

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**MYSTICAL TALE OF TILO WITH ALLEGORICAL REPRESENTATION OF SPICES IN
CHITRA BENARJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings out the mystical powers of a clairvoyant woman of Indian ancestry with an allegorical representation of spices, which help her to treat her multiracial and multigenerational shopper's physical, emotional and spiritual illnesses.

THE MISTRESS OF SPICES by Divakaruni is a magical-realist novel combining ancient Hindu mythology and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American socio-cultural concerns of the 1990s. It is an allegorical fable of fantasy depicting the magical powers of Tilottama (Tilo), named after sesame seeds, the "Spice of nourishment "who runs an Indian grocery store in Oakland' America. Originally named Nayan Tara, "Star of the Eye" or "Star seer". She supplies the ingredients for curries and kormas. She also helps her customers to gain any precious commodity they most desire, for Tilo is a mistress of spices, a priestess of the secret magical powers. Through several interwoven stories of the numerous characters who visit Tilo's spice shop, the writer presents inner-city social problems in the 1990s. As she attempts to cure with her secret spices, "the mistress" falls in love with an attractive male client named Raven, who is himself tormented by his half Native American identity and whom she secretly calls "My American." So a troubled Tilo cannot find the correct spice for him as he arouses in her a forbidden desire which if she follows will destroy her magical powers.

Thus this work gives an account of the life of Tilo and how she has struggled after her encounter with Raven.

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The Mistress of Spices is the first novel of Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni which combines ancient Hindu mythology, religious superstitions and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American

socio-cultural concerns of the 1990s. Divakaruni highlights the heterogeneity of Indian cooking by naming each chapter of the novel after a different spice. She keeps the story very simple by introducing

many different characters through the protagonist, Tilo with the allegorical representation of spices, for example Turmeric. She calls it preserver and an auspicious spice representing divinity and which works as a shield for heart's sorrow. She offers it to Ahuja's wife who is depressed with her married life. Similarly in the succeeding episodes she introduces different spices like Cinnamon as a symbol for compassion and which works as a friend-maker and she offers it to Jagjit who is not interested in his studies. So Divakaruni's magic and her ability in portraying the character Tilo with spices is beautifully conceived and crafted in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

The protagonist, Tilo, a young Indian woman born in an earlier period in a faraway place, is trained in the ancient art of spices and groomed as a mistress charged with special powers. Once fully initiated in a rite of fire, the now immortal Tilo-- in the gnarled and arthritic body of an old woman-- travels through time to the distressed part of Oakland, California, where she opens a shop from which she administers spices as curatives to her customers. An unexpected romance with a handsome stranger eventually forces her to choose between the supernatural life of an immortal and the vicissitudes of modern life. Spellbinding and hypnotizing, *The Mistress of Spices* is a tale of joy and sorrow and a special woman's magical powers.

In *Mistress of Spices* Tilo's life begins in a small village in India and after becoming a mistress of spices she leaves for America to serve people. Divakaruni employs different shades of the technique of the magical realism to reinvent an equitable, multicultural and multiracial America. It is not a feminist story, in the usual sense. The different characters presented in the story are not victims of circumstances or of their gender. Neither are the males insensitive egotists. Each character has its dignity. There are no heroes or villains, just human beings, like ordinary men, each of them with their own shades and each being what they are, because of the circumstances in their life.

