. Carmen Faymonville asserts that

..America is depicted as a promised land, site of innocence, a site of redemption, and a place where the world or the self can be transformed and perfected. (Faymonville 247)

This lead to the migratory movements to the West in search of retreat, renewal and solace. The author has elucidated through her tale that Diaspora signified much more than a metaphorical journey of people migrating from their original home to other places of dwelling and working. These travelers gathered again in other, new foreign lands, forming new communities.

Divakaruni chooses to cloak the stinging pain and the tears of the emigrants by spicing up the tale with myths, spirituality, folk belief and magic. The narrative draws on a folk belief, according to which a baby born with a *caul* over her face will have special powers, being able to communicate with the dead and see into the future.

Tilo, short for Tilottama was named after the sun burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment. She was given the task of mollifying her customer’s individual pain and suffering through specifically selected Spice, each noted for their particular power. Turmeric acts as a shield for hearts sorrow, Clove is for compassion, *Makardwaj* to make one beautiful, Ginger for better digestion and

inner strength, *Neem* to kill disease and so on and so forth.

In the hands of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Spices and magic become forms of alternate realism. According to Faris —

One of the important features of magical realist text is that a familiar object or incident is endowed with magic. (Faris 163)

There is no distinction between magical and medicinal values of spices in the novel: both the real and the magical attributes of the spices are depicted familiarly with minute details. Tilo deploys clove and cardamom to help Jagjit in his friendless state —

Crushed clove and cardamom, Jagjit, to make your breath fragrant. Cardamom which I will scatter tonight on the wind for you. North wind carrying them to open your teacher’s unseeing. And also sweet pungent clove, *lavang*, spice of compassion.(Divakaruni 39)

he Spices have a distinct individuality and their presence not by any degree less than the protagonist —

Pebbled-hard fenugreek, colour of sand. Put it in water and it will bloom free. Bite the swollen kernels between your teeth and taste its bitter sweetness. Taste of waterweeds in a wild place, the cry of grey geese. Fenugreek Tuesday’s Spice, when the air is green like mosses after rain. . . (Divakaruni 54)

Each Spice has a song of its own which they sing in the hands of their their Mistress —

I am fresh as river wind to the tongue, planting desire in a plot turned barren . . . I Fenugreek that renders the body sweet again, ready for loving”. The author furnishes tales of origin of each Spice — “The Fenugreek was first sown by Shabari, the oldest woman on earth. (Divakaruni 34)

Timothy Morton’s path breaking work *The Poetics of Spices* lays down —

Spice participates in discourses of spectrality, sacred presence, liminality, wealth, exoticism, commerce and

imperialism. It is caught up in, but not limited to, the forms of capitalist ideology . . . spice is a complex and contradictory marker of figure and ground, sign & referent, species and genius; love & death, epithalamion & epitaph, sacred & profane, medicine & poison, orient & occident and of the traffic between these terms.(Morton 9)

Spices have strong colonial connotations and they also symbolise the subversive power of the postcolonial era. When we look back down the lanes and by lanes of history, the spices had first allured, enchanted and enslaved the foreign travelers with their latent powers. In the course of time these travelers became the rulers of the land. In this tale of dreams and desires, the spices were mastered by a female, incidentally called *Mistress* rendering a distinct colonial *master-slave* flavour. As long as Tilo follows the rules of the game, the spices obey her silently. Once she transgresses, the equation changes —

Speak to me fennel, says Tilo, waiting for them to sing. When they respond, their voice is not a song but a booming, a wave crashing in the skull — “Why should we, when you have done that which you should not? When you have overstepped the lines you willingly drew around yourself?(Divakaruni

The normative master slave relationship was subverted by the spices and eventually the spices were empowered. Edward Said pointed out the changes in the attitude of the occident towards the Orientals in *Orientalist Structures and Restructures*. Oriental lands and behaviour had been highly romanticized by the European poets and writers and then presented to the Western readers. The Oriental nations were perceived as a land of pure sunlight and clean oceans. It was a place of pure human culture with no necessary evil in society. After the Second World War, all the European colonies were lost and it was believed that there were no more Orientals and Occident, but this was certainly not the case. Western prejudice towards eastern countries is still very explicit.

