

Magical Role of Spices in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

P. Helan Jona

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English Cauvery College for Women (Autonomous),
Trichy-18, Tamilnadu**

Dr. Cheryl Davis

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous),
Trichy – 2, Tamilnadu.**

Abstract: Spices are treated as characters by the Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni has dealt metaphysically to the Indian Spices to touch the knowledge beyond science. She has also depicted myths, magi and history related to spices. The spices have their tangible, perceptible and manifesting relationship with Tilo, the protagonist. It also explores the importance of spices in socio-cultural perspectives of the novel and psychological perspective in Tilo's life.

Keywords: Indian Spices, Mistress, First mother, Customer.

Divakaruni has narrated the story in the first person. Tilo herself describes her character and her life. She has the cosmic energy and divine strength to acquire authority over spices. She has shown the spices talking with their mistress verbally or nonverbally. Their reactions express the form of sound gestures reflecting negative vibes in turmoil, but in the positive streak, they become auspicious. In *The Mistress of Spices* the Spices talk, sing, rebuke, love, warn and get annoyed with their mistress Tilo. The Spices always act in Tilo's personal choices like foreign bodies. The spices do not let her go beyond the boundaries of a mistress. Tilo starts feeling helpless and caged within the shell of spices.

The present life of Tilo is related to her service as a mistress in a space store in the curved corner of Esperanza where Oakland buses stop. The store becomes a protective shell to her. Tilo is a woman of wisdom and passion. Tilo touches the lives of many people who come to her shop and for whom she has given remedy for their suffering and sorrows with her chanted spices.

Tilo was born in a village. She was named Nayan Tara, star of the Eye. Shortly after birth, it becomes apparent that the girl child is unique. She can see into the distant future with uncanny clarity. People from every walk of life praised her, and the pirates came to know of her. She is known to the pirate owing to the impending doom and named her *Bhagyavati*, bringer of Luck. One day, death came to her with the tossing of the ship over the ocean, but her life was not in danger owing to the snakes.

She reaches a magical island of spices where women call themselves the "mistresses of Spices". First Mother was taking care of all and teaches them too. They learnt the art of listening and controlling the spices, and then they sent forth into the greater world to aid humanity. The First Mother used to say that the hands are essential to call power out of the spices. They call it, Hater gun. The Old One used to judge the hands of the girls. To her, the right side is not too light, nor too heavy. They are the wind's creatures.

On the other hand, heavy hands have no spirit as they are pulled downward by their weight. "The Mistress of Spices" should feel other's pain as snake's belly which is not cold or dry. She should leave her passions behind. In the centre of the excellent hand is imprinted an invisible lily, a flower of fresh virtue, glowing pearl at midnight. Tilo's side failed to have all these things, but she became "The Mistress of Spices". After the purification ceremony, the First Mother tells the girls, "Daughters it is time for me to give you your new names. For when you came to this island, you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since" (MS 40).

While Tilo was about to leave the Island of Spices to America First Mother, from the folds of her clothing placed a slice of ginger root to give her heart steadfastness and to keep her secure in her vows. The taste of ginger root is the last taste of Island and the first taste of America. At the beginning of the novel, Tilo says,

I am a Mistress of Spices... I know their origins and what their colours signify their smells... Their heat runs in my blood. From *amchur* to *Zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper, they yield up to me their hidden properties, the magic powers (MS 3).

Tilo, knows the spices origin, their colours and their smells. She can call them by their names and feels that the old secrets of the spices had forgotten now, but it was known to mothers. The spices of actual power are from her birth land, land of ardent poetry, India. Each chapter of this novel is after a spice which reveals their strengths and their origins and thus making the novel very interesting to the reader to continue without postponing. In the chapters she deals with different problems faced by her costumers and even found a solution for them, healing them with the help of spices.

Tilo takes exceptional care of each customer by learning their heart's desire, the greatest fears, challenges and dreams of America. She chooses the perfect spice to complement their needs and aid them in all facets of their lives. She has shown the spices talking with their mistress verbally or nonverbally. Their reactions are in the form of sound gestures reflecting negative vibes in turmoil, but in positive streak they become auspicious. We learn to love and root for these mortals, suffer their pain, elate in their joy.

As a Mistress of Spices, Tilo is bound to an ancient set of rules and consequences loom if she is to step out of the bounds of her shop and duties. Her mission is to guide her customers through the wisdom of the spices. The power of the spices is only hers to wield as long as she follows their will. But as Tilo learns to love and care for her customers, she finds maintaining a boundary and accepting the spices intention is harder and harder to do. Her commitment to her customers and the spices let her always remember that "I will chant. I will administer. I will pray to remove sadness and suffering as the old one taught. I will deliver warning" (MS 7).

Indian Spices on account of heir myth and history become the tool to extend the narrative plot in a dramatic or in a significant way. Each spice showcases a particular mythical impression in curing disease or in their use during festivities. Based on mythology each spice has its special day. For turmeric it is Sunday.

First, it starts with the hopeful spices Turmeric. It is also named as halud, meaning yellow, the colour of daybreak, couch shell sound. Turmeric is the preserver, keeping foods safe in a land of heat and hunger.

