



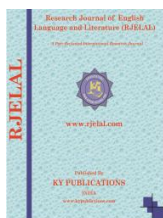
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE ROLE OF SPICES IN *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES* BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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<https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7119.243>



ABSTRACT

Spices are treated by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as characters in her award winning novel *The Mistress of Spices*. They are used not only for the purpose of cooking but for curing diseases for the immigrants in America. Chitra Banerjee is an immigrant writer who uses her firsthand experience in her novels. When Tilo comes across people with the problem of alienation and diasporic dilemma she tends to cure the problem by administering the special herbs to them.

Keywords: spices, curative, magic, alienation

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the leading immigrant writers has come out with many novels in English. In day today life, spices are used for cooking. But in the hands of the writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Spices get a different shape and sense. Tilo the main character of the novel uses the spices as a curative.

By penning the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, the novelist, opens a new avenue and reveals the importance of spices in the life of people which is found and cultivated exclusively in a rich land, India.

Tilottama in the novel, *The Mistress of Spices* tries to cure the ailments of the immigrant Indians in America by administering Herbs to them as she runs a spice store in Oakland. She acquires this special nature from her first mother. First it starts with the auspicious spice Turmeric:

Brush the surface with your hand, and the silky yellow powder will cling to the pads of your palm, to your finger-tips. Bring it to your face. Rub it on cheek, forehead, chin. Don't be hesitant. For a thousand years

before history began, brides – and those who long to be brides – have done the same. It will erase blemishes and wrinkles, suck away age and fat. For days afterward, your skin will give off a pale golden glow. (MS 13)

Tilo has a special nature of speaking to the spices. Turmeric which is also halud, is a good preserver of food. Not only that, Turmeric is an auspicious spice. Hence it is placed in the heads of new born child for luck and it is also rubbed in the borders of saris by traditional Indian women. Tilo wraps a handful of turmeric in newspaper with some words of healing whispered into it. In this way she tries to cure the people with physical and mental ailments.

Jagjit is a boy who comes to the store with his mother. His reserved and shy nature makes him face many problems in life when he goes to school. "Jagjit with his thin, frightened wrists who has trouble in school because he knows only Punjabi still" (MS 38). He has learnt only one word in English that is 'Idiot'. So his teacher has put him in the last bench. Not only this but he is also ill-treated by the

fellow students. Their behavior is very indecent when they shout at him like this: "Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole"(MS 39). Tilo is successful in bringing the cheerful Jagjit back.

Tilo uses the spice Fennel to cure Ahuja's wife. This woman's life became miserable after her marriage. Before marriage when she was Chowdhary's daughter her life was wonderful. Tilo made use of the spice Fennel for her: " Fennel equalizer, who can take power from one hand and give it to the other when two people eat of you at the same time, I entreat you, help Ahuja's wife"(MS106).

Then the spice Ginger is used by Tilo to cure Geetha's grandfather. She drops the slices of ginger in a pan of boiling water, and watch them rise and sink spreading the aroma everywhere. "Golden ginger used by the healer Charak to relight the fire that simmers in the belly, may your bright burning course up my sluggish veins. Outside, America is flinging itself against the walls of my store, calling in its many-tongued voice. Give me strength to answer" (MS 125). Tilo can communicate with the spice, which is very peculiar: "Speak to me, fennel, *mouri*, coloured like the freckled house sparrow that brings amity where it nests, spice to digest sorrows and in their digestion make us strong"(MS 106)

Tilo should make use of the special power only with other persons not for her own good. If she uses the power then it will turn against her. But unfortunately there comes a time when she uses it. She must live a life of detachment with others. She is not able to follow this rule also when a handsome American visits the store. When the lonely American leaves the store Tilo feels the pain so she waders aimlessly in the store.

D.B.Gavani has commented: "Divakaruni is writing the script of women's rebellion against the pressure to suppress their desire and their bodies. The order of Mistresses clearly replicates patriarchal struggle and Tilo must be made to break free of them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with Native American man, whom she calls Raven"(Gavani, 80)

Finally one day she visits him in his apartment. She offers her virginity to Raven as she is overwhelmed by his physical beauty. "Raven turns off the lamp. In the cool silver moonlight I feel his breath behind me, smelling of almonds and peaches. He twines his arms around my waist"(MS 287). When Tilo disobeys the rule, the power of the spices move away from her. The writer is endowed with the special power of converting the mythological tales, which she heard from her grandfather, into wonderful tales. This makes the reading of the novel much more interesting.

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