

CONTEXTUALIZING THE INHERENCE OF IDENTITIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICE*

¹ Chandra.K, ² Dr. P. Arockia Nathan

¹ Ph.D., Research Scholar (Reg. No.D21SH001), Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Science, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research – Chennai.

chandra13103@gmail.com

² Associate Professor,), Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Science, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research – Chennai.

arockia.india@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper traces the different countenances of identities of the characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spice*. It seeks to explore how the characters shape their identities to fit the circumstances and tends to emphasise the elasticity of identity. Her characters, particularly the female ones, have a strong desire to create their own unique identities and to have names that reflect those identities. Tilo, the main character of the novel, longs for her own identity from the start and desires a moniker that reflects her "true" nature - "the Mistress" - which is why she declares at the novel's opening, "I am the Mistress of Spices." Tilo, short for Tillottama, the essence of til, the source of life, health, and hope, is the name she selects for herself after completing the training when the Old One gives each girl a name. She is delighted to finally use her real name. Tilo is an Oakland resident who is proud, obstinate, wishful, self-driven, and impatient. She is eager to begin her new life under this name and with these spices. Identity has some intrinsic, immutable characteristics that give it fixity, and it also has some varying characteristics that give it fluidity. An effort has been made to pinpoint the circumstances and events that aid readers in understanding character identities and how they are navigated.

Keywords: Identity, Female, Social, Spices, Life

Contextualizing the Inherence of Identities in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spice*

In Indian English Writing and Diasporic Literature, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent big name. Through her compelling narratives, she captures life's pivotal events and depicts the battles between duty and love. She also discusses the problems that arise in relationships that are at a crossroads and combines the cultures of both her native India and the foreign country, America. She captivates her readers by sprinkling observations about India and America as well as other traits like self-presentation, visions, eclecticism, folktales, mythology, and fables, as well as discontinuity, plurality, Bengali culture, and tradition, across her works. The process by which her characters negotiate and assert their identities is eventually seen across the entire spectrum of her creative ability.

The story of *The Mistress of Spices* is masterfully crafted in a way that establishes the personalities of its characters. Their internal issues and the path they took to discover resolutions

aid them in creating a new identity for themselves. This novel tells the story of Tilo. Her identity has changed significantly from Nayan Tara to Maya, as depicted by Divakaruni. Depending on the circumstances, locations, and decisions Tilo makes in her life, she goes by four different names. This shows that a person is adaptable enough to change who they are in response to circumstances. Consequently, Tilo's persona demonstrates that identity is neither fixed nor permanent. The transformation in identity is seen in a similar pattern in real life as well.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is faced with the difficult decision of choosing between duty and passion. The Old One brings her to an Oakland spice shop with the intention of helping her people. The Old One told: "To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need" (68). The "own kind" are Asians who miss and feel lonely in their native countries. Tilo's goal is to give people a sense of grounding through the plants she sells in her spice shop. But she frequently encounters possibilities that pull her back and forth between her responsibility as a spice healer and her desire to live a normal life.

In addition to serving as a spice healer, Divakaruni's Tilo devotes her life to helping the customers of her spice shop. An in-depth analysis of her personality will show that she behaves much like a real person, even if she is a fictional character named Tilo. In the process, her true identity is revealed. According to Erving Goffman's theory, "when an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 10). He continues by saying that "front stage" performance is calculated and is for the "benefit of others." When a performer engages with the audience, they do so with the conviction that situations have idealised and dramatized their actions.

A Spice Bazaar is run by Tilo. She plays the part of a healer on her front stage, relieving the suffering of those who come to her with their troubles. Tilo is motivated by her innate sense of taste for spices. The snakes have taught her about the spice island. Her hands have the ability to "send the thunder-writing across the sky," and she is informed by snakes about the ageless Old One who appears as a "pillar of burning" at night. Her power also extends to the "island and also the water that touch its roots." The fragrant air is introduced as "the curling notes" (23). Tilo believes she has arrived at her destination and discovered "a name for her wanting." She also claims that the "call of spices coursed up in her veins, unstoppable" (24). The ageless Old One takes Tilo's hands in hers as they first make contact on the island, telling her that "You were the one in whose hands the spices sang back" (32). Tilo's hands are ideal for handling the spices, according to The Old One, who examines each girl's hands before choosing them to be her students. Tilo's excitement is expressed in the following words: "My hands are as light, hot, moist, and freckled as the back of a golden plover. "Palms where thorn-purple would bloom at midnight" (33). Tilo is taken by the Old One. Tilo picks up the ability to handle spices on the island.

Tilo is the most intelligent of the Old One's followers, and he usually responds quickly in front of the mistresses. The Old One assigns Tilo to the position of spice healer, and Tilo is sent to the "spice bazaar" in the form of an elderly woman to give the impression that she is knowledgeable and experienced. To avoid drawing notice, she dresses in worn-out cotton saris in muted hues. She welcomes clients into her shop from early until night, helping them make

purchases and listening to their issues. She describes the sweets from her mother's cooking, which are displayed behind a glass counter, as being "Emerald green burfis, rasgullas white as dawn, and made from lentil floor laddus like nuggets of Gold" (4). In order to better understand her outfits, she sways a little and gives them the spices they require. Her movements are entirely professional, and she appears interested in other people's problems. She employs her understanding of spices because, in the words of the Old One, "spices are her prime love" and because she is thrilled with them since they "sing back in her hands" (43). She frequently cures people with the help of the magical healing power of spices. She recognises the importance of her work and commits her entire life to serving her own people.

Tilo is well-versed in the chants of spices, and with the use of her abilities, she takes control of them. She had always desired to have her own distinct identity, and the spices provide her the sense of community that helps to define her role as mistress of spices. An individual is convinced of the reality of some chores completed at that time while carrying out his or her duties. One simultaneously wants other people to accept the veracity of what is being offered.

Tilo is a quick learner and uses the powers of spices on others to their benefit. The action that takes place during a time when a person is continuously present in front of a certain group of observers and also has some bearing on the observers is known as performance on the front stage. It is conveniently referred to as the "front," and it refers to that aspect of the performer's performance that frequently acts in a fixed, broad way to establish the context for those watching the performance. A performer is only expected to exhibit the portion of themselves that is necessary to accomplish the task at hand, not their entire true selves. In a similar vein, Tilo is younger than she lets on to her clientele.

Because Tilo's goal is to heal them rather than develop an emotional attachment to any of them, it is requested that she conceal her true name from her clients. She must present herself to others as an elderly woman because her identity is tied to her spices and spice shop. The Old One's brightest pupil, Tilo declares at the opening of the novel, "I am a mistress of spices" (03), adding, "I am quick to master every spell and chant, quick to talk with the spices, even the most hazardous, quick to hubris and impatience. She recognises the importance of her chosen name, Tilottama (Tilo), as she explains:

Yes, First Mother. Til is the sesame seed, under the sway of planet Venus, gold-brown as though just touched by flame. The flower of which is so small and straight and pointed that mothers pray for their grandchildren to have noses shaped like it. Til which ground into a paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver, til which fried in its own oil restores luster when has lost interest in life. I will be Tilottama, the essence of til, life-giver, restorer of health and hope. (42)

With this knowledge, people can anticipate Tilo's assistance with their diseases. Their response to her is based on the seeker and sought equation. It takes manners to play a role. While it is beneficial for the audience to comprehend the performer's act, it is equally essential for the performer to conceal his or her genuine identity from the audience. As a result, Tilo's customers are not exposed to her "real" self: "Across the entire length of this land, no one knows who I am."

Tilo claims that her clients are unaware of her past. “I had another name, too; some people love me, and some people hate me,” she claims. For them, “I remain a mystery” (5). Tilo’s refusal to reveal her true identity enhances her performance as the mistress of spices. Only indirectly, through the avowals or through what seems to be unintentional expressive activity, can the ‘genuine’ or ‘real’ attitude, beliefs, and emotions of the people be determined.

