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## Acquaintance of Women between Myth and Reality: An Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

Ms. S. Bhuvaneshwari,

Assistant Professor of English,  
Sourashtra College,  
Madurai.

### Abstract

The presence of myth in Indian novel writing is nothing new and while works be plentiful in examples of using cosmological concepts, mythological stories as parallels or allegories, or just simple images. Writers of Indian origin living abroad like Salman Rushdie, Amita Ghosh, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to name a few have explored these concepts and it is true that with Rushdie arrives an awareness of other religious systems interacting with Hinduism or Islam and questioning of the self's own religious tradition. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress Of Spices*, the imagery of water and sun or fire, each develops the theme which reaches beyond the frame of the woman's condition when approaching it, as will be shown, in a different manner. Divakaruni uses imagery of water as a medium through which the characters attain the transformation of their identity. In the Hindu cosmology water is primordial for the coming of the universe into existence, with all its particles, including human beings, and for birth and rebirth. Fire and Water both associated with destruction and sacrifice. Realizing the loss of her youth on meeting Raven and the bougainvillea girls, Tilo undergoes an acute sense of despair and yearns to become youthful by using the spices personally. It is inherent in the human nature, perhaps a biological fact, that the sensual things and worldly joy attract Tilo and also give a new meaning to her lonely life.

**Keywords:** cosmological, bougainvillea, destruction, existence and tradition.

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"When I was a child in India, my grandfather would tell me stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the ancient Indian epics, imaginative roots are in India, and always will be."

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

The presence of myth in Indian novel writing is nothing new and while works be plentiful in examples of using cosmological concepts, mythological stories as parallels or allegories, or just simple images. Writers of Indian origin living abroad like Salman Rushdie, Amita Ghosh, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to name a few have explored these concepts and it is true that with Rushdie arrives an awareness of other religious systems interacting with Hinduism or Islam and questioning of the self's own religious tradition

First, a new tendency in the treatment of myth, more precisely, Hindu cosmological imagery appears with regard to the treatment of the women's question. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress Of Spices*, the imagery of water and sun or fire, each develops the theme which reaches beyond the frame of the woman's condition when approaching it, as will be shown, in a different manner. Divakaruni uses imagery of water as a medium through which the characters attain the transformation of their identity. In the Hindu cosmology water is primordial for the coming of the universe into existence, with all its particles, including human beings, and for birth and rebirth. Fire and Water both associated with destruction and sacrifice.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni lets her main character Tilo go through several different identities and each metamorphosis is accompanied by either fire or water. If the fire at her birth cannot be extinguished and fire is put to the village by the pirates when she who was born as Nayan-Tara, an unwanted child because a girl, turns into Bhagyavathi as if to signify that both her existences will be related to sacrifice and self-destruction, her passage through water already brings her nearer to rebirth or transformation in terms of a free self-asserting individual.

On the spice island she lives with her new identity, her re-birth being indicated by her arrival there naked and by the fact she chooses her new name, Tilo, herself. After Mistress were trained

with the art of spices, the Old Mother took them up into the core of the sleeping volcano, to make Shampati fire through which they reached the place where they wished to go. Nevertheless, fire is still the milestone between her 'Island' and 'Store' existence because her task is exactly sacrifice, to help the immigrants in the fulfilment of their needs and desires while totally denying her own.

When the final earthquake comes to mark the end of a world, the order of things which is no longer convenient, their transformation is accomplished through crossing several times the water and fire entity. Even though the earthquake had risen from the depths of the sea, one is led to associate its origin to Tilo's efforts to start Shampati's fire. Divakaruni suggests the idea of being reborn every time after the symbolic death of her protagonist's previous identity just like the mythical bird phoenix which is reborn out of its own ashes.

Myth need to be alive only if it metamorphose in relation to the contemporary times and culture. Thus have several novelists, dramatists and poets who through their ingenious use of myths have constructed a link between the past and the present and between different ages and culture. Thus, Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* collapsed the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic to create a modern fable.

*The Mistress of Spices* belongs to the genre of Magic realism. Magic has always been an integral part of different genres like epics, fairytales, adventure stories handed over orally from generation to generation, drama and poetry. Myth might contain magical happenings and events. Magic realism is a natural part of the literary tradition of the Indian mind. The change of form, shape and size between human and animal world and time being elastic is common in the Indian classic mythology. It is absorbed with unquestionable logic. Time is a conspicuous theme, displayed as cyclical instead of linear. Another complex theme in magic realism is the carnivalesque. The concept of carnival celebrates the body, the senses and the relations between humans.

Chitra Divakaruni pays tribute to her ancestral and cultural Indian background by adapting and combining mythology and magic realism in *The Mistress of Spices*. It carries the

image of the island of spices, the timeless first mother, the legend of Shampati, speaking serpents and distortion of time. Tilo, her magical power to command the spices, her travel through continents and time effortlessly, her telepathic relationship with the old one are some of the elements of magic realism. Here, the supernatural is integrated into the fictional world. The presence of the supernatural is associated to the primeval or exotic Indian mentality. The spice power and the social consciousness of Tilo, in solving their maladies, show the life affirming side of the carnivalesque.

Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices* blend myth and magic realism to celebrate trans-cultural space in America. The *Mistress of Spices* celebrates female trans-cultural space through immigration into the new 'home' land America. It combines realism, fantasy and magic realism to challenge hegemony, distort time, and to illustrate a deeper and true reality of diaspora today.

This narrative concentrