

**THE MISTRESS OF SPICES: MYTH AND MYSTICISM ENGROSSED IN
NATURE AND WOMAN**

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Abstract

India is well bestowed with nature and the worship of nature has been a way of life since time immemorial. The ethnicity of our country is prolific with a lot of myths. India's rich heritage of literary tradition continued in imparting our culture and interpreting the myths of our country. The ancient traditions of India reveal the true history on the status of women, our own tradition of feminine culture and women's participation in spiritual and public affairs. The male dominated society in Indian culture has marginalized nature as well as woman for fulfillment of their needs since ancient times, hence the women writers focused on the portrayal of different facets of women. The renowned Indo-American author and poet, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her debut novel *The Mistress of Spices* depicts the magical properties of spices and the relationship between spices and human beings. Tilo, the heroine of the novel, upholds the mystic power of sensing the spices and dedicates her life to helping those in need within the South Asian community in California. This paper attempts to analyze the effects of spices on the protagonist and the representation of different myths, magic and history related to spices from the Eco-critical and Eco feminist perspectives.

Key Words: Culture, tradition, myth, spices, nature, woman, ecocriticism and ecofeminism.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her debut novel *The Mistress of Spices*, has depicted the lifeless spices as living characters and has given metaphorical representation to the Indian spices in order to touch upon the knowledge beyond science. Her work deals with the immigrant experience and tries to unite people by dissolving the boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages and different worlds. *The Mistress of Spices* is a unique novel with a blend of prose and poetry. It is full of mystical turns and magical spells, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of Twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic and there by creating a modern fable. The author uses myth and magic for the literary effects and she succeeds in achieving the literary flavours.

Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, runs a grocery shop ‘Spice Bazaar’ at Oakland. She sells and provides spices according to her customers’ suited problems and troubles and helps them to overcome their difficulties. She provides spices not only for cooking but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants experience. In fact, not only the Indian immigrants but also the aboriginals flock to her shop with an intention of getting healed. She is the viaduct between herself and the sufferers. She is an elegant advisor, an up bringer of healing powers and a remedial champion. Therefore she is a life giver, restorer of health and hope. She confesses frankly that she is a mistress of spices. She learned them from the Island of Spices. She knows their origin, their smells and what their colours signify. She can call each by their true name it was given at the first, when the earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heart runs in her blood.

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. The term was coined by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 as an attempt “to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet.” (Merchant 184) Ecofeminism brings together the elements of feminism and green movements, while at the same time posing a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. Ecofeminism emphasizes on the way the nature and women are treated by the patriarchal society. Ecofeminists promulgate to treat earth as sacred and to respect and save the earth and oppose the hierarchical structure that grants power to men and allows for the exploitation of women and nature. They consider the predicament of nature and women as one and thus try to bring forth solutions to both. This thought developed into a branch of ecofeminism named radical ecofeminism. Cultural ecofeminists uplift an association between women and environment, as they believe women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles and their biology. Such associations allow women to be more sensitive to the sacredness and deprivation of the environment. Cultural ecofeminism has rooted in nature-based religion and goddess and nature worship so as to redeem both the spirituality of nature and women’s instrumental role in that spirituality.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a multifaceted and an accomplished writer who combines the themes of diaspora, feminism and ecofeminism in her works. Her debut novel *The Mistress of Spices* strongly depicts ecofeminism. This book has been made into a film and was also short listed for Orange Prize. The protagonist, Tilo, is an expert in the secret power of spices and is trained by the First Mother amongst the nature to use spices as a healing power. She was born in

a lower class family as the third child and was felt burden by her parents as another dowry debt. She was named NAYANTARA- The star of the eye, star seer, and also the flower that grows by the dust road. As the cows run dry at the time of her birth she was fed with the milk of ass, which helped her in getting the sight and words sooner than others. When she recognized her unknown powers, she helped the villagers in solving their problems and finding their lost things. She was given luxurious presents as a matter of gratefulness and her household won recognition. Her fame spreads far and wide.