Identity is also shaped by ‘self-control’ and is emphasised in order to uphold a functional consensus. Accentuating some facts while omitting others creates an idealised view. Under the restrictions that the Old One places on her, Tilo’s identity also goes through this process. Teenager Jagjeet visits Tilo’s store with his mother. He struggles to fit in at school because he is a shy boy. Additionally, some firangi lads assault him. He declines Tilo’s offer to give him some Indian tonic because he dislikes the taste of Indian food. But when Jagjeet arrives to buy some groceries as Tilo is closing her store, she blesses him and gives him a sack of cash to utilise wisely. She gets Jagjeet to see that he is different from her typical seekers and is instead special and unique. She goes above and above to be kind to him. Tilo is completely capable of commanding spices and she does so. She gains the affection of her customers by her job. She must adhere to the regulations established for mistresses, but when she falls in love with a Native American, she breaks rule after rule. She acknowledges that she is a person with needs, but she compromises by giving her life to spices in the end and accepting the penalty she receives. She only receives the reward of a new life as Maya as a result of her genuine services to humanity.

The inner area where Tilo keeps her purest spices is her backstage. In that room, Tilo sets her bedding out. As one thinks freely and practises for his or her performance on the front stage, the backstage environment is also crucial in the formation of one’s individuality. No outsiders are allowed because it is a private area. The interior room of Tilo is described as having:

Its floor dips just a little, overhead, a naked bulb cast great domed shadows, the roof disappears in into the color of smoke. Around me, buckets of bajra flour, squat casks of rapeseed oil, reassuring-solid. Sacks of sparkling sea salt to keep me company. The spices whispering their secrets, sighing their pleasure. I too sigh my pleasure. (60)

Tilo usually keeps a knife beneath her mattress, which she got as the old one’s “going away gift,” to help her stick to her commitments. The knife seems quite commonplace, yet Tilo senses that it contains magic, describing it as most ordinary for that is the nature of deepest magic. “If only we had eyes to see it, the flickering fire that contains the greatest magic at the centre of our daily lives” (51). As the Old One’s parting present, it serves as a reminder for her to always remember the commitments she made in order to maintain her status as a mistress.

In her interview, “Unbraiding Tradition,” Divakaruni describes how she modelled the character of Tilo on a time when she herself was on the verge of passing away. She had created a mental image of Tilo at that point. Tilo is an ageless character who she later developed; time has no bearing on him. Divakaruni uses Tilo’s agelessness to give herself several other identities. Through the process of self-perception, Tilo, the primary character, develops her identity. On her main stage, the Spice Bazaar, she describes herself as being of Indian descent from South Asia.

Her first mother gave her the identification of a spice healer, which might be used to study her identity in this situation. According to Richard Jenkins, 'identification' is crucial for a human being. She is Tilo because of how her first mother raised her and what her clients think of her. The author does a fantastic job of capturing Tilo's identity dilemma. She must face the crushing reality that no one in this land has a clue who she really is. Mirrors mirror our images, and the novelist uses them to represent how people perceive performers.

Tilo prepares herself to interact with the outside world against the Old One's prohibition when she purchases a mirror from the shop and examines her reflection in it. She alters her appearance to blend in with the crowd. She feels the desire to be acknowledged and to claim her identity. Jenkins claims: "identification is a necessary prerequisite for human life... individual identity - embodied in selfhood - is not a meaningful proposition in isolation from the human world of other people" (*Social identity*, 18). Tilo feels the same way. She is naturally rebellious, which is why she ventures outside of her spice shop, investigates the outside world, and creates a place for herself. She develops feelings for Raven, and in order to satisfy those feelings, she behaves like a regular mortal. She hears his life narrative, empathises with his suffering, and gives herself over to "human love," hoping "like any woman that this would never stop" (219). She is not aware that once an identity is lost, it is permanently lost. It cannot be retrieved afterwards. Tilo gives in to her desires as her emotions take her, but after discovering her true calling, she returns to help others. She calls upon the power of spices to satiate her cravings and to enhance her beauty.