Nayan Tara, a little girl, born to her parents as the second daughter discovers her hidden psychic powers as she grows up in India, little aware that one day she shall be the Mistress of Spices. As she meets First Mother and her team of little girls-

Mistresses of Spice in the making, Nayan Tara discovers her calling. Now starts her unusual tutorials where she learns the enchanted language of the spices- spices ranging from the very Western vanilla beans to the utterly Indian turmeric or halud. She learns to love them and be loved by them in return. In due course, armed with the sensitivities that make a good Mistress of Spice, Nayan Tara is launched in the avatar of Tilo (short for Tilottama meaning sesame, a spice known for its nourishment and energizing qualities). She walks out of the comfort of First Mother's arms into Oakland in California, where she is typically the Indian woman trying to find her feet in the US, an alien country. She runs a Spice Bazaar, where spices of every kind are available, and Tilo loves them, administers them and is true to them. She is their mistress. She is so completely owned by the spices, and so utterly in love with them, that her entire life centers on the spices who are unrelenting lovers. She loves them absolutely, they love her conditionally. She cannot love another person, not even herself. The spices are whimsical and will not tolerate infidelity. They will ruin her. They are jealous lovers'. The spices are sensitive to Tilo. As she says, 'When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world'.

Before leaving the comfort of First Mother's haven, Tilo the volatile one has dedicated her life to spices, and vowed abstinence from worldly desires. The reason why First Mother has tutored Tilo, despite her inconsistencies, is simply because "she is the only one in whose hands the spices sang back". She meets Indian families, takes care of them as the Mistress of Spice, and is loved enormously in return- also trusted. Along with them she goes through the pangs of immigrant nationals, and her spices help her sort out issues of health, culture and in fact their very existence. The greatest irony is that those very spices which help other people find peace and love, restrain her from finding her love on grounds of abstinence. Tilo loves these spices selflessly and sometimes the spices tend to get possessive and selfish about her. In *Mistress of Spices*, spices also play a vital role as they are used by the mistress to solve the problems of people and also as curatives.

At the very beginning of the novel Divakaruni starts introducing the spices with turmeric by Tilo because to her it's an auspicious spice. At the outset we have Lalitha who gets married to Ahuja, an old man. Her husband's elderliness dawns on her when she looks at his photo, taken years back. She realizes this fact only on the day of her marriage. She is not interested in getting married as she is happy with her sewing. She agrees to marry for the sake of her parents. She accepts him as her husband, as she wants to obey her parents. Their married life has not been a successful one. Lalitha confesses to Tilo about her marriage. She also tells that her husband is extremely possessive and harrases her physically. Tilo suggests that she can talk about this to her parents. However Lalitha replied that because she was the oldest of her father's progeny her father spent much money on her. And if she said, "no" her sister would also get a bad name inviting a bad remark from everyone that the chowdary girls are headstrong and it would be better not to arrange a match with the family. On account of this she married Ahuja but inwardly she was furious and heaped on him all kinds of insults, calling him a 'liar', 'cheat', 'son of a pig'.

So she thinks Turmeric is the one which makes her feel better and she says it's the balm to lay over her burning. So she offers her Turmeric. In the succeeding episodes Tilo, the mistress of spices has introduced many characters who visit her spice bazaar the bougainvillea girls, the rich men's wives, the Mohans and Jagjits and Kwis. Each face tells a story. Many of their immigrant dreams lie shattered in the dust, but there are also some success stories. The ones most vivid among them are the faces of four whose fates are inextricably linked with that of Tilo, The mistress of spice. Geetha, Lalitha, Haroun and Raven. To each, Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice, for the restoration of sight, the cleansing of evil, and the pain of rejection. For example in the chapter next to Turmeric she introduces the innocent character Haroun who is a friend of Tilo, visiting the spice bazaar regularly. One day he comes to spice bazaar in order to share his happiness with her on getting a job at Kapadia memsaab as a taxi driver. Then with her magical powers of foreseeing the future she foresees that

his joy would not become real. She thinks that something wrong will happened to Haroun. But before she thinks of the name of the spice is to offer him he has gone away. She likes to offer Kalojire, the spice of the dark planet ketu, protector against the evil eye to him. In course of the novel, the narrator changes her name many times, from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavathi to Tilottama and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, Since it means spell or enchantment; she has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood. The spice shop, where the whole Indian community converges, is like a microcosm in itself.

Coming to the Tale of Tilo, Tilo is born in a small village. Her parents don't feel happy as their next child is also a girl. Tilo roams the village as she has not been taken care of by her parents. She then begins to predict forth coming dangers, finds lost things, shows people the misbehavior of the rich and reveals hidden treasures. After a while people consider her as the child of God and start praising her. Her fame spreads to other villages through the merchants and sailors. In America, Tilo meets many characters who have different problems in their life. She tries to solve them with the help of the power of the spices except Raven. Raven an American ventures in to the store, A troubled Tilo cannot find the correct spice; for he arouses in her a forbidden desire which when followed will destroy her magical powers. She suffers in her life after meeting Raven.

Dhaksha is a nurse, who works at the hospital and also takes care of her old mother – in – law. Her mother-in-law is troubled when she says she can't do anymore work. Tilo gives her black pepper and amla to help her and to develop immunity to face problems. Geetha is yet another character who is reared by her grandfather, always resents her American style of life. When he goes to Tilo's shop he relates everything happening in the family. One day he tells Tilo about Geetha's answer to her parents, when they asked her opinion about marriage. She replied that she was averse to arranged marriages. She prefers to choose her husband by herself and bursts into laughter. She adds that her father cannot expect her to be seen with a veil over her head in kitchen, sweating all

over all the day with a bunch of keys tied to the end of her sari . To this Ramu said that it is not going to be like that.

She then tells him that she is in love with Juan who is a Chicano. Everybody at home gets upset. She quarrels with her dad and mums and leaves the house without telling anybody. Geetha's grandfather asks Tilo to go and speak to Geetha. Tilo refuses to go as she cannot go out leaving her shop according to the vows of the mistress of spices. Here we see an Indian family in America who still try to follow and stick to their culture. Tilo meets Geetha, convinces her and gets the information that she is staying with her friend and not with Juan. Tilo solves the problem by using the power of spices.

Hameeda, who is a neighbour of Haroun, stays with her brother in America. She has been given talaq by her husband for she had no son. She is interested in Haroun. Tilo gives Haroun the lotus root to attain love in his life. She wants him to lead a happy life with Hameeda who cares for him. Through the character of Geetha's grandfather we know that people still value their culture though they go abroad. He complains to Tilo saying in disapproval that Geetha comes late at night with her friends after work. It is Tilo who tries to convince him by telling him that it is America after all and even in India women are now working. She changes his mind and tries to convince him that they are to adjust with the younger generation.

Tilo remembers the warnings given by the old mother that they should not become disobedient and seek their own pleasure. Now and then she gets the warning from the spices when she is about to disobey her vows.

The sudden twist in the story comes only after the entry of the American to the spice shop. Tilo who does not have any desire prior to this starts thinking about the arrival of the American, Raven to her shop. Tilo falls in love with Raven, a handsome young Native American, and builds a life of love with him. This romantic shell, worn and curiously static, comes startlingly alien as Tilo begins to intercede in the lives of the cast of characters around her. Raven talks of his mother Celestina, who is not a white, but pretends to be a white as she thinks it gives her self-esteem and happiness. She hates her own community. Raven does not like his mother for this

reason. He leaves her alone after he had started earning. He starts living his life without any aim. He earns and sends

Some money to his mother but will not even reply to her letters. And one day when he goes in search of his mother he gets to know that she is no more. He confides everything to Tilo as he thinks that his burden will be reduced. Raven is left all alone in this world with no one to share his life. He expects love from Tilo, who is an Indian mistress of spice. She gives Haroun a spice called Mahammul which enhances fortune and for developing interest and to bring success in his life. Tilo fails to save Haroun, as she has been busy with her own desires and fails to save Haroun at the right time. She realizes her mistake only after he has been attacked by the smugglers. Tilo knows definitely that Shampathi's fire will take her as she has disobeyed her vows and also failed to save Haroun from danger. She has got only three days left to complete all her work in America. She keeps a board which announces "biggest sale of the year, Best bargain in town. Everything must go".

