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NEW NAMES, NEW IDENTITIES OF TILO IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S  
"THE MISTRESS OF SPICES"

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ABSTRACT

Identity is a very interesting concept both in psychology and literature. This article traces the journey of Tilo who assumes new names with new identities in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. In the novel, Tilo has been addressed by nearly four different names representing four conflicting and confusing identities in a single life-time. She has many disguises and she keeps on changing her names throughout the novel, making clear the complex problem of identity crisis that the Indian try to cope with in a foreign land. She has been changing her name from Nayan Tara and then to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates then to Tilo and finally Maya when she finds her love.

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta, India. She attended a convent school in India run by Irish nuns during her childhood and later she got her bachelor's degree from the University of Calcutta. In 1976, at the age of 19, Divakaruni immigrated to the United States. She continued her education in the United States by earning a master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a versatile writer and her novels have won many literary awards, her eloquent novels treat the subjects of cultural accommodation, adaptation, assimilation, and acculturation. Some of her famous works are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *The Conch Bearer*, *Queen of Dreams* and *The Palace of Illusion*.

Identity is a very intriguing concept both in psychology and literature. Many modern literary texts revolve around this concept. Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams explain, "Identity as people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams, p. 2). Stuart Hall defines, "Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself" (Hall, pp 9-20). Alexander Wendt observes identities are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt, p. 397). The present

paper analyses the journey of Tilo who assumes new names with new identities in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is the story of a girl born with magical powers, kidnapped by pirates whom she rules later shipwrecked enchanted island, where she is tutored by a mystical figure transmigrated in an old woman body to an Indian grocery store, met Raven, an elusive American in quest of an earthly paradise breaks Tilo to Maya. The novel is set in Oakland California, is about a female Indian shop owner named Tilo who sells spices which act as remedies for those who come to her for help. The protagonist of the novel, Tilo, is a Mistress of spices, who is able to solve the problems of her customers miraculously with the help of the spices which they come to buy from her shop. She has been addressed by nearly four different names representing four conflicting and confusing identities in a single life-time.

Tilo, the protagonist of the novel was born in a lower class family as a third girl child and was considered as a burden by her parents as another dowry debt. 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. Being neglected by her parents she led a very careless life. Tilo was named Nayan-Tara at the time of her birth. Nayan-Tara means a Star of the Eye, but it could also be interpreted as a person who is starry-eyed. Just like the name, she has very high aspirations and is not content with whatever she has. She yearns for something more in life despite being worshipped by thousands of villagers as a goddess. She wants something drastic to break the monotony of her life. The filial love of a daughter is not received by Nayan Tara. She suffers from not being accepted and loved by her biological parents. Her parent's reaction contrasts with the meaning of her first name, "Star of the eye", yet, Nayan Tara is scared by her family and village because of her supernatural powers to see the future. Nayan Tara is forced to look for other persons who would bring her love. It is at this juncture that the pirates loot her village and kidnap her. She is renamed as Bhagyavati or one who is in charge of destiny. The pirates regard her as their lucky charm which would bring them to their destiny, while she herself is far away from her own destiny in life.

When Tilo was a girl, pirates storm into her home and they 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. But Tilo abandons this exalted position when mystical sea serpents tell her about the existence of an island upon which she, and other women like her, can develop their supernatural talents to use them for a greater good. This isolated island is a haven for these women, who call themselves the "Mistresses of Spices" and are under the care of the First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher of all the women.

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 personas 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. 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. She happens to meet the Old Woman whom she called the First Mother. The First mother promises her a sense of security and love. After being chosen as an apprentice by the Old One, the protagonist makes the request that she be addressed Tilo. She tries to justify her choice of the name Tilo by drawing a comparison to the Tilo or sesame seed which restores health, hope and gives a new lease of life to people suffering from several incurable diseases. But the Old One also reminds her that Tilo is the short form for Tilottama who was the most elegant of the dancers in Lord Indra's court. Indra is regarded as King of the gods in the Hindu pantheon.

Tilottama was cautioned by Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe according to Hindu mythology, that she would be condemned to seven lives of illness, disfigurement and leprosy if she falls in love with a human being. Tilottama disregarded the words of caution of Brahma and fell to the earth for her misdeeds and had to suffer greatly for it. The Old One reminds Tilo to think about Tilottama's fate if ever she is led by her overconfidence and arrogance to go against the norms set for a Mistress of spices. The Old One's gift of a knife

to Tilo while leaving the island is reminder of the narrow and dangerous path she had to tread for being a Mistress of spices.