In line with Jenkins' assertion that our identities are framed by "similarities and dissimilarities," the author of the novel has described both the individual and collective facets of Tilo's identity. Tilo aspires to stand up for herself. Despite all of her abilities, she feels contempt and believes that her life should be about something else. She does not consider herself to be the queen of the pirates and bears a hidden hurt that has left its mark on every chamber of her heart. She wanders the decks by herself, miserable and yearning for something different. She puts out a call to the sea serpents, and a powerful 'typhoon' pulls her off the deck. If she accepts to live with them forever as their SarpKanya, they also offer to show her the seven seas. They pledge to transport her to SamundraPuri, beneath the sea, but Tilo turns her head in the direction of the island of spices to learn her real name.

With her new name, Tilo is keen to create her own unique identity. Tilo also makes her own fate. She must now go by this name and perform the Old One's assignment for her life, which is to use spices to help others. She takes on the role of spice mistress. As the Old One informs her, "You are not important," her name, Tilo, and the spices serve as her identification. Mistress is not. The store is what matters. "And the spices"(5). Tilo devotes her entire life to the spice industry and helps others in need. But after meeting Raven, she has a change in perspective. She dislikes the monotony of the spice firm.

Tilo's voyage from her hometown to that island demonstrates that, despite changing her name, location, and identity, she has undergone simply a physical alteration. Her inner self is still just as arrogant, obstinate, and impatient as it was at first. She is wishful, self-centred, haughty, and inquisitive. She wakes up in Oakland after going through the purifying procedure and

discovers her in the empty store. Tilo closes her eyes, pleased that she won't be seeing herself in her ageing body. Because spices are significant to me, "I know that I am far from beautiful and I accept that" (59). Everybody wants to be associated with something, and Tilo uses spices to define her identity as the "mistress of spices." Before Tilo enters the Shampati's fire to restrain her cravings, the Old One gives her a slice of ginger root. She also offers her a knife as a parting gift to help her cut her ties to the past and remain virginal. She yearns for mortal love and, when she finds it, she leaves everything behind - including spices, her first love, and her first identity - because she had to go through a laborious journey to get there.

Changes in identity rely on a person's life experiences, and Divakaruni makes an effort to illustrate this through her characters in the novel. She has repeatedly displayed changes in Tilo's identity between Nayan Tara and Maya. She goes under four different names depending on the events, locations, and decisions that Tilo makes throughout her life. This shows that a person is adaptable enough to change who they are in response to circumstances. The reason for living justifies a person's identity.

To effectively convey a necessary message to her viewers, Divakaruni skillfully constructs her characters. She loves snakes and feeds them every day in the spice store, just as Nayan Tara uses her skills to serve others and Bhagyavati guides her pirates to the huge prize. She assists the earthquake victims as Maya and, in her capacity as mistress of spices, offers healing via the use of herbs and spices. Tilo benefits humanity in every capacity. As a result, she creates a holistic identity through her performance while navigating the ups and downs of various circumstances.

The characters in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* are motivated by their group and 'ethnic' ideals. The plot is legendary and fantastical, but it is set in real time and place. They are immigrants to the US from South Asia, and they bring the weight of their ethnic convictions with them. The characters' social behaviour is occasionally influenced by the demands of their communities, but more frequently it is determined by their own deeply held views that have a long history of close ties to their ethnic and social groups. Regardless of whether or whether they are still relevant in their new socioeconomic setting, it is challenging for individuals to separate and extricate themselves from the customs and values of their original communities. However, given enough time in the new place, especially during the formative years, the characters open up and start to accept new customs and societies. The expectations of their communities for them form the basis of human behaviour in Divakaruni's characters. The anger of the protagonists' families and original groups is unleashed when they cross the lines and identify with other groups. Characters behave in a way that respects social boundaries and the impact of their ethnic groupings.

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