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From Mysticism to Maya: Agency, Autonomy, and the Re-authoring of Womanhood in *The Mistress of Spices*

Dr. Nirmala Sharma^{1*} and Naresh Kumar²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jyotiba Phule Government College, Radaur, Yamunanagar (YNR), Haryana, India

*Email: nndp01@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jyotiba Phule Government College, Radaur, Yamunanagar (YNR), Haryana, India

Email: nndp02@gmail.com

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Dr. Nirmala Sharma



Naresh Kumar

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex trajectory of female identity and self-actualization in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), focuses on the protagonist's transformation. As Tilo, the protagonist functions as an immortal, desexualized archetype. She suppresses her personal desires to serve her immigrant community through the magical properties of spices. This paper analyzes how her transformation into Maya marks a crucial departure from rigid, patriarchal, and cultural expectations of idealized womanhood. By choosing mortality, vulnerability, and romantic love, Maya reclaims her physical body, agency, and personal autonomy. The study utilizes postcolonial and feminist frameworks to examine the intersection of diaspora, cultural isolation, and gender performance. Ultimately, this paper argues that Divakaruni redefines womanhood not as a static sacrifice to tradition, but as a fluid, self-determined process of negotiation between communal duty and individual desire.

Keywords- Redefinition, identity, diaspora, agency, postcolonial feminism.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-born American writer and poet who relocated from her birthplace of Kolkata, India, to the United States for her higher education. She is a prolific author of both poetry and prose, widely recognized for her insightful portrayals of the immigrant journey, with a particular

focus on the lives of South Asian women. She is an exceptional writer who beautifully combines life stories with heartbreaking emotion. Her celebrated novels include *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), including *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002). *Queen of Dreams* (2003), *The Palace of*

Illusions (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2009), and *Oleander Girl* (2013). Her poetry collections include *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1991), *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) for which she won the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize, and the Gerbode Foundation Award. Apart from the above, she wrote profusely on Young Adult Fiction, and has published several collections of stories.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* stands as a seminal work in diaspora literature, exploring the intersections of cultural heritage, gender identity, and personal autonomy. Central to this narrative is the complex negotiation of identity faced by immigrant women who must balance ancestral traditions with the realities of contemporary Western society. Through the magical realist framework of the novel, Divakaruni explores the profound internal and external conflicts of her protagonist, Tilo, an Indian immigrant living in Oakland, America. As the Mistress of Spices, Tilo represents a traditional, highly restricted model of femininity. Stationed in an Oakland grocery store, she subverts her individuality to preserve a static, idealized version of Indian heritage. However, this impenetrable construct of womanhood begins to fracture when Tilo encounters the complexities of contemporary immigrant life and experiences the awakening of romantic desire. She ultimately dismantles the vessel of sacrificial female archetype, and evolves into a mortal woman who claims agency over her own body, fate, and identity.

Description

The title of the novel, aptly selected by the author, is suggestive of the female, whose journey as a mistress of spices passes through different stages to redefine womanhood. Tilotamma, commonly called Tilo, runs a spice shop in Oakland, California, and encounters many people. Tilo, in the disguise of an old mistress of spices, not only sells spices but also teaches life lessons, as well as the medicinal and

magical power of spices to the customers. Her clientele include both men and women, especially the Indian immigrants, who discuss their life problems and experiences with Tilo. Store visitors, particularly women, frequently experience the conflicts of a diasporic environment. While emigrating from India to America altered their daily lifestyles, traditional mindsets regarding gender roles remain unchanged. Among the female characters discussed in the course of the novel are the First Mother, Geeta, Lalita, Hameeda and Tilo, the mistress herself.

Tilo is perfectly trained in the art of spices and their medicinal qualities; spices sing songs of life with her "at a whisper they yield up ... their hidden properties, their magic powers" (Divakaruni 3). Born and brought up in India, Nayantara, meaning "star of the eye," possesses a unique multi conscious identity. But her parents were unhappy with another girl child "coloured like mud," she was taken ominous to the family, and another "dowry debt" (7). She narrates of her mother "lying fevered all the while, and the cows run dry, and I screaming until they fed me milk from a white ass" (7).

