

## **Magical realism with autobiographical touch in Divakaruni' s "The Mistress of Spices"**

**V.Devarajan**

Research Scholar  
&

**Dr.R.A.Rajasekaran**

Department Head, English  
Prist University  
Madurai campus  
Tamilnadu

### **Abstract**

*The Mistress of Spices* unravels the journey of Tilo from childhood to womanhood. The power possessed by Tilo over the spices and how she uses the power to heal others those who visits her shop and how she lands into trouble by trespassing the rules, for possessing the power of the spices, by giving vent to her passions for a man in the new land where she lives in now are also dealt with. The novel is a blend of magic and reality known as magic realism. In the Post-Colonial view, *The Mistress of Spices* deals with the sufferings and emotional conflicts in every woman in this society. The aspects of Post Colonialism in this novel are the problems faced by the women in foreign land and their inner conflicts in choosing their relationships.

**Key words** : mistress, sorceress, abandoned, alienation, feminine

The idea of penning *The Mistress of Spices* is different from other novels of Divakaruni. She was hospitalized to give birth to her second son. As she was leaving her house to hospital, she assured her first son "I'll be back in a few days," . She told hoping that she would have a normal delivery. However, she didn't know that she would have Caesarean and:

" I didn't know that I would balance precariously for weeks on the frail and perilous boundary between living and dying." she points out "That encounter with death affected me deeply..." ok

Hospitalization and the Caesarean that went wrong affected Divakaruni to the core. It brought out the philosopher in her and gave her insights into the life she lives in. Divakaruni expresses:

“But at times I would feel a strange, lightheaded sense of peace, of emptiness, in the way Buddhists use the term. I felt as though I floated between states of life and death, and that it didn't matter which side I landed on. Because the boundary we humans had drawn between these two states was not as important, nor as irrevocable, as we believed.”

It is at this stage where *The Mistress of Spices* was born. According to her:

“...it seemed to me, in some wordless way, that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about. But I didn't know how until Tilo, my heroine, *The Mistress of Spices*, came to me.”

Divakaruni was in no leisure to keep *The Mistress of Spices* away because she came so close to death and she couldn't even spare a day. She has commented on her novel, “I wrote the book urgently—almost breathlessly. Having been so close to death, I could no longer take even a single day for granted.” *The Mistress of Spices* is an autobiographical novel. It is unique in its own kind. Previous novels of Divakaruni deal with ideas familiar to her. She wrote within her boundaries. However, *The Mistress of Spices* crossed her boundaries and set forth her new areas that were not dealt early. In the words of Divakaruni:

“For me, Tilo became the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and finally the trial of earth-burial to emerge transformed, each time with a new name and a new identity. Reading passages aloud, as I often do when I am revising, I was surprised to find—how much I identified with her. But looking back I see that it is not so surprising after all. I too have taken on a new identity in a new land. And I too, in my quiet way, have visited that emptiness, at once vast and minute, that shimmers between life and death”

The novel is aptly titled as '*The Mistress of Spices*'. The chapters of the novel are given different names of the spices for which Tilo is the mistress. The chapters are entitled as Tilo, Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalo jire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makaradwaj, Lotus Root, Sesame and Maya. Moreover, Tilo in the beginning of the novel says, "I am a Mistress of Spices" (CBD TMOS 3) The priority given to explaining the medicinal values of each spice, belonging to the island where Tilo is trained, substantiate the word spices used in the title.

The novel revolves around the titular character Tilo. She is born in a small village. Her birth is unwelcomed because she is a girl. Her parents worry that they have to give her dowry if they marry her to someone. Her parents want to, "'Wrap her in old cloth; lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except a dowry debt? (CBD TMOS7).'" In the due course of the novel Tilo's name is changed to Bhagyavati. Before that she is called as Nayan Tara. she is taken away by the pirates. However, her calling for wanting the power back does not go unanswered. Her power comes back and she "I overthrew the chief to become queen of the pirates" (CBD TMOS19). Time passes by and she helps the pirates to achieve fame and glory. Bhagyavati expresses her inner thoughts "I Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, bringer of luck and death..." (CBD TMOS 20). She speaks of her like for snakes. She used to keep bowl of milk in the corner for snakes to drink. The snakes are invisible at their own will. She is no exception to it. Bhagyavati not knowing what she wants ends up in calling a great typhoon. It destroys the ship she is in and she is saved by the sea serpents. The serpents inform her about the island. She says "it was the sea serpents who told me about the island" (CBD TMOS 23). The serpents wish her to be with them and they would give new name to her. However, she chooses spices over the serpents.

She reaches the island and meet the women there who call themselves as mistresses of spices. There is a first mother who takes care of all and teaches them the art of mastering the spices. Bhagyavati joins them and chooses the name Tilotamma for her. She too masters this art. After the training is over, women are sent to different parts of the world to do service with the power they possess. Tilo is sent to Oakland, California. She establishes an Indian spice shop and

begins her duties of healing the customers who come to her by using the spices each of which possesses a particular power of its own. She has to help people only who come to her shop. She trespasses this rule and goes outside her shop and helps Raven. Eventually she falls in love with him. She makes love with him knowing that she will be punished by the spices and she accepts it wholeheartedly. So, she loses her power. Her shop is destroyed in the earthquake. However, the spices do not punish her. Spices give the reason for not punishing her “Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also” (CBD TMOS 305). The novel ends with Tilo living a happy life with Raven.

The capability of Mistress of Spices’ power over different metals and minerals is spoken about in the opening chapter. Though she can command many minerals and metals, her love lies in spices, ‘I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone...But the spices are my love (CBD TMOS 3)’. She knows the origin of the spices and what do the color and smell of them signify and they are under her complete command, ‘From amchur to zafran, they bow to my command. At whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers” (CBD TMOS 3). Moreover, Tilo reveals that even the spices used in everyday cooking in America has magical power. However, “the spices of true power are from my birth land” (CBD TMOS 3).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the modern world is filled with magical elements. Divakaruni associates magical elements with different names of Tilo. When she is a child, she is fed with milk of white ass. She speculates the reason for speaking early, “perhaps that is why the words came to me so soon” (CBD TMOS 8). Bhagyavati is called as Nayan Tara then which means star-seer. She used to predict different events that has happened in her village. For instance, she knows who steal Banku the water-carrier’s buffalo. She also helps the zamindar to find his lost ring. When Tilo changes her name to Bhagyavati she calls herself as sorceress. She travels with pirates and overthrows the existing head and she becomes the queen of pirates. It is while in sea she comes in contact with sea serpents who save Bagyavati’s life. The presence of sea serpents is also a magical element present in the novel. Bagyavati finally comes to be known as Tilo. The

power possessed by Tilo over spices, which she uses to cure who are in need, is the pinnacle of magical elements present in this novel.

Divakaruni portrays multiple levels of identity crisis in her titular character Tilo. The element of identity crisis arises in *The Mistress of Spices* not only from placing Tilo as an immigrant but also in the identity given to Tilo herself by addressing her with different names as Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati and Tilo. Various names given to Tilo shows the identity crisis she experiences in the course of the novel. She is called as Nayan Tara in the beginning and then as Bhayavati and she is pleaded by sea serpents that they would give her new name and take her to their place. The serpents cried, “come with us instead. We will give you a new name, a new being. You will be Sarpa Kanya, snake maiden” (CBD TMOS 24). Finally, Bhagyavati changes her name to Tilo and undergoes training in handling spices. This loss of identity at every stage of her life leads to identity crisis in her. Adding to the identity crisis, she leaves her native village and goes to sea and then to the island and finally leaves the island to go to America. It is the loss of double identity in her. First is her name and second is the place she belongs to. Mary Brooks observes in this context, ‘The identities of the postcolonial characters are mired in the struggle to form an emotional, cultural, and societal identity that reflects the experiences of a distant past they cannot recall.’ Tilo abandoned by her parents becomes a distant past. Later, being a queen of pirates becomes her distant past. These are completely forgotten once Bhagyavati becomes The Mistress of Spices and falls in love with Raven. Tilo struggles to come in terms with emotion, culture and society. Rejection of Tilo when she is a child is an emotional crisis in her. Acquiring different culture of pirates and then of the island brings in her cultural crisis. According to the rule to be *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo cannot socialize. She has to help the people only who comes to her. This depicts her struggle in coming to social terms.

