



## **Quest For Identity And Self Revelation In Chitra Banerjee's The Mistress Of Spices**

**R.Geetha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. S.Sobana<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of English Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli-620017

<sup>2</sup>Head & Associate Professor of English, Dean of Arts Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli-620017

### **APA Citation:**

Geetha, R., Sobana, S., (2021). . Quest For Identity And Self Revelation In Chitra Banerjee's The Mistress Of Spices , *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2242-2246; 2021.

Submission Date: 30/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 30/12/2021

---

### **Introduction**

Writer and poet, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has won numerous honours for her work. She is an author from India, although she now lives in the United States. She makes up her mind to be adamant that women are oppressed in India and the United States. Therefore, her writings cover a wide range of topics, particularly emphasising the challenges faced by South Asian women immigrants. Divakaruni frequently incorporates elements of her own life and experiences into her fiction. Stories about women's lives as immigrants in India during the 1970s and 1980s predominatethe literary firmameter. The Mistress of Spices is one-of-a-kind since it combines prose and poetry in its writing style. This jubilant first novel by the award-winning writer Divakaruni creates an enchanting story on the schism in American identity between the individual and the collective, as noted by Laura Merlin in a review for World Literature Today. She specifically discusses the plight of immigrants, asking how they manage the "shifting stress of desire" inherent in trying to satisfy everyone's requirements (207). To tell her stories, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni creates a novel method. She chooses a magical realist storyline, which seeks to exploit the seeming contradiction inherent in the bringing together of seemingly disparate elements. Spice Queen, the Queen of Seasonings in her debut novel, Divakaruni blends magical realism with the emerging genre of culinary fiction and the still-simmering alchemy of Indian immigrant life in the United States. Women and the environment are often inextricably linked in cultural ecofeminism's view. It explores how women have a closer connection to the natural world under their biological make-up and social conditioning. As a result, cultural ecofeminism holds that participation in these groups makes women more aware of environmental issues, both sacred and desecrated.

Tilo, the titular character and the shopkeeper possesses both knowledge and fervour, which makes her an exceptional female character. Her enthusiasm and curiosity for the exotic

spices she sells are enthralling and instructive. Tilo can do this because she has been taught on the island to heed the advice the spices provide her in the form of daily whispers. Tilo sells Indian immigrants spices to help them cope with feelings of homesickness and isolation. Tilo's humble beginnings can be traced back to a rural community. She was born to a fortune teller and a midwife both of whom wept over their newborn daughter's face and shook their heads mournfully at her father. What does she have to say about that?: My parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl-child and this one coloured like mud... wrap her in an old cloth, lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except for a dowry debt? (7).

Nayan Tara, or Eye Star, was her name. Nayan Tara's literal translation as "star-seer" suggests that she has always been a prophetic visionary. She foretold the oncoming floods to the village headman. She knew who took Banku the water-carriers' buffalo, which servant was having an affair with her master, where the gold was buried in the dirt, why the weaver's daughter stopped talking, and where the zamindar's stolen ring could be found. Her fame quickly reached the neighbouring communities and beyond. People began showering her with gifts, and she soon found herself living a lavish lifestyle. She predicted the tyrant's demise, predicted the health of the potentate's daughter and drew patterns in the dirt to ensure favourable winds for commerce ships. Although they expressed their displeasure, her parents enjoyed a high standard of living. She had no idea that this name, whose alternate meaning is "Flower that grows by the dust road," would be hers for a brief period. Her fame quickly spread, and she received accolades from all walks of life, including the pirates.

In Tilo's shop, we see Ahuja's wife. She looks even younger than she is and is a young woman. She is pretty talented with a needle and thread, which is difficult to find. Because of her husband's authority, she had been denied the time and space to sew. Like everyone else, she experienced pangs of maternal longing. After some thought, Tilo decided to gift her a package of old newspaper wrapped in turmeric and accompanied by healing words. I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between (13). Turmeric also told about its secret power of healing to her mistress. Tilo explained the quality of turmeric: Turmeric shield for heart's sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth (14).

In her work, Divakaruni gives spices the same attention and dialogue as the human protagonist, Tilo. They provoke and respond, compelling Tilo to employ and restrain his mystical abilities. Tilo and other mistresses women like her are stationed all around the world in spice shops. One of the terrible pranks perpetrated on the mistresses is that no matter how old they are, they are always confined to the body of a middle-aged or elderly lady. This is the spice servants' way of protecting their mistresses from sensual temptations. Tilo utilises spices to aid those in trouble, but when she starts manipulating them and going against what they recommend, the spices quickly turn their power against her. Her love for Raven drains her of the magical powers bestowed upon her by the spices and plants. In time, the symphony of spices will fade away.

Tilo has extensive knowledge of spices' history, colour, and aroma. She recognises their names and laments that mothers no longer have access to knowledge formerly common on the spices. Her native India, a nation of passionate poetry, produces the spices of great power. Tilo treats the clients who come into her business with herbs and spices throughout the narrative,

including the unhappy teen boy who is there to get spices for his mother and the young woman whose father prohibits her from marrying outside her kingdom.

Tilo used to give the snakes milk in earthen bowls every day before the stores opened to the public. She owes her survival to the sea snakes. Her mind starts to wander to a time when she was the pirate queen. She looted every ship she could find when she went on a pirate raid. She wanted to give in to her death wish. It was like a new mission statement to her. She started to sob to Bhagayavati, the goddess of death. The ship sank into the seas, bringing death, but the snakes saved her. When she was in danger on Bhagyavati, the serpents used their love to rescue her; when they told her about the island, they saved her life.

The elderly one was the most influential person on the island. The island was famous for its spices. The snakes warned her against making the trip to the island right away. A new moniker, Surpa- Kanya, Snake maiden, was proposed. Because she was leading the spice glow under her skin, a symbol of destiny, the elder of the Snakes let her go for the island. Not only did he show her the path, but she never encountered another snake after that. The wise one also cautioned her against giving her heart to anyone, just as Brahma had worked with Tilotamma, the court dancer of Indra, to ensure she never gave her heart to a man but only to the dance. Tilo had to take whatever life dealt her in the same way that Tilotamma did in Indra's court. The seasoned one then branded her with a name over her forehead. She finally had a proper name. She was bereft of any poor mortal to love her. Remember this too; the elderly one cautions her; Tilotamma fell because he was disobedient in the end. She was, moreover, sentenced to seven lifetimes as a human being on Earth. Infectious disease and explosive anger claimed seven human lives. Off people were averting their eyes from her leprous, twisted limbs (43). Tilo has locked the store's entrance. Then she reflects on the mundane existence she no longer leads because of the spices. Last Friday, as she was ready to lock the door, a young man walked in. His presence tempts her. Something is causing a fire to build up inside her. She is well aware that, as a spice mistress, she has no right to want him. However, she has a sense of loss after his departure. To her, he transforms into a lonesome American. She cannot even get the door to close. So, she must go out and procure a special seasoning for him. There is a specific spice for everyone, but "the mistress of spices" does not get her own. She has incessant fantasies about him. It all retakes its original form. Her spice begins to drain away. She intends to go back to the shop. Tilo recalls the message she left at Raven's place as they head back to the shop. To Raven, Tilo then explained that he thought their love was nothing more than an Indian illusion. She plans on starting a fire for Shampati. She arranges the dals and spices in the middle of the storage area. Like how she arrived in America, she wants to leave it in the same state. Unfortunately, her attempts to have the spices transform her into a new person fail. She does not change at all after ingesting the spices. She has to stay in bed until she hears someone say her name, "Tilo." And then, the word "earthquake" pops into her head.

Tilo is curious about the 'Earthquake' reference, and she hopes to track down the source of the voice. She starts to wonder if the Earthquake took her and Raven with it. Raven is the one who protects her from the quake. Furthermore, Raven wants to feel that way about her, too. In the end, Tilo gives in to his love and realises he has moved on from his previous existence. She is keen on changing her identity, even her name. Raven suggests the names Sheeba and Rita, but the final choice is Maya. Maya has numerous connotations for Tilo, including illusion,

enchantment, enhancement, and so on; therefore, he has come to accept the moniker. Through her marriage to Raven, she discovers who she is and gives up the spice trade for good. Tilo, the empress of spices, is known by several aliases. Tilo's mother's name at birth was Nayan Tara, and she was born in a rural area. The buccaneers kidnap her, rename her Bhagyavati, and set sail. The snakes give her the moniker "sarpakanya" once she reaches the island. Tilo, "a life giver" and "a restorer of health and hope," was the moniker she adopted after becoming the spice trade's master. She goes through several persona shifts until she settles on a stable sense of who she is. Tilo ends up being crucial to the novel's structure. She is essentially the novel's protagonist. In her current existence, Tilo occasionally recalls the regulations the old one set forth for the young mistress. They need to keep their distance and not get too emotionally invested in anything or anyone. She also says she connected the purely realistic world with the mystical world. She broadened the focus of her work beyond the Indian American community to include the experiences of African Americans, Americans, and native Americans who live in the city's poorer neighbourhoods. She tried to merge poetry and prose to reflect better the book's idiom, which has a lyrical quality akin to the magic realist genre. There is no hostility or anxiety on the island because the labour is done in an area where men are not allowed. The men's world is what the women of the island can trade for. This suggests that although both sexes make up humanity, the globe is predominately populated by men. To aid battered women and other women excluded and suppressed in the male-dominated cosmos, Tilo chooses the United States as the male-dominated world in which to intervene. She has made the shop her home—a haven for only women. Despite the difficulty of the situation, she ultimately chooses to follow Raven. The main character finds her speciality thanks to her keen insight and diligent self-examination. She recognises that we now live in a brave new world where courageous choices must be made. She represents the need to go beyond one's origin and have given circumstances to create a new, unique self.

The novel ends on a hopeful note, empowering the protagonist to the point of self-sufficiency and contentment so that she can continue her journey with renewed vigour. A prominent theme of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is the idea that no matter how much change one undergoes, one will always retain some of their original identity. Tilo, the protagonist of this tale, has come to terms with her situation by deciding to support Raven. In her conclusion, Lalita Tybij of *The Book Review* writes:

Nevertheless, underlying this is the faint bear of another, darker, more sombre message: that women today, however successful, however, educated and emancipated, are still to themselves as well as to the world incomplete without a man. Furthermore, in searching for the perfect male and happiness, there is compromise and pain and a self-mutilation of personal identity. In Jung's words, A woman seeks completion, which is imperfect (26).

Tilo, the protagonist in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, goes through many hardships to find her own identity. To many others, it represents a message of optimism for the future. Tilo learns more about herself due to her encounters with the alien culture..

#### **Works Cited:**

Deivanai, Valli,P, Self Revelation in Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices*, *Voices of the Displaced: Indian immigrant writers in America*,Madurai: Department of English, The Madura College 2011.236.

Vanmathi, G, Quest for Identity in Chitra Banerjee's '*The Mistress of Spices*'*Voices of the Displaced: Indian immigrant writers in America*,Madurai: Department of English, The Madura College 2011.236.

Karpazhagu,R, Gangalakshmi, Mystic of Spices in *The Mistress of Spices*, *Contemporary Discourse*,7,2 (2016), 152-156, ISSN 0976-3686.