

THE THEME OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES"

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Abstract: The paper explores The Theme of Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. In the novel the narrator changes her name many times from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, since it means spell or enchantment; she has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood. There is an imbalance between the past and present in *The Mistress of Spices*. The beginning of the story, where Tilo describes her childhood and the events that led her to America are told in a surreal way. In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spice*, Tilottama (Tilo) the narrator is a woman born in another time and age and trained in the art of spices. This knowledge and initiation comes at a price. Finally Tilo is described as being a young woman in an old woman's body; only falling in love can set her free but she has to question how important it is for her to follow and pass on the old way basically she is trapped between love and duty. The paper traverses how the author in the ending especially the last third of the novel ties up all the loose ends in nice happy endings to justify the theme of the novel.

Introduction: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist. She is born on 1957 in Calcutta, India. She has gained wide national and international audiences from her first publication, *The Reason Of Nasturtiums*(1990) and *Black Candle*(1991). She has written several poetry collections, critical essays and several novels which include *The Mistress Of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*(1999), *Neela: Victory Song*(2002), and *Queen of Dreams*(2004). Her awards include PEN Josephine Miles Award, Bay Area Book Reviews Award and The American Book Award.

The Theme of Identity Crisis: In "The Self-Reflexive World: Consciousness and Social Responsibility" in *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts, Volume 7: Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience* Daphne Grace state that:

"Both Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Salman Rushdie are authors concerned with migration and trans-national concepts of ethnic identity in the Diaspora and with trans-cultural experiences of exile and belonging, alienation, and the hope of reconciliation."(DG, 117)

The Mistress of Spices is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and bent creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires. Tilo, the mistress of spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. The problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land is one of the themes.

Accordingly, the narrator changes her name many times. Like Bharati Mukherjee's Jyoti Jasmine-Jane; from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, since it means spell or enchantment; she has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final

definition of her selfhood. Divakaruni clarifies in her interview given to Elizabeth Softky to an online magazine *Diverseeducation.com*:

"Tilo became the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and finally the trial of earth-burial to emerge transformed, each time with a new name and a new identity."

The story ends on a positive note the familiar immigrant tales of dreams, desires, pain, and struggle. Divakaruni delves a little into the backgrounds of her characters, so they come out as realistic and understandable. For instance, the character of Ahuja's wife, Lalita, we are told of her feeling cheated when the man she weds turns out to be balding and pot-bellied. An unhappy married life follows. She does not want to hurt her parents and jeopardize her younger sisters' marriages by leaving him, so tries to legitimize his abuse and her suffering by blaming her initial rejection of him.

Then there is Jagjit, the shy frightened boy transformed to Jag by the endless hostility and abuse he has to bear for his accent and turban. He hits the road with a yearning for the power of the steel blade and gun. But the boy who dreamed of his grandmother's kheti has the desire to start a new life over as he promises Tilo, and Haroun, the cab driver who fled Dal Lake where generations of his family had rowed shikaras for tourists. He lands in America as an illegal immigrant, but he looks forward to riches and happiness in this land.

The minor characters are all Indian immigrants to the Bay Area, varying from wealthy to struggling. Divakaruni's sympathies are clearly with the struggling group, and their problems are detailed with warmth. The different spices come into play

“haldi” to help an abused woman, lotus leaf for love are some traditional beliefs which were well incorporated by Divakaruni.

Tilo, the sensitive mistress reaches out and touches the lives of many people at the cost of incurring the spices' wrath. She is willing to accept the punishment, but the spices set this compassionate being free so that she can become a mortal woman again. Divakaruni's books, which are set in both India and America, James Thomas Bredemus illustrates in the article "Voice from the gaps":

“Feature Indian-born women torn between Old and New World values. She gives laser-like insight and skilled use of story, plot, and lyrical description to give readers a many-layered look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope, and discovery”

Anyway, the last third of the book ties up all the loose ends in nice happy endings. The infamous natural disasters of California obligingly do their bit. I had to chuckle at how to conveniently things fell into place for Tilo and the other characters.

There is an imbalance between the past and present in *The Mistress of Spices*. The beginning of the story, where Tilo describes her childhood and the events that led her to America are told in a surreal way. But when she is in Oakland, the prose becomes much less so, more everyday really. In “The Self-Reflexive World: Consciousness and Social Responsibility” in *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts, Volume 7: Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience* Daphne Grace state that:

“Tilo does lose her magic powers as a consequence of choosing of human love and a fully human identity: she must finally choose between worlds.” (DG, 126)

Tilo, the mistress, can only pray to them to release their magical powers but the ultimate power, the power to heal, cure and restore happiness and well-being, lies in them. In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spice*, Tilottama (Tilo) the narrator is a woman born in another time and age and trained in the art of spices. This knowledge and initiation comes at a price. To serve the spices she must leave her own form and journey to another time and live in the body of an old woman in Oakland. Here she opens a shop and administers spices to cure and heal the people that visit the store.

Nalini Iyer writes in “Embattled Canons” in *Cross/Cultures - Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English, Volume 99: Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* edited by Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare that :

Tilo's grocery shop offers a montage of various elements in the lives of youth to discord between generations and the frustration of the American dream deferred. (NI, 16)

Each chapter in the book is the story of a spice - turmeric, cinnamon, chili, fennel, peppercorn and so many more and of the people that consume it. One can enjoy this blending of the spices with the characters and their emotions. Turmeric, the hope for rebirth; chili, the cleanser of evil; fennel, to cool tempers; fenugreek, to render the body sweet and kala jire to reduce pain and suffering.

Succeeds in evoking the aroma of the rich spices and their deep earthy colours but tells the reader tantalizingly little about the history and uses of spices than is promised at the beginning. However, Tilo's ability to advise people on their problems and diagnose with spices proves a useful vehicle for examining the problems encountered by Indian immigrants in the United States. Fiona Thompson writes in her reviews "The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni":

“It is a subject that is encapsulated perfectly in the situation Tilo is put in how far do one's traditions and values affect how one can assimilate into a new life and how much of them should one give up to fit in”? It is not necessary for it to be set in America - I'm sure these are questions just as valid to immigrants arriving in Britain.”

Described as being a young woman in an old woman's body; only falling in love can set her free but she has to question how important it is for her to follow and pass on the old way basically she is trapped between love and duty. In “The Self-Reflexive World: Consciousness and Social Responsibility” in *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts, Volume 7: Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience* Daphne Grace say that:

“Tilo the mistress of the spices is the quintessential of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them.” (DG, 125)

Conclusion: Today we are living in the world of hybrid culture. Tilo falling in love with Raven and creating a new world of their own shows in the end of the novel a positive outlook in accepting new identity and pave a space for dialogue between the two cultures. Raven and Tilo are able to associate with each other mentally and can easily build up their earthly paradise. The earthquake towards end of the novel is symbolic. It shows the destruction of the established order and a crumbling of the segmented cultures of the world. This interracial relation can be seen as an implement to fight against racism and discrimination in America. The Mistress of Spices is studied for academic purposes in various Universities in India as well across the world. The novel is a beautiful piece of art presented in as a telescopic insight into the lives of immigrant in America. By blending myth, fantasy and realism, Divakaruni is

able to break stereotype of defining one's identity only from the socio and political levels.

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