The South Asians, on the other hand, are in awe of America and everything American. Young Asian girls wish for blue eyes on New Year —

I must be proud like mother says to be Indian; I wish for that American hair those blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say wow!(Divakaruni 87)

The text clearly voices tensions between exoticism as a reason for attraction. Being a ‘mysterious Indian beauty’ is a disappointing, disenchanting experience for Tilo. She accuses Raven —

You have loved me for the colour of my skin, the accent of my speaking, and the quaintness of my customs which promised you the magic you no longer found in the women of your own land. In your yearning you have made me into that which I am not . . . I do not blame you too much. Perhaps I have done the same with you . . .(Divakaruni 299)

Tilo towards the end forsakes her magical powers and the Spice Store for human love and a worldly life. But Tilo, who represented the orient could not easily become one with Raven, who was an embodiment of the occident. Tilo remarks —

Now you must help me find a new name . . . one that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now.(Divakaruni 316)

This marvelous story of myth and romance, social critique and poetry presents a situation where the previously colonized South Asians come to a colonizing country in search of home, respect and tolerance. They carve out a new space where remains of colonialism and modern day resistance meet. Just as the emigrants assimilate and desperately try to gel with the alien culture, Tilo too undergoes a transformation. From a meek ideal of chastity, she changes into a woman of desires, carnal and spiritual. She defies the stereotypes of descent and creates spirituality and sexuality of her own consent. She worships Goddesses and values that best suit her wishes and needs. One of several pioneer ethnic American literary frontierswomen fighting with a pen instead of a pistol, Divakaruni rewrites the tradition of Western writing, tracing the

immigrant experience of South Asians in America beyond the expected identities of exclusion, alienation, helplessness and enslaving —

The Mistress of Spices is a South Asian American magico-realist tale written in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of the twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic. (Web.)

When the novel was being filmed, by director Mayeda and the scriptwriter Chadha, it bore a different look altogether. It can be gauged that adaptation is a film maker's personal and political opinion not only about the novel but also about immigrant identity. In Adaptation, a literal transposition of the novel is impossible, as diverse mediums of expressions are employed. But the film at times appeared to be completely divorced from its original text.

While the novel is replete with magical realist elements, the film prefers to ignore most of them. The film also considerably minimized the ignoble reality of immigrant life that was depicted in the novel. The film makers decided to highlight a love story, which brought together and merged the East West cultural dichotomy. The film is a cosmetic display of Indian culture to impress the first world viewers.

The Spice shop in the film looked like a cultural boutique with sleek interiors and trendy ethnic wares. But this aesthetic display of the Spice shop was far removed from the cobwebbed, dark, dingy store of Divakaruni's novel. Another point of significance was the marked difference in the age of the protagonists as depicted in the adapted work. Tilo, in the film, was depicted with an unblemished beauty. In the novel, her ancient body was constantly in conflict with her young heart.

The film maker's choice of Aishwarya Rai as Tilo in the film was not just to preserve the glamour quotient of the film but it is also an effort of portraying India, spiced and beautified, packed and labeled, for winning the appraisal and appreciation of the Euro-American viewers. The first world prefers India's age old wisdom to be aesthetically wrapped to suit their palate. Thus, it can also be

concluded that the film is an attempt of marketing India for the world with a postcolonial backdrop.

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri and Shweta Rao have analysed the difference between the text and the film. They concluded:

In the film, the Indian ethos seems to extend its limits and incorporate the world view of the West in its heterogeneous, pluralistic fold, which can be perceived as Chadha's hopeful intervention. The film promotes a healthy mixture of cultures in the idyllic multiracial world, while the novel poses serious questions to this idyll. Further, the film refuses to engage with larger societal problems, and posits the uncomplicated treatment of a cross-cultural love story as a political device to undermine the racial issue, with Tilo and Doug uniting without any galactic conflicts. Tilo continues being the mistress of spices, in spite of her relationship with Doug. The spices become much more accommodating and the Mistress is allowed to pursue her personal life. Tilo hears First Mother saying that spices won't leave her as she has proved her devotion to them. (Postcolonial Text 11)

As the novel drew to a close, Tilo was re-christened as Maya—illusion, spell, enchantment and the power that kept the imperfect world moving. Maya was no longer a Mistress of Spices but in the film she continued to be one. Her union with Doug does not destroy her powers as it does in the novel. Spices continue to obey her and help her heal the immigrant community of America. Maya and Doug give up their search for an earthly paradise and decide to lead a normal life amidst the hate and the fear of people. Although Chadha and Berges' film omitted issues of cultural conflicts and imbues the film with shallow exoticism, it successfully created a film that is an amalgamation of the East and the West.

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