The Old One warned the Mistresses before allowing them to enter into the Shampatti's fire that a Mistress, grown rebellious and failed her duty and must be recalled. She felt it fully, scorched and seared, the razors of flame might cut her flesh to strips, "Screaming, I smelt my bones shattered, skin bubbled and burst" (The Mistress of Spices, pp.58-59). Some mistresses were allowed to return to the island, learn and labor again by the spices. For some it was the end, crumbled to charcoal, a last cry dangling in the air like a broken cobweb. She remembered all this as she watched her sister- mistresses. One by one they walked into the fire, and when they reached its center they disappeared. There had been no agony on the faces of her sisters before they vanished. After the complication of their training each of the mistress has to go through the Sampath fire and choose the country they want to go. Once they take over the "Mistress-body" [59] they transform into old lady. When it was Tilo's turn that she was afraid and closed her eyes. She believed what the Old One had told them, "you will no burn you will not feel the pain. You will wake in your new body as though it has been yours forever." (The Mistress of Spices, p.60) As the Old One had said, it happened in reality. When Tilo stepped into the heart of Shampati's fire, she felt that the flame tongues licked like a dream at my melting skin, flame fingers pushed down my eyelids. (The Mistress of Spices, p.61). Soon after the training was over First Mother offered to choose the places to settle themselves. Tilo chooses Oakland The Old mother warns her against it and offers to choose another place but Tilo insists on the same First Mother developed a kind of liking towards Tilo from the beginning hence guides her at every moment. Old one gave each Mistress a going away gift. Some got flutes, incense burners, some looms and some pens but Tilo alone got a Knife, to keep under mattress before sleeping, to keep her chaste and from dreaming. The Knife is as cold as ocean water, supple edged as the yucca leaf that grows high on the sides of the volcano. The Old one taught Tilo to look into the heart of others but she doesn't teach her to read the future as it keeps her away from hoping and trusting the spices fully. While Tilo was about to leave the Island of Spices to America First Mother, from the folds of her clothing placed a slice of ginger root to give her heart steadfastness and to keep her strong in her vows. The taste of ginger root is the last taste of Island and first taste of America. The spices in Divakaruni's novel can cure a wound, they can help you survive, they can evoke love, and last but not least, they can heal one from nostalgia and homesickness. Each chapter is named after one particular spice and each explores how that spice has a unique name, one major function, several other functions, and how, as Tilo remarks, "each spice has a day special to it" (The Mistress of Spices, p.13). The spices can be seen as a representation of Indian culture. They also give Indians the taste and smell of home while in America.

Tilo loves spices, knows their origins, what their colors signify, their smells and even their true names. Their heat runs in her blood. From Amchur to Zafran all bow to her command, yield their properties and magic powers. The spices talked to Tilo to use them to get back her youth when she wanted. They told her if she wanted true change she must use them differently, must call on their powers. When she hesitated that her spells were not given for her to use. She thought that the spices knew right and wrong better far than her. At that time the singing of the spices from the inner room:

Come Tilo use us, we give ourselves gladly to you who have tended us so faithfully. Lotus root and abharak, aalaki and most of all makardwaj kingspice, we are yours to command. Use for love, for beauty, for your joy, because that is why we were made. (The Mistress of Spices, pp.201-2)

Every Indian spice was found in her store and when placed in her hand they speak to her and even direct her at necessary times. SPICE BAZAAR was the name of her shop fitted at the corner. The board faded into mud brown. Though the shop is been there for only a year, it looks as though it was there from many years. The walls inside the shop were veined with cobwebs and metal bins lost their shine. In the corner of the shop dust balls ere accumulated along with the desires exhaled by the customers. According to Tilo many people are attracted to her store as it attracts a large group of people for whom the store is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives full of problems. The Spice Bazar is visited by many faces belonging to different sections of the society and from various parts of India as well as other minorities like the rich men's wife, the

Mohans, Haroun, Jagjit, Ahuja's wife, Gaeta's grandfather and Kwis. Each face tells one unique story contributing to larger story of survival. Tilo the central figure of all these characters tries her best to give them solace until she is caught in her own desire. She bridges the gap between the Indian communities and she feels that Indians come to the spice store in quest of happiness.

