

# Tilo-An Epitome of Humanity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Divakaruni has highlighted problems pertaining to self-identity of men and women who are tossed between cross-cultural complexities of human life. She has also dealt with family relationships and values related to community. Divakaruni is good at depicting the experiences of Indian and Indian American women. Divakaruni belongs to the South Asian Diaspora whose voices are heard aloud in order to arouse the conscience of the people all over the world in the analysis of human problems. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first full length novel, published in 1997 is about a magical woman, Tilo, an immigrant from India. Tilo is a Mistress of spices and runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. Besides supplying the ingredients for curries, she also helps the customers to overcome their difficulties by the secret magical powers of spices. It is an enchanted story which lies between self and the community.

Divakaruni has got the concept for *The Mistress of Spices* during her 1994 near-death experience because of her second pregnancy. She was hospitalized and caught in the boundary somewhere between life and death for one month. Many women encounter the typical tunnel of light or out-of-body experience when death nears. Rather, they immerse into a meditative state that allow them to experience a profound understanding and appreciation of life. Divakaruni says: "I felt as though I floated between states of life and death, and that it didn't matter which side I landed on. Because the boundary we humans had drawn between these two states was not as important, nor as irrevocable, as we believed. . . . And it seemed to me, in some wordless way, that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is about" ("Dissolving Boundaries").

The principal character of this novel, Tilo, is an immigrant from India, who runs a spice bazar in Oakland, California. She is the voice of this novel and the only one that lets enter this exotic and magic world. As the title of the novel suggests, Tilo is a Mistress of spices, a woman who was trained in the art of using spices for healing pain and suffering, misfortunes and cleansing of evil etc. Her age and appearance are not real. She was born in another time.

In order to become a Mistress of spices, she subjects herself to the power of spices and the First Mother who is the trainer of the Mistresses. She travels through Shampati's fire and takes on the appearance of an old woman, running a spice shop in Oakland, forever forsaking a woman's vanities. She dissolves her own space and voice to help the community. In each chapter, a new character and his/her misfortune and pain is added to the plot. However, the story suffers a twist the moment an American man enters the store, leaving Tilo confused by her own prohibited emotions. She cannot find the right spice for this mysterious man, touched by her forbidden desire of love, which if she follows will destroy her magical powers.

She acts as a facilitator to all those people. She takes them to the inner room where the purest spices are found waiting to help those they want or feel compassionate. Tilo with the use of the spices, chant and pray for the spice remedy. Her store is not only the store of spices but also the store of happiness. Tilo relates her life with the spices. She dedicates her own life by helping others. But, it is only the choice of the spices which instructs whom to help and how to help. Tilo can only chant and ask for remedy; but it is only in the hands of the spices to help. Tilo says, "The other possibility I push away with all my strength for surely it cannot be, the spice failing which is a failing of my life also" (97).

Tilo who helps others in fulfilling their desires and needs should not have any desire. She leads a secluded and secretive life. She never shares her feelings to anyone, she starts living her life for others. Thus, she has to follow the exotic practices throughout the novel. Tilo has a concern towards "All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from a *tanpura*, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where" (78).

Even the Mistresses should help only the Indians, their own people not others. As per the guidance of the First Mother, The Mistresses are allowed to use their powers only for the good of her own people, "The others, they must go elsewhere for their need" (68). According to Debjani Banerjee: "The store with its sacred, secret shelves functions as a geographical/ textual space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity" (23).

Tilo travels outside the store at risk to her own personal safety because she wants to help others. Her visions about the customers force her to cross the boundaries of limited space. The first time that she crosses the store is to see Haroun's cab and she understands the disapproval of the spices: "Behind me a hiss like a shocked, indrawn breath . . ." (29). Her concern for humanity makes her cross the boundary. Tilo gets a vision that something bad is going to happen to Haroun. So she wants to prepare a spice remedy and she thinks of, "*kalo jire*, spice of the dark planet Ketu, protector against the evil eye" (30-31). Tilo once again breaks the rule to find Haroun and give the spice remedy. But before Tilo hands it over to Haroun he is physically attacked and robbed.

Tilo shows a way to Jaggit to keep him away from danger and violence. Tilo's money and the support of Kwisit's "One World Dojo" (273) are the chances for Jaggit to get a resolution. Thus Tilo acts as a connector to people. Jaggit gets the help of a

woman. He also seeks help from others who belong to his community. Tilo hopes that he will use the money in a right way and she prays to the spices.

Similarly she helps Ratna, whose womb is burning with poison. Daksha, a nurse plays her dual role as a working woman and as a wife and daughter-in-law. She never complains about her life. She says, "It makes too much trouble in the house if I say I can't do all this work. But sometimes I wish--" (80). She stops with that, because "Daksha to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to say" (80). But Tilo who listens to everyone without any gender discrimination does not pay attention to her inner heart's throbbing and gives black pepper to loosen her throat and say "no" which is really tough for Indian women; and Amla for "different resistance" (81).

Thus, Tilo is involved in the lives of the characters and helps them through abusive husbands, racism, generational conflicts and drug abuse. Tilo is a good samaritan. She gives importance to others' feelings. At the same time she is also driven by human desire and love. But she manages to come out from that desire and emerges successfully as a woman of compassion.

#### *References*

- [1] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Black Swan, 1997. Print.
- [2] "Dissolving Boundaries." Rev. of *Bold Type*. Monthly Review: Random House (13 May 2014) : <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0597/divakaruni/index.html>>.