The concept of divine feminine is also used by Divakaruni through Tilo. According to Kingsbury, “the Divine Feminine is an energy that has been with us since ancient times.” Tilo is presented as healer in this novel. She could do it only by connecting her ordinary self with the highest form of consciousness related to healing and intuition. She cures many people who come to her shop. For instance, she relieves the warrior-chef Kwesi off his suffering. She also heals a

woman named Myisha, a taxi-driver named Haroun , Rehman, Jagjit and his mother and a man named Doug and also his girlfriend. She prepares mixture of some special spices to improve their lives. Divakaruni reveals the feminine spirituality of Tlio through these characters.

Tilo remains a wanderer throughout the novel. She is born in a village and is discarded from her home by her parents. The pirates come to her village and set fire and take away Nayan Tara. In the words of Nayan Tara “They carried me through the burning village...” (CBD TMOS 19). Nayan Tara describes this as, “Their pain stung like live coals in my chest as the pirates flung me onto the deck of their ship, as we took sail, as the flaming line of my homeland disappeared over the horizon” (CBD TMOS 19). Nayan Tara becomes Bhagyavati and overthrows the pirate chief to become the pirate queen. Ship becomes her home now. This does not last long. A great typhoon comes one night and destroys the ship. Bhagyavati is saved by the sea serpents. When serpents want to keep her with them to make it as home to her, she declines. She goes to the island only to be there for a short time. The island does not serve as her permanent home. She leaves the island to America after mastering the art of controlling spices. She lives as an immigrant in America.

Divakaruni works the theme of alienation in multiple ways. Firstly, Nayan Tara’s parents alienates her. Secondly, she alienates her village. Even though she is abducted by pirates, she recovers from it and becomes the queen of pirates. She could have got back to her village. But she does not do it. This shows Bhagyavati alienating her village and looking for something beyond her native place. Tilo, when she is Bhagyavati also alienates herself from the serpents who pleaded her to live with them. The power possessed by Tilo also alienates her from the rest of the people. She could not live a normal life like others because she is bound by certain rules. If she trespasses the rules, she would lose her power and would be alienated by the spices.

Divakaruni being herself a diasporan, it runs in her blood to create a diasporic character. Tilo is the outcome of it. Moreover, Divakaruni lives in Houston now. It is evident from Divakaruni’s words, “...I dipped into the language and imagery of my childhood, the tales I

grew up on, and alternated them with slang from Oakland's inner-city streets...". Therefore, it is easy for her to write on people's plight who live in America like her. The account of the plight of the people is given to Tilo who is in the position to cure the people with the power of the spices. Tilo herself is a diasporan. She belongs to a village at first and then to sea and then to an island and eventually lives in America. However, she is never able to call the immigrant country as her own.

Existentialism is the look for and expedition for true self and factual personal meaning in our life. This is very much applicable to the titular character Tilo who undergoes a search and journey to find the true self through various identities without realizing it in the beginning. As mentioned earlier, she is born in a village, abducted by pirates, landed in island and immigrated to America. Kierkegaard maintained that:

“the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom”.

This is applicable to Tilo. As an individual, she decides her life on her own. She undergoes obstacles since her birth. In fact, her birth itself an obstacle to her. Her parents rejected her.

The purpose for Tilo's existence changes according to the environment she lives in. finally it ends in love. Predicting the future and solving the problems of the village people become her purpose when she is in the village. In the words of Nayan Tara “I sensed where under the earth gold lay buried, and why the weaver's daughter has stopped talking since last full moon” (CBD TMOS 8). The purpose shifts to being a queen of pirates and leading pirates to fame and glory. In the words of Bhagyavati, “I lived as queen, leading my pirates to fame and glory, so that bards sang their fearless exploits” (CBD TMOS 19). The ephemeral purpose of Tilo's life culminates in eternal purpose of life, love. In the words of Tilo, ““come on', I say to Raven, and hand in hand we walk toward the car” (CBD TMOS 317).

### **Works cited**

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, C.B(2005). The Mistress of Spices. London: Black swan Book,Print Softly,E(n.d).

[https://www.uni-saarland.de/.../user.../Divakaruni\\_Dissolving\\_Boundaries.pdf](https://www.uni-saarland.de/.../user.../Divakaruni_Dissolving_Boundaries.pdf)

<http://coursesite.uhcl.edu/HSH/Whitec/LITR/5731copo/models/2005/finals/f05brooks.htm>

<https://www.bustle.com/p/what-does-the-divine-feminine-mean-its-so-much-more-than-a-new-age-buzzword-2966641>

<https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Existentialism>

<https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existentialism.htm>