

The Innermost Urge of Woman for Self-discovery in ‘The Mistress of Spices’ by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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“Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind”
Dr. Seuss

Abstract

Self-identity is important for each and every individual. Everybody has a unique identity; for example, every person has impressions and identity from their childhood. One of the most burning issues in Indian women writings, nowadays, is identity of woman. Religion and society work to give women a forced identity. The current study makes an effort to concentrate on women's ultimate need for self-discovery. Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*, is centred about Tilo, the main character, and his relentless search for his identity.

Keywords: Identity, self-discovery, acculturation, transformation

Introduction

The identity of immigrants is the biggest topic of diaspora writers. Humans cannot exist in society without an identity of itself because identity is nothing but self-reorganization. Numerous authors have explored the topics of immigration, identity, and the pursuit of freedom as central topics in their writings. Among them is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her writing style is diasporic. The main concern of her writings is South Asian women's identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, like those of Rohinton Mistry, Bharti Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri, deal with identity, migration, and diaspora. She established "MAITRI," an organization, to assist South Asian women immigrants in America in adjusting to and surviving in the new alien culture. She wrote novels, short stories, and poems. During an interview with Erica Bauer, she says:

I really like using different forms of writing – each form has its own strength. To me poetry focuses on the moment and in images, it feels like an intuitive form of writing. Recently I’ve been writing more fiction because I’m interested in exploring relationships and showing the differences that develop into characters.

Identity describes a person's identity besides their characteristics, skills, and abilities, regardless of their gender. However, this isn't the same for women. Rather than being given the chance to identify herself, she is identified by someone else's identity.

The protagonist of the book "*The Mistress of Spices*" goes through several name changes: Nayan Tara, Bhagyavathi, Tilottama, and finally Maya, which is the most fitting name because it denotes magic or enchantment. She has gone through several identity changes before coming to a final definition of who she is. In the novel, there is an imbalance between the past and the present. The narrative opens with a fantastical account of Tilo's early years and the circumstances leading up to her immigration to America. The narrator of the story, Tilottama, is a woman who was educated in the art of spices and was born in a different era. She has to pay a price for this knowledge and initiation. Tilo is characterized as a young woman stuck in an elderly woman's body. Tilo is said to be freed only by love, but even then, she must consider the value of continuing on the traditional path. In other words, she is caught between duty and passion.

Dubbed as one of the best novels of the 20th century by the San Francisco Chronicle. Tilo, the protagonist, supplies spices not just for cooking but also for the alienation and home sickness that the Indian immigrants who visit her shop suffer. According to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Multiple consciousness is an identity that exists between these opposing states. Tilo's identity is formed on the process of self-perception. Tilo experiences several thoughts as she works to establish her identity as a South Asian and simultaneously as an American. These ideas are evident in her experiences, in the way she deals with her racial and sexual identities. In America, Tilo self-perception is limited to what those around her see of her, making it an unimportant and almost irrelevant perspective. Seeing herself through the perspective of the people around her causes Tilo to create a variety of notions about who she is, many of which are often conflicting. Divakaruni writes with an objective of bringing people together. Her mission is to eliminate misconceptions and myths. She wants to break down barriers between people of diverse ages, ethnicities, and communication styles through her writing.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to the mysterious figure of a lady who is both the keeper and bearer of her traditions and a disguised enchantress with magical abilities. Tilo is a symbol for how a woman's identity may change and evolve over time. Tilottama is a distinct character with a unique and tenacious personality. She gains strength after strength until she is able to be called *The Mistress of Spices* in Oakland, California. Her life journey is the journey that a woman takes not only from childhood to adulthood but also beyond the world of magic and beyond national boundaries and cultural norms. She represents a woman's endless struggle to get her own identity, which focuses on each event of her life and changes with it.

As a metaphor for a woman's life and identity, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has skilfully contrasted the realm of spices with that of a woman, representing the ever evolving, changing world of spices that, when employed, always produces something new. In response to her shifting circumstances, a woman also adapts, changes, and evolves, particularly when she has to assume the identity of an immigrant. The constant process of self-identification that typifies the fluid nature of a woman's identity is what leads to Tilo's quest and ultimate self-realization.

Tilo was endowed with the ability to sense the higher powers that existed in spices and use them to treat the illnesses of people around her. Born into a small village in India, Nayan Tara was a girl gifted with extraordinary powers. When Tilo was a little girl, pirates broke into her house, killed her whole family, and kidnapped Tilo, taking her prisoner on board their ship. In the end,

Tilo ousts the pirate captain and ascends to the position of pirate queen, achieving fame and glory for the pirates. But when mysterious sea serpents inform Tilo, that there is an island where she and many other women like her can develop their extraordinary abilities and use those powers for a better cause. Tilo gives up the position of pirate queen. Even though Tilo has already begun her diasporic voyage, she experiences a feeling of discovery rather than the loss of her home. She travels to the island of the Mistress onboard a ship. That island refers to the "Kalapani" or "dark water," which is used as a synonym to the migration of immigrants and enslaved labourers from the Indian motherland to other countries, giving rise to "diaspora." According to Divakaruni, Tilo is deeply connected with the diaspora, and the perception of "homeland" is shifted, evolving into a transient state that is based on travel along numerous locations rather than one location.

For these women, who refer to themselves as the "Mistress of spices," this remote island is like a paradise. An old and intellectual lady, called The First Mother is the in charge of the island. After receiving training in the arts of understanding and utilizing spices, these women are sent away in different places of the world to serve and cure the humanity. Upon completing her education, Tilo decided to go to Oakland, California, where she starts her duty of healing the sufferers. She is forced to adjust to the difficulties of a new culture and the turbulence of American life. The first mother gifted Tilo with a knife, before sending her to Oakland, and Tilo believes the knife is for ".....to cut my moorings from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea" (53).

Tilo stepped into a giant fire, called the "Shampati's fire", which in no time send her to America. Fire's symbolic meaning is evident in its nature, which reduces everything in its vicinity to ashes, which is then dispersed across the world. Divakaruni portrays identity as inconsistent and displays fire as an allegory for the re-construction of the identity. The word "Shampati" actually refers to " the bird of myth and memory who dived into conflagration and rose new from ash." Tilo's voyage to America can be seen as a literal reconstruction of herself, a sort of rebirth.

Tilo is devoid of her youth and viewed as the mistress of the spices in Oakland, but her true "self" is not destroyed—rather, it is repressed, as evident in her frequent outbursts of anger. "This disguise falling like old snake skin around her feet, and I rising red and new and wet-gleaming" (49). Tilo is a solitary woman, not a Devi; her wild nature is subdued in her withered appearance like the ".....female deities [who] were either sidelined or demonized" (Mohanty120). As human society gradually become more patriarchal. She has a healing and sympathetic nature, but she is not allowed to be personally engaged in the pain of others. As a mistress of spices, Tilo discovers the pain and hardships faced by the immigrants in America, who struggle at every point to establish their identity in alien country. Some of the characters in the book; Haroun, Geeta and her grandfather, Jaggi, and Lalita, are all immigrants. They ask Tilo for assistance in resolving their psychological, emotional, and physical issues.

All the immigrant identities surrounding her are reflected in her own immigrant identity. They all have traditionally bounded their desires to get mixed into the new culture. Haroun and Jaggi faced the typical immigrant issues of alienation, racism, and adopting. In contrast, the women balance their newfound identity within the American culture with their twin obligations as preservers and carriers of culture. Geeta, being the only child of her parents, is their pride and source of affection, but the moment she expresses her individuality, her family broken down and

she was forced to get away from home. Her decision to choose a white man who is not a part of her culture or society as a companion severed her connection with her family. In the story, Lalita is also an immigrant woman whose condition is noticeable. She has no identity of herself. She is known in the society as the wife of Mr. Ahuja, a man older than her. She finally manages to escape the agony of marital rape and violence, thanks to Tilo and her spices, whose healing powers helped her a lot. This tormented woman receives her strength and meaningfulness from Tilo. Besides the magic of spices, Lalita's compassion and understanding helped her in getting back her identity.

Tilo perceives Americans as unkind and lacking in relationships with others, as she himself has faced the difficulties as an immigrant. That's why, she wants to help more and more Indian immigrants living there. As an immigrant, it is very challenging to survive in an alien land. She advises them, how to discover the purpose of life. Tilo helps Geeta, an immigrant girl from India, and her traditionally strict grandfather reconcile their divergent views on marriage. Geeta's grandfather wants to get her married to an Indian boy, and he doesn't like that she should work with boys and hangs out with them late at night. He shares with Tilo his thoughts, that:

“Arre baap, so what if this is America, we are still Bengalis, no? And girls and boys are still girls and boys, ghee and a lighted match, put them together and sooner or later there's going to be fire” (85)

He is in favour of arranged marriages. But Geeta has distinct thoughts about the life. She is strongly pro-American and is opposed to arranged marriages. As she says: “Arranged marriages aren't for me either. When I marry, I'll choose my own husband” (88).

Divakaruni through the story of the immigrant girl Geeta explored the potential solutions to the widely recognized problem of cultural differences between first and second-generation Indian immigrants settled in America. As J.W. Berry (1992), in his acculturation model classified immigrants into four categories Assimilation, Separation, Integration & Marginalization.

While Tilo falls into the Integration category, Geeta and her grandfather are in the assimilation and separation category respectively. Tilo thought that the helping hand she extends to her clients is her greatest responsibility, and for this she does not hesitate to break rules imposed on her. In an attempt to ease her clients' suffering, she has taken to touching their faces and hands and wiping away their tears. Tilo commits to: “I Tilo initiated this joining of skin and blood and bones” (99). Tilo believes she has enchanted spices with her occult skills to aid in diagnosing her customers, but spices always reminded her that she needs to be disciplined as she is a mistress of spices. Tilo states: “I hear the spices crying to me, a sound like hot hands pressed over the ears. Pull away pull away Tilo, before you're welded down” (99). Tilo always finds herself in a conflicting situation. Despite possessing magical abilities, Tilo still feels bounded and powerless. She yearns for her independence to explore her identity.

One day, a lonely attractive American-Raven stops by her spice shop to get some spice for himself. Raven gets attracted towards her enigmatic Indian beauty and engages in romantic conversation with her. When Tilo failed to locate the spice, he helped her in doing so. Seeing Raven attracted to her, Tilo becomes passionate towards him, as no one has given importance to her feelings as Raven did. Tilo also gets fascinated by Raven and is not in a condition to sense her emotions. Spices are aware of Tilo's passion for Raven, but for her, being a mistress of

spices, it is prohibited to get attracted towards anyone other than spices. She is magically drawn to Raven's appeal and started losing control over spices. The circumstances and her mystique prevent her from making the proper diagnosis to Raven. However, Raven has found the perfect spice for himself in the form of Tilo.

Divakaruni has perfectly described the different spices as characters, who are guardian of patriarchal society. Spices are shown as biased against gender and sexuality. Divakaruni has depicted Tilo's situation, wherein she has to choose between Raven and her magical skills in order to discover true purpose of her life. Every immigrant has to face this conflict, when they are given a choice between their Indian customs and American modernism. The cultural tension that every immigrant Indian lady in America faces is symbolized by Tilo's situation.

The spices restrain Tilo from breaking the rules imposed on her as she is a mistress of spices. The host culture's traditions and customs require her to assimilate, acculturate, and redeem herself from her past life and the customs of her native place, yet the spices prevent her from doing so. Tilo aspires to a fulfilling life of her own, free to fulfil her own desires and happiness. In addition to illustrating the weakness of womanhood, Divakaruni makes evident the obstacles a woman must overcome to seize possibilities in a foreign country and confront patriarchal norms.

Tilo begins contemplating her future and her life with Raven. She narrates: "I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know" (69) When Tilo realizes that she has not found the real significance of her life, her discontentment rises up once more. Tilo, being a strong lady can achieve anything she wants in life, without any sacrifice. Tilo has been portrayed as a modern woman who is constantly dissatisfied with her life but has the strength to achieve her goals. Divakaruni, through Tilo, encourages women to take control of their lives, accomplish their goals, and find fulfilment in their work. Tilo aspires to lead a meaningful life. She is not interested in fulfilling her duties merely for its own sake. She wants to use her magical skills to help people and attain some success in life. Tilo has never considered using any immoral means to get what she wants. She never thinks to deceive the spices; instead, she consistently asking them to cure her clients. She loves her spices as well, and she wouldn't want to be separated from them or her customers. She desires to assist Raven and all of her clients.

By listening to her own desires instead of those of the spices, Tilo shows an example for woman. Despite receiving warnings from the spices and the first mother, Tilo continues to be brave, serves her clients, and cares for Raven. Tilo promises her allegiance to the spices, and the first mother. Tilo gives assurance to the spices: "Spices trust me to give me a chance. In spite of America, in spite of love, your Tilo will not let you down" (143). Tilo asks the spices so that she might use them for herself, although mistresses are not allowed for this. She swears to the spices that, after spending just one day and night with Raven, she will return to them and dedicate her whole life in their service. As she says: "To him, I will give one night, to you rest of the life (262). Tilo gets her power back for one final day, and she gets ready for her meeting with Raven. She transforms into a youthful, attractive woman for a day by using all the spices for herself. After regaining her beauty and independence, she expresses her happiness by saying:

"For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the odd one, not the awe I felt for the spices..... And I see that the risk lies

not in what I always feared, the anger of spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose the love” (219)

Tilo's commitment towards spices has impressed them, therefore they have forgiven him. The spices see that she has truly come back to them in order to keep her word and give up her life for them. Tilo is told by the spices that:

“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” (305).

The spices returned Tilo with her magical powers so that she can make use of these powers for herself, as she has shown her faithfulness to them. Tilo's courage and devotion allowed her to get what she desires. If Tilo wants, she can betray the spices and lead a happy life with Raven, but she has chosen the right path and got whatever she desired. Tilo also has an option to leave Raven and live happily with her magical skills, but she chooses not to do so. She has neither sacrificed her life for selfless love nor did she become disloyal to the spices. In this way, Tilo achieves her family and professional life, thanks to her feminine strength and integrity. For women of the current generation, the struggle between their professional and personal lives is a big problem. Author Divakaruni has demonstrated how to strike a balance between the two via her bravery, sincerity, and hardship.

Conclusion

In this process of transformation, Tilo establishes her identity as the way she wants. She rises her inner-strength and gets the purpose of her life with the help of Raven. Raven gives her a new name 'Maya'. The novel shows transformation of Nayan Tara to Bhagyavathi to Tilo to Maya, or from being an Indian to becoming an Indian-American, or transformation from a life without meaning to one filled with purpose, Tilo's life journey exhibits the process of her liberation.

According to Divakaruni, women who follow the paths of values like bravery, honesty, and faithfulness to their roots in life, succeeds in all spheres of their life. *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates how the female characters of Divakaruni's novels don't accept defeat; instead, they put in efforts to achieve success in life by realizing the real meaning of life. Regarding the protagonists in Divakaruni's book, Mishra says the following: “Divakaruni's women characters present the innermost urge of women for self-identity.” (Mishra25) Tilo regains complete independence and her identity as *The Mistress of Spices*.

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