Once when she was a child, out of boredom and discontentment, she sent a calling thought with a gold hook over the waters by which the pirates came in search of her and took her away killing her parents and destroying the village with fire, so as to gain more riches through her exotic powers. For some years she remained as the queen of Pirates- bringer of life and luck. As to escape from them she sends a calling thought over the water again and as the result typhoon came and she was released and saved by the serpents of underwater. Water and fire become an important part of her life that transforms her life from a village belle to a pirate queen and now takes her to an unknown world of spices and magic led by the serpents. She jumps into the water and in the morning she found herself naked on the shore.

There in the Island of Spices, the First Mother chooses her as the spice girl and under the assistance of First Mother she renames herself as TILOTTAMA- means life giver, restorer of health and hope. The sesame seed is known for its tiny sharp flower that mothers pray for their children to have anose shaped like it. It is golden brown in colour under the sway of planet Venus. Til or sesame ground into the paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver. The name also refers to the Apsara Tilottama in the court of Indra, the most elegant of all dancers. From this land of nature Tilo passes through the purification ceremony or fire of Sampathi (Eastern Phoenix) and enters to Oakland.

Tilo's life is highly intertwined with nature as she has the unique power of understanding the spices. She ascertains herself as a mistress of spices and acts according to their instructions and guidance. She introduces:

I am a Mistress of Spices

I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth, sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island.

But the spices are my love. (MS 1)

Tilo's spice store, Spice Bazaar, has got every Indian spices. When they are placed in her hand, the spices speak to her and direct her at necessary times. Each chapter of this novel is entitled after a spice, which discloses their powers and their origins. The author spins an amazing story of spices with a mix of nature, where nature becomes an important part of setting and a character itself. Divakaruni makes this novel equally romantic with the introduction of the character the 'Lonely American' as Tilo calls him. The time when she first met him the real nature of her womanhood is revealed. She is very much attracted by him. Eventhough she was warned by the spices, she likes to have him, losing control over herself and even the spices. As a mistress of spices she has to feel other's pain and leave her own passions behind. But from the time she was attracted by Raven, the lonely American, spices start working against her as well as the persons to which they were used. The spices are powerful to heal and comfort, but when used wrongly can also ruin or hold back or even ghettoize.

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Tilo makes herself beautiful like an Apsara with the help of the spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her at least for once in her life time, 'By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at beauty's summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone.' (MS 263) She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven's love. The customers for whose welfare she had prayed are happy and at peace with their lives and all of them were on the verge of making a new beginning while she was at the end of her life as a mistress of spices in America. She enters into Shampati's fire and loses consciousness. The next morning when Raven comes in search of her he finds her laying down unconscious and he takes her in his hands and moves out to his car. At the same time a huge earthquake occurs which destroys almost the entire Oakland and even her spice shop collapses.

Tilo leaves that place with Raven but after going a little distance she changes her mind to return to Oakland and help people over there. She thinks that she is responsible for everything that had happened and she wants to help people as she did before. The question that haunts her mind is the reason why the spices had not punished her. They answer 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.' (305)

She rejects Raven's offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. Raven changes his mind and returns with Maya, the new name given to Tilo to lead a new life. The novel closes with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She accepts herself as Maya, the name suits her in this new world order where she has only herself to hold her up and show the right path.

Conclusion

Nature serves as a deciding authority in the novel. The cycle of nature comes along with the whole story from the beginning until the end. From the birth of Nayantara as aforeseer and further in her life journey as Bhagyavathi and Mistress of Spices, nature is preserved and reinstated throughout the novel. The powers given to Tilo are taken back and destroyed as she breaks the rule of getting emotionally and physically attached to someone else. The devastating earthquake at the end of the novel symbolizes the natural cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction. The earthquake destroys everything but not her faith to emerge from the ashes. Tilo and Raven realize that a new world can be created from the ruins of the devastated world, "There is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped away flesh." (315) Nature is the great nurturer of life. It can protect, demolish and can rejuvenate life from destruction.

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