There are certain codes of rules to be followed by all the mistresses which Tilo ultimately breaks during the course of her transformation. Tilo should never leave the store, she should never use the powers for herself but for others to help and last but not the least she should not make any physical contact with any human being. As the story progresses, readers find smaller stories intertwined where Tilo uses her powers to help others. While helping others, she is so taken into it that one after another she starts breaking the forbidden rules laid for Mistresses. Not only she breaks rules but she also allows herself to fall in love with a lonely American, Raven. Tilo is attracted towards Raven as he shares all his personal details including her mother Celestina. Raven does not like his mother as she pretends to be white and so he leaves her alone after he had started earning. He starts living his life without any aim. He earns and sends some money to his mother but will not even reply to her letters. And one day when he goes in search of his mother he gets to know that she is no more. He confides everything to Tilo as he thinks that his burden will be reduced. Raven is left all alone in this world with no one to share his life. He expects love from Tilo, and she offers him a spice to get some interest in his life. Tilo also falls in love with Raven. She starts waiting for him in the store. She is fully engrossed in his thoughts. Tilo finds herself irresistible in reciprocating to Raven's love and she says—"For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the Old One, not the awe I felt for the spices...the anger of spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose the love" (The Mistress of Spices, p. 219).

Tilo felt that she was doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom she could turn. For one to be happy, another must take upon herself the suffering. She spent her whole life for the welfare of others. Tilo, once, had the desire to live for her. She would make herself as ravishing as Tilottama, "dancer of the gods, for Raven's pleasure" (The Mistress of Spices, p.318). Tilo knows definitely that Shampathi's fire will take her as she has disobeyed her vows and Tilo meets Raven for the last time before entering into Shampathi's fire. She decides to give up herself to him in his apartment. For the first time she uses the powers of spices for herself. She uses Marakadwaj to make her extremely beautiful, thinking that Raven is more attracted towards beautiful girls and loves beauty. By using the spice Tilo becomes young and beautiful.

Tilo after consuming Makaradwaj, the most potent of the changing spices for three days, she was getting back her youth to give pleasure to her lover Raven who loved her sincerely. When the transformation was going on in her body, she felt the pain. But Tilo was too confident, who thought she could absorb the poison like —Shiva of the blue throat, who had risked all for nothing." ( The Mistress of Spices, p.278). Tilo got astonished feeling at her beauty. She was dazzled by the face looking back at her, young and ageless at once. The author described Tilo's "forehead was flawless like a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the til flower, —mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips color of there are no other words for this crushed red chilies." (The Mistress of Spices, p.297). When Tilo and Raven were indulging in love making, the spices encouraged her. The spice spoke to her in my ears, —Use everything. [...]Give and take back, teasing. As did the great courtesans in the courts of Indra the god king."( The Mistress of Spices, p.307). Tilo disobeys her vows by giving herself to Raven but making love with Raven brings Tilo a symbolic change making her more human rather than supernatural and its gives a sense of harmony with the outside world. Tilo enters the Shampathi's fire, leaves a note to Raven and loses consciousness.

I hope I have given you a little too. Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going – life or death, I donot know which – I will carry its brief aching sweetness. Forever (The Mistress of Spices, p.311)

In the morning when Raven comes in search of Tilo, there was a huge earthquake which destroys almost the entire Oakland and even her spice shop collapses. He finds her lying down unconscious takes her in

his hand and moves out to his car. They leave the place and go in search of his earthly paradise. But Tilo after going a little distance stops the car and looks at Oakland which is on fire. She changes her mind to return to Oakland and help people over there. She thinks that it is because of her that everything happened and she wants to help people as she did before. Even Raven changes his mind and returns with Maya, the new name given to Tilo to lead a new life. Maya is not anymore the mistress of spices but a woman who has accepted her life a woman who loves a man named Raven, even though she may not accepts to live with him in the conventional way. Love has settled within her mind and body, she closes her shop and eventually frees herself from the enclosed room of SPICE BAAZAR thus significantly breaking it free from narrowly divided rules and regulation of the society.

In the novel, Tilo has many disguises and she keeps on changing her names throughout the novel, making clear the complex problem of identity crisis that the Indian try to cope with in a foreign land. She has been changing her name from Nayan Tara as a good daughter then to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates then to Tilo and finally Maya when she finds her love. Tilo manages to define herself at the very end of the novel as "Maya", a Hindu term that defines the everyday world of desire, pain and joy. "Maya" represents the illusionary power of the world.

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