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 afterwards, your skin will give off a pale golden glow....Turmeric, the auspicious spice, placed on the heads of newborn for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at *pujas*, rubbed into the borders of wedding saris. (MS 13)

Turmeric is pious and divine. Tilo wraps a handful of turmeric in a piece of newspaper and enchants some words into it to heal people with physical and mental pain.

In the chapter Ginger, she mourns,

...when I woke in this land the store was already around me, its hard, protective shell. The spices too surrounded me, a shell of smell and voices. And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me. Shell within shell, and in most of all my heart beating as a bird. (MS 125)

To ease Jagjit's troubles, the spice-Mistress administers

Cardamom which I will scatter tonight on the wind ...to open your teacher's unseeing... Cinnamon friend-maker, cinnamon *dalchini* warm-brown as skin, to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it's not so bad. (39-40)

When she holds the turmeric, the spices speak to her. "I am turmeric who roses out of the ocean of milk when the Devas and Asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am

turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lies in between" (MS 14). Tilo believes that turmeric, the shield for sorrows and gives hope for rebirth. She gives turmeric to Ahuja's wife Lalitha because Tilo quietly observes her feeling and loneliness. Turmeric may ease Lalitha's loneliness. But it will only tie her closer to her husband and the home, even more, significant constraints on a life of singular speechlessness. Later when she does not want to lie with her husband, Tilo asks her to take the spice Fennel, which is the spice for Wednesday to get mental strength.

Fenugreek is Tuesday's spice. In Ayurveda fenugreek is medicine used to take care of asthma, hormonal disorder and to maintain a healthy metabolism. It is shown by Shabari, the oldest woman in the world. Tilo described fenugreek's taste as: "Put in water, and it will bloom free. Bite the swollen kernels between teeth and taste its bittersweetness. Taste of water weeds in a wild place, the cry of grey geese" (MS 47). She asked fenugreek's favour to help Ratna.

When Tilo tries to break the rules, the spices punish her by giving sufferings to her customers which she cannot bear on any condition. The spices warn Tilo through their annoyed and non-verbal gestures, "For a moment I hold their glances and the air around us gross still and heavy. A few Chillies drop to the floor, scattering like hard green rain" (MS 6).

She was in disguise, forgetting the original appearance she used the spice ginger. It is for digestion problem in Ayurvedic and one of the essential spices in Indian curries. Tilo sliced the ginger and boiled it for her. But now she breaks the rule of the mistress. She would not use the spices for her benefit; she thought it's all for Geetha's welfare. She ate the ginger slices; the gingers give her youthful appearance. She went to meet Geetha to give the mango pickle mixed with some magical spices. Tilo has some doubts because she breaks the island rule, so the spices are angry on her.

Raven who comes into Tilo's shop as a customer to get a spice of his life. Tilo doesn't find a spice for him because her mind was disturbed with his thoughts. She searches the spice for lonely American. Finally, she finds Asafoetida, a remedy to love. Tilo describes the things in her shops,

See, bunches of podina leaves green as the forests of our childhood. Hold them up and smell how fresh and pungent, isn't this cause enough for gladness. Tear open a packet of chilli-cashew. That hot taste, that crumple and crunch against your cheeks, the delicious tears that rise to your eyes. Here's kumkum powder red as the heart of a hibiscus flower to put on our foreheads for married luck. (MS 79).

Raven also feels attraction towards Tilo's antique Indian beauty. She falls in love with him. The Spices restrict her to indulge in any sexual intimacy with Raven. The spices stop reciprocating with Tilo and show their anger.

Tilo asks for a single day of her life from the Spices in which she can live for her wish and can do whatever she wants. Tilo promises to Spices to sacrifice her life as punishment after that day. Tilo finds herself irresistible in reciprocating to Raven's love, and she says-"For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the Old One, not the awe I felt for the spices...the anger of spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose the love" (MS 219). She asks makaradwaj to make her beautiful, "Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine" (MS 261). But Makaradwaj remains silent because Tilo humiliating the island customs. The spice laughs and warns her as "*Do you desire it more than you desired us on the island, that day when you would have thrown yourself off the granite cliffs had the First Mother said no*" (261). At this flouting of their rules, the spices themselves rise against her, demanding that she chooses between love and power. At last, she thinks about all the people and makes arrangement to arouse Shampati fire.

After that, the spices leave Tilo and also her magical power. So she lies down in the centre of the store of which she is no mistress. She feels unconscious before Raven knocks the door, and when her power goes away from her body, her body changes into a normal woman. Raven still loves her and calls her Maya. She thinks about the spices, which does not punish her. She hears an answer floating in her ear,

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 body also. (MS 305).

Finally, she consoles the spices and first mother, she got a new life and named herself as Maya. Each spice has the medicinal quality, but people think spices are only for cooking. Divakaruni explores that spices have their therapeutic qualities in curing physical and mental problems. The ancient people have created myths and magical elements on each spice to convey their crucial medicinal quality of them.

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