She roamed lonely and unattended in the village "with no one caring enough to tell her Don't" (Divakaruni 8). She acquired a unique sight and power of future prediction. Her insights allowed her to accurately identify the thief of a buffalo, expose illicit relationships between masters and their servant girls, pinpoint underground gold deposits, and uncover the psychological reason behind a young girl's sudden muteness. Furthermore, she successfully guided the local landlord to his misplaced ring and alerted the village leader to an impending flood. As Nayantara's fame grew, people traveled from distant areas just to receive her luck-bringing touch. These wealthy visitors showered her with unprecedented, lavish gifts that fascinated the local villagers. She learnt "all habits of affluence:" sat on "gold woven cushions and ate from silver plates studded with

precious stones," (8) alongwith predicting the future and healing the sick:

I cured the daughter of a potentate, foretold the death of a tyrant, drew patterns on the ground to keep the good winds blowing for merchant sailors. When I looked at them, grown men trembled and threw themselves at my feet, and that too seemed easy and right. (Divakaruni 8)

Excessive wealth and deference rendered Nayantara arrogant, cruel, and selfish, leading her to mistreat her servants and family; she ate "the best portion of the food and threw the leavings on the floor for her brothers and sisters" (Divakaruni 9). Her parents "dared not voice their anger" because of "fearful deference" (9) and the luxurious life provided to them. Her reputation for possessing extraordinary powers grew, ultimately attracting the attention of pirates through "merchant sailors carried tales... across the harnessed seas to every land" (9).

Worshipped as a goddess, young Nayantara was jaded of "the endless praise, the songs of adulation, the mountains of gifts" (Divakaruni 17). This sheltered life shattered at dusk when pirates violently raided the village, interrupting dinner. They splintered the bamboo walls of the cottage: Tilo's cottage, "kicked away bowls and, pitchers scattering rice and fish and palm honey, an arm curved casually through the air, driving a sword into my father's chest" (18). The raiders then cornered "dragged women," (18) piled all types of jewellery, necklace, earrings, waistband, pulled tapestries from walls, and bound this bounty on the skirt of Nayantara's sister. Though capacitated with magical powers, Nayantara failed to halt the destruction. They carried her away through the "burning village" (19) while she was shocked and shamed. In an "awful irony," the pirate chief renamed her "Bhagyavati, Bringer of luck" (19). Deeply traumatized, she silently begged her family and

village for forgiveness in her thoughts. After transforming into her new self, Bhagyavati reclaimed her magic "strengthened by hate as power often is," she overthrew the chief and "lived as queen, leading.... pirates to fame and glory" (19).

But beneath her fierce reputation, she carries a racking secret: "the spell is greater than the spell maker; once unleashed, it can not be countered" (Divakaruni 19). Plagued by sleeplessness, she finds herself becoming "Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, bringer of luck and death, her cloak dragging in salt dust like a torn wing"(20). Her transformation into Bhagyavati wiped all her memories except the vengeance against the pirates. Her recollections portray "all raids..., all the ships...plundered, all the richest," (21) commended by her, as futile and meaningless. She finds herself whispering a desperate desire for something unknown, though deep down, she only craved death. A sudden typhoon destroyed everything-including pirates adorned with glowing crests or luminous eyes

Bhagyavati lost all sense of time; Nagraj, the king of the snakes rescued her, and warned her against the dangerous island of spices, inviting her to become their "Sarpa Kanya" (snake maiden) with a new name and identity. However, she remained focused on her destiny, "imagined the island waiting for" (Divakaruni 24) her, and took a leap of faith and dove into the ocean at midnight. After a long swim, she arrived safely on the island by morning, where she was greeted by the Old One and the other initiates:

It was then I saw that I was naked. The sea had stripped me of all clothes and magic and for the moment arrogance even. Had thrown me at her feet bereft of all but my dark, ugly body. (Divakaruni 32)

A complete break from her past identities as Nayantara or Bhagyavati was ensured through a "ceremony of purification"

(Divakaruni 40) after which she recovers her deeper memories through the "herbs of memory" (33) taught by the First Mother. The first mother represents tradition, discipline, authority and the ancient rules governing the spices. First Mother embodies strict tradition, authority, and the sacred laws governing the spices. She deems Tilo uniquely qualified to inherit these mystical secrets because Tilo actively rejects a conventional domestic life: "cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children" (34) in pursuit of a higher spiritual devotion. Choosing a difficult, obstacle-ridden path, Tilo or Tilotamma, along with others, accept to commit to the demanding life of a mistress that requires massive sacrifice: "to give up their young bodies, to take on age and ugliness and unending service" (40). The first mother warned them of the consequences of breaking the laws of the spices. Following the island's tradition of naming girls after their core traits, she is given the name Tilotamma (shortened to Tilo). Symbolizing her fiery nature, the name refers to Til – "the sesame seed; under the sway of planet Venus" (42) and possessing a warm, flame-touched golden-brown hue.

Tilottama, whose name signifies a "life giver" and a "restorer of health and hope," was celebrated as the most beautiful and elegant dancer in Lord Indra's heavenly court, recognized as "crest jewel among women" (Divakaruni 42). The first mother named her Tilottama "finally and forever," (43) forbidding her from ever revealing her true identity to anyone outside her sisterhood. However, Tilotamma: the apsara, eventually disobeyed, resulting in being "banished to the earth to live as a mortal for seven lives" (43). Before departing, she vowed to the First Mother that she would not succumb to earthly temptations or fall in love with any "pitiful mortal man" (43). But the first mother is sceptical of Tilottamma's passionate nature that desired "so much from the world" (49). As a parting gesture, the First Mother "gave each mistress a going away gift"

(51) – such as flutes, incense burners, looms, or pens. Tilottama received a knife intended to help her, protect her chastity, an object she carefully hides "it under ... bedding" (51) every single night.

At last, the trained mistresses of spices leave the island for their designated places "to exchange it for the human world" (Divakaruni 54). Tilotamma arrives at Oakland, California, America where she would spend her life with a transformation of old body in disguise. In America, Tilo finds joy managing a spice shop that serves as a vibrant cultural hub for the South Asian diaspora. Her store attracts Indian immigrants from various states and religions, vividly reviving her childhood memories. This inclusive space also gathers Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and American customers who bond over shared traditions, cultural recollections, and personal challenges. Tilo acts as a magical guide and loving friend who offers healing remedies to recurring visitors including Lalita, Geeta, Hameeda, Haroun, Jagjeet, and Raven. Through Customers' stories of homeland festivals and customs, Tilo relieves herself of own nostalgic memories of childhood and lives through them.

Tilo serves as the Mistress of Spices, using her magical bond with spices to help immigrants navigate their tough new lives in America while staying true to Indian traditions. She surrenders her youth and personal freedom, embracing premature aging to heal the physical and psychological ailments of her community. However, her commitment wavers when she falls in love with Raven, a lonely American customer who "keeps on gazing straight into Tilo's eyes" (Divakaruni 69) and touches her. This forbidden "sensation" pervades her "like a blade of fire, yet so sweet" (70) igniting her longing for bodily desires and worldly pleasures contradicting the strict laws governing spice mistresses. Her attraction to Raven transcends his clothing, handsome face, or expressive eyes; instead, she feels an

inexplicable, deep-seated connection to him that defies logic.