Tilo meets Raven for the last time before entering Shampathi's fire. She decides to give up herself to him in his apartment. For the first time she uses the powers of spices for herself. She uses Marakadwaj to make her extremely beautiful, thinking that Raven is more attracted towards beautiful girls and loves beauty. By using the spice Tilo becomes young and beautiful. She disobeys her vows by giving herself to Raven. Tilo leaves a note to Raven telling that,

"I do not expect you to understand, only to believe that I had choice. I thank you for all you have given me. I hope I have given you a little too. Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going – life or death, I do not know which – I will carry its brief aching sweetness. Forever." (292)

Tilo enters the Shampathi's fire and loses consciousness. In the morning Raven comes in search of Tilo. There has been a huge earthquake

which destroys almost the entire Oakland and even the spice shop collapses. He finds Tilo lying down unconscious takes her in his hand and moves out to his car. They leave the place and go in search of an earthly paradise. But after going a little distance Tilo gains consciousness and stops the car and looks at Oakland which is on fire. She changes her mind to return to Oakland and help people over there. She thinks that it is because of her that everything has happened and she wants to help people as she did before. Even Raven changes his mind and returns to Oakland with Tilo and renames her as Maya with a wish to lead a new life.

Tilo returns to save people from danger again. This shows her love to serve people and her love for the power of the spices. Throughout the novel we come across many characters with different problems in their life and come to know how they managed to solve them with the help of Tilo who acts as the problem solver of people but also faces a problem in her life. So from this novel we can come to the conclusion that a clairvoyant woman too can face problems in life even if she has got the magical powers.

Mistress of Spices is cloaked in fantasy and the prologue, with its strong poetic overtones convinces us that this is literature of fantasy. However, a strong undercurrent of realism runs at the very beginning of the novel and becomes manifest later on. Divakaruni modifies ancient Indian legends and reinvents the myth of the bird of Shampati, whose name stems from the 'Ramayana', who, phoenix like, rises from the ashes. The legend of Shampati, as a dominant theme, holds the story together. However, as the novel progresses, the element of fantasy diminishes and the realistic element becomes prominent. In this novel readers see women facing all kinds of problems in their life. Though women are happy for a short period, they get into the circle of problems soon. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has presented her best to the readers.

Her characters especially women, are very sensitive and intuitive. She has also used many literary devices in her novels. In *Mistress of Spices* too there is a flashback told by Raven to Tilo. It tells about Raven's life and his aim to search for the

earthly paradise. This novel contains magical realism. Tilo uses her magical powers to solve the problem of her people. There is also irony in *Mistress of Spices*. Tilo loses her magical powers when she enters into a relationship with Raven. She did not expect that she will fall in love with him which will make her lose her powers. Due to her desires, her powers wane. The novel is open ended as she runs the spice shop again in America.

Shalini Gupta says about the author "She writes about positive things too, about strong family bonds and the courage of people who find themselves in a different world after immigration. In short we can say she portrays Indians in a balanced diet." Spices are not mere taste enhancers in this story by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni - nor are they medicines. They are real characters with emotions. Spices, here, possess powers that are real- they heal, soothe, enhance, possess, enliven, energize on the positive side and wreck vengeance, take offence, be mean, and strike on the negative side. It is remarkable how international, how global the spices are, in their respective characters - they are accepted by all irrespective of country, religion or sex.. They are citizens of the world. Spices are like pixies too - they play pranks. At one moment, they are so adorably compliant - Tilo weaves her spell and they oblige. The next moment, they frown on her wayward emotions and remind her of the sacrosanct rules she must remember as *Mistress of Spice*. When they are unhappy that Tilo is getting close to the American, they decide not to help her cure her other clients- which causes her embarrassment and some guilt as well. Elizabeth Softky says for Divakaruni, "Tilo is the quintessential immigrant - she must decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will leave behind".

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