

Diaspora Experience of Tilo Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 8

Special Issue: 1

Month: May

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Impact Factor: 3.025

Citation:

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"Diaspora Experience
of Tilo Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's *The
Mistress of Spices.*"
*Shanlax International
Journal of Arts, Science
and Humanities*, vol. 8,
no. S1, 2021, pp. 33–35.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8iS1-May.4501>

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In *The Mistress of Spices*, the process of self-perception is the foundation of identity formation for the central character Tilotamma (Tilo). As Tilo strives to define herself as South Asian and American, She develops multiple consciousness the manifest themselves in both her experiences and her subsequent relationships with her racial and sexual identities. While Tilo is living in America, she is incapable of pure self- perception and can only see herself through the eyes of those around her, leaving her own self-seeing as a secondary and almost marginal perspective. Tilo views herself through the lens of her surrounding society, thereby leading to various and often conflicting simultaneous visions of her identity. At first, Tilo allows these perceptions of herself to dominate her thinking, yet as she assimilates herself to America culture throughout the course of the text, Tilo comes to claim her own self-perception. Ironically, however, she finds that she is in fact comprised of the numerous identities that people had ascribed to her, for the perceptions that others had of her all legitimates aspects of her identity. The result of this knowledge is Tilo's recognition of her multiple consciousness, and although this multiplicity is replete with contradictions, Divakaruni nevertheless presents it as a possible "solution" for Tilo's dilemma of cross-cultural identity formation.

An older woman born with supernatural Shaman like abilities in a small village in India, Tilo's gift is her ability to ability to elicit specific powers inherent in spices and use them to cure the maladies of those around her. In Tilo's preteen years, pirates storm into her home, murder her entire family and abduct Tilo, taking her on board their ship as a prisoner. Eventually, Tilo overthrows the pirate captain to become the pirate queen, leading pirates to fame and glory, so that bards sand their fearless exploits." But Tilo abandons this exalted position when mystical sea serpents tell her about the existence of an Island upon which she, and other woman like her, can develop their supernatural talents to use them for a greater good. This isolated island is a heaven for these woman, who call themselves the Mistress of Spices and are under the care of the art of listening and controlling the spices, and that she can, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny thrust into the chaos of American life and the newness of a culture to which she must adapt.

Although Tilo has ready begun her diasporic journey, she does not feel the loss of a home, but rather a finding of many. When Tilo arrives on the Island, she and the other young girls like her are given new identities, indicating that the past is being relegated to memory and new person as are being forged. Tilo meets the first mother, a figure who foreshadows the paradoxical identity that Tilo will soon find herself grappling with, the first mother is elderly and maternal, representing the traditionalist notion of the South Asian woman in the domestic sphere. Yet at the same time, she is outside the boundaries of conventional culture, for she lives on an isolated island, possess magical powers and urges the young girls toward progression and change rather than the maintenance of the status Quo. Upon their arrival, the first mother tell the girls, “Daughters it is time for me to give you your new names. For when you came to this Island you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since.” (33) Tilo receives her new name and identity, leaving her childhood in a village in India behind her, and assuming a temporary persona that is of the uncertain present rather than the definitive and historical past. Tilo spends decades learning the delicate art of the spices, but the moment arrives when she must leave the island and continue the diasporic journey she has begun.

The Island is the first diasporic space that we encounter, and while it exhibits the same liminality and ambiguity as America does, Divakaruni clearly genders the island differently than she later will America. The island exudes femineity specifically Divakaruni constructs it as a maternal space with the figure of the first Mother and the presence of only females on the island. The Island nurtures Tilo, educating and preparing her for the next stage of life she will encounter when she leaves, and also imbuing Tilo with a sense of singularity of identity. While its women learn and grow, the Island itself never changes- the daily routines of the Mistress remain the same an ambiance of group unity amongst all females is fostered. Such community unity and support will later contrast sharply with the multiplicity and solitude that Divakaruni presents as indicative of the diasporic experience of America. Tilo is transported to America by means of “Shamapti’s Fire”, giant bonfire into which she steps and disappears. The symbolism of fire is obvious in its action, the destruction of present physical form, and a reduction to ashes that are then scattered to the far corners of the globe.

She emerges from the fire on a bed of ash, in a small spice in Oakland that she will make her own. The presence of this ash serves as an ambiguous omen, for Tilo enters into her new life upon the remnants of her old, with life and death inextricably linked together just as they are for the phoenix. Once in America, Tilo is immediately placed in yet another interstitial space, unable to forget her history but still wanting to move forward with the life. She lives “in between”, for the island of the past is no longer her home, while America is still too unfamiliar to describe as such. While Divakaruni had gendered the island as female, America is now portrayed as an almost hermaphroditic space, as ambiguous and uncertain in its many identities as Tilo is in hers, when in customers and friends alike. She experiences the sadness and anger of the young and confused adolescent Indian boy who is tormented at school while at the same time sympathizing with the pain of the newly-wed Indian bride who suffers from the terrors of domestic abuse.

Tilo’s consciousness, like America, is in between genders, processing the characteristics of both so she never has to “choose” one to or the other. Even though she now lives in California. Tilo finds that she cannot let go of her time on the Island with the First Mother and the other Mistresses. The memories are with her night and day, reminders and warnings of the past stream into her thoughts, crating conflict in her present life. Tilo also feels unmoored spatially, for America is only a temporary place for her: it is her home only insofar as she is fulfilling her duty as a Mistress of Spices. The first time that Tilo exits the comfort of her store, she experiences as intense wave of longing for a place to call home: “I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor

light, and I am stuck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness.” Not have a home in the traditional and permanent sense, and America is simply one point in between her geographical migration. Tilo has left the island but knows that she will someday return to it, to that place is still “in heaven” worlds, yet remains the only location in which she feels the comfort of belongingness. Tilo’s emotions are an extreme version of the diasporic experience of space in which condition are separated not by miles but by universe, where home does not exist except in the space of idealizing memory.

As Tilo observes the manner in which South Asians are treated in America, Tilo first encounters the brutality of racism when one of her working class patrons, Mohan is brutally assaulted by two younger White men one evening. As the men viciously beat Mohan, they scream, “Son of a bitch Indian, should stay in your own god dam country”(43). Mohan and his wife Veena see themselves as separate from other minority communities and wonder why they are the targets of racism. Tilo experiences Mohan’s pain and Veena’s suffering as if it were her own, crying out after him visiting of the beating, “My limbs ache as after a long illness, my sari is damp with shiver-sweat, and in my heart I cannot tell where your pain ends and mine begins. For your story is the story of all those I have learned to love this country, and so fear for”(44). Another young South Asian patron of Tilo’s is assaulted at school, taunted by white classmates who scream, “Talk English son of a bitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole”(45). Tilo’s patron sobs and tries to understand why the jeering must occur, wondering what it means to be called “nigger”, when he is not black but rather South Asian.

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