This encounter initiates her transformation into "Maya," a name meaning illusion or enchantment given to her by Raven, as he coaxes her out of isolation and prompts her to rebel against the rigid doctrines taught by the First Mother on the island. Tilo struggles between her strict duties as a Mistress of Spices and her intense, new physical desire: "fugitive happiness" (Divakaruni 71) with Raven. She finds herself deeply distracted and unable to focus on her work. Raven's "eyes dark as a tropical night, as deep, as filled with peril" impairs her judgement on spices and she recalls the Mother's instruction: "when you begin to weave your own desires into your vision', the true seeing is taken from you. You grow confused, and the spices no longer obey you" (72).

Though Tilo tries her best to retract her advances, her thoughts remain aggressively fixed on Raven. Despite having lived through multiple past lives as a "fortune- teller, and pirate queen, and apprentice of spices," she has "never desired to see" (Divakaruni 73) a naked man until now. She is burning in the fire of desires, but closes her eyes out of guilt, unaware of the massive, destructive, emotional upheaval. Tilo finds herself consumed by thoughts of Raven, though experiencing personal desire is strictly forbidden. Despite these rules, she feels deeply vulnerable, occasionally succumbing to her physical senses and passion. She longs for individual freedom and Raven's companionship, yet she desperately tries to maintain her allegiance to her calling, praying to the spices to preserve her identity and save her from losing herself. Tilo starts showing strange, visible changes in her behavior and future predictions. She stays awake at night and intentionally recalls the words of old Mother to suppress her intensified yearning:

Most important, don't get too close.
You'll want to. Even though you've

taken the oath to treat all alike, there'll be the special ones whom you'll want to warm at your heart's heat, to whom you will want to be whatever they lack in life. Mother, friend, lover. But you cannot. When you chose the spices you gave up that right. (Divakaruni 98)

Tilo internalizes the desperate warnings of her spices which seem to cry out to her: "Pull away, pull away Tilo, before" (Divakaruni 99) being permanently trapped. However, through physical intimacy with Raven, she has "gone beyond boundaries" (105) merging their bodies into one. This transgression forces Tilo to contemplate remorsefully of her actions, and she desperately attempts to regain her self-trust. But her deep infatuation with Raven limits her efforts:

Events in the outer world are nothing to mistresses. When you fill your head with inessentials, the true knowledge is lost, like grains of gold in sand. Set your mind only on what is brought to you, search only its remedy. (Divakaruni 168)

Raven visits the shop daily, and his absence makes Tilo anxious. Raven's written note for tomorrow's excursion thrills her and she feels romanticized by his gesture. This planned "pleasure day" excitement quickly turns to dismay on the thought that how "the censoring curious eyes" react to the companionship of "handsome American with this sag-skinned brown woman" (Divakaruni 186). Tilo ultimately decides to accompany Raven on a city excursion, hoping to use her spices to ease her anxiety. However, she is restricted because the spices' magic is strictly forbidden for personal benefit. Though Spices themselves tempt her to use them to put "bodies together, supple and twined in ecstasy" (190) for joy and love, she upholds her identity as the Mistress of Spices by desperately negating the temptation. Despite her wishes, Raven arrives with a joyful expression, discloses his

impatience and she too admits with a smiling face. Even though Raven is entirely unaware of the unknown consequences of the outing, she completely realizes this and wonders if her intense emotions are actually love.

My heart has taken over my body till it is one beat of joy. Raven who does not know, who I want never to know, how much I will have to pay for this excursion, how gladly I will count the cost. Is this what is love. (Divakaruni 191)

Raven gives her a beautiful, stunning, dawn-white gown: "the loveliest dress" (191) she has glimpsed. However, she thinks that she is "ugly and old," and both the dress and their companionship are nothing short of a "mockery" (Divakaruni 192). Raven melts emotionally and embraces her tightly. This embrace: "have never been held" by immediate family or "sister Mistresses," gives her an American reshaping and transforms Tilo into "dear Tilo" (192). Later, as Raven drives them into the city, Tilo is suddenly struck by intense regret for violating the instructions taught on the island. She breaks another mistress' rule when she visits Haraun and drinks wine, a forbidden thing. She enjoys its taste and feels lightheaded, unmoored. She cannot adjudge whether it is the drunkenness of wine or his love (Raven's). Raven cuts into her own thoughts, telling herself to take a holiday from thinking for the day. No longer wishing to be separated from Raven, Tilo begins acting like a silly, infatuated girl:

Raven, is it not foolish that I am afraid, I Tilo who have been the keeper of so many secrets for so many men and women. But I fear that when I learn your desire, you will become no different from the others who come to my store. I will give you what you long for, and in the giving pluck you from my heart. (Divakaruni 198)

Tilo daydreams of her volcanic island, while acknowledging the prevailing incompatibility between Raven and herself: they are "words apart" (Divakaruni 199). She knows barely about him yet is determined to risk everything for Raven. In the course of conversation, Raven reveals his background: the secret of his birth, parenting and the reason why he left his home. Later, Tilo reflects on her rebellious nature and flaws, desperately wanting to confess her own secrets to Raven but fearing that the truth might cause her to lose him. The two share a pleasant dinner together while Tilo remains conscious of the rules "broken so many" (233) times.

Tilo's mind is a swirl of distractions, caught between the echoes of her island past and her obligations to the community. Her heart longs to yield to Raven's affection and deeply deserves to embrace personal happiness, yet her sacred commitment stands firmly in the way. In moments of intense conflict, she hams the "transforming chants" (Divakaruni 235) learnt on the island. Her suitor, Raven, remains patient and explains his presence in Oakland and in the shop:

When someone told me, There's a woman down in Oakland, go see her. She isn't what she seems. She can do things. After the mushrooms, I couldn't allow myself to believe. But on a whim I came to the store on a Friday evening. And met you. (Divakaruni 253)

This fateful meeting connects a lonely American with the woman of his dreams, the mistress of spices, an old woman in disguise who looks "different, the way... under the skin" (Divakaruni 254). Tilo, stubbornly, decides to accept the invitation of Raven whose "eyes are deep and pleading, but also in them a dare," and help him in his search for his dreamlike "earthly paradise" (254):

O my American, if youth and beauty is what you want, the joy of what you can see, what you can touch, I will give you

Your fill. I will draw on the powers of the spices to fulfill your deepest fantasies about my land. And then I will leave you. (Divakaruni 257)

Tilo willingly chooses to sacrifice herself by breaking the most sacred rule of the spices. She invokes *Makaradwaj* to transform her into an unprecedented blinding beauty:

Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine. For one night so that his skin will dazzle, his fingertips will be branded with it for always. So that never again will he be with another woman without remembrance and regret. (Divakaruni 261)

The spices mock Tilo with a "low and deep, but not unkind" (Divakaruni 261) laughter. Recognizing her error, Tilo refuses to "pretend repentance" or shame, and boldly instructs, with "head high," (261) to fulfill her desire. The spices dissent her choice and the tone of address, asking, "do you desire it more than you desired us on the island" (261). Tilo's response symbolizes her yearning for personal freedom and romance: "each desire in the world is different, as is each love" (261). She drinks "*Makaradwaj*, the most potent of the changing spices" (262). While it is meant to be sipped slowly, "one spoon an hour, over three nights and days," Tilo drinks "it all at once" like "Shiva of the blue throat, who have risked all for nothing" (262). Tilo stands by her words, embarking on a new path of her life; her heart not "strained with colors of regret" (263).

The next day, after a refreshing bath, Tilo finds a bouquet "spilling red velvet Roses the colour of virgin blood" (Divakaruni 264) accompanied by a note from Raven. She embraces the flowers, though thorny and hard, that is going to make her day. Later, Tilo hosts a massive clearance sale at the shop, drawing a large crowd of customers. On enquiry, she passes a concocted story, explaining that the

elderly shopkeeper is retiring due to unexpected, though not critical, health issues. Claiming to be the owner's niece, she receives customer's warm and heartfelt wishes for the mistress of spices, hoping that stories of the spice shop will definitely percolate to their children.

Young Tilo puts on the elegant white gown gifted to her by Raven, which fits "falling over slimness of waist and hip" (Divakaruni 279) and flows gracefully against her skin. On examination, the mirror reflects a "goddess -face free of mortal blemish, distant as an Ajanta painting," (279) yet her eyes remain distinctively vulnerable and human. Her mirror reflection terrifies her as it shifts between her conflicting personas—Nayantara, Bhagyawati, and Tilo—while she swings between her dread of the spices and her intense desire for Raven. Her visit to Raven's house: stunning and immaculately decorated, turns into a night of intense intimacy and connection, leading to the thought: "O *makaradwaj*, why do you say illusion. I am willing to give this man all my secrets, my past and my present both" (288).

Raven refers to Tilo as "my mysterious Indian beauty," (Divakaruni 290) clearly indicating his deep passion and affection to her Indian skin tone, her accent, and the unique cultural qualities he finds lacking in American women. Later, she retrieves a piece of paper and a pencil from a kitchen drawer to write a farewell letter, hiding it inside the bathroom cabinet. Tilo undergoes internal battle: her heart desperately wants to stay with Raven while her sense of duty forces her back to the spice shop and "Shampathi's fire" (292). In an internal monologue, she expresses her gratitude for everything Raven gave her in lieu of hers. In her goodbye note, she confesses:

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 is 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. (Divakaruni 292).

Following this final confession, she returns to her spice shop to prepare herself for Shampati's fire: the last ritual of spices, the only way of penance. Tilo embraces her desires without fear of the spices, declaring her wish: "and again, yes, I would make myself as ravishing as Tilotamma, dancer of the gods, for Raven's Pleasure" (Divakaruni 298). Later on, a devastating earthquake destroys her spice shop, symbolically reducing her to an ordinary woman, not a goddess, no longer the Mistress of Spices; she has lost her supernatural powers, ancient wisdom, and prophetic abilities. Raven rescues her from the disaster, finally confessing his deep love; though earlier upset at her parting note and consumed by rage, his affection never wavered.

Tilo confides her feelings and opens her heart to Raven, confessing that her love for him surpasses anyone she has ever known across all her travels. Despite this profound affection, Tilo declines to join him in his dreamland because her sense of duty weighs to work for earthquake-stricken people of Oakland, a purpose for which she has been specifically trained. Sensing her identity as Tilo has concluded, Raven, on her request, renames her next transformation as Maya: meaning "many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going" (Divakaruni 317). She embraces this name, recognizing that she must now rely entirely on her own inner strength. This new name, Maya, represents a sharp departure from her past identities and their mystical associations, stripped of pearled island light, guiding sister mistresses, or a first mother's blessing. Yet, she views this new path as equally true and sacred. The novel reaches its peak as Maya thanks Raven for his unwavering love and support. Holding hands, Maya and Raven step forward together on a new journey dedicated to serving

humanity, illustrating that genuine love transcends physical pleasure and finds its highest expression in universal compassion for mankind.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, very dexterously, redefines womanhood across diverse roles, bridging cultural and national divides while tracing the evolving relationship between Maya and Raven. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist progresses through multiple identities, beginning as Nayantara: an overlooked child with prophetic gifts, thereafter Bhagyavati: a powerful pirate queen and seer and then Tilo (Tilotamma): the mistress of spices who runs a spice store, that serves as a diasporic microcosm, reflecting the cultural heritages of Indian immigrants and Americans. Her love for Raven veered her to leave the magical realm of spices to pursue a worldly life with Raven, rechristening her as Maya: meaning illusion or enchantment who ultimately moves with Raven to Oakland to serve humanity after a devastating earthquake. Ultimately, whether known as Maya, Tilo, Tilotamma, Bhagyavati, or Nayantara, the protagonist embodies the versatile facets of womanhood. By transitioning from a magical guardian to an ordinary woman, she successfully fulfills her duties and promises to the First Mother, balancing her roles as a master of spices, a loyal disciple, and a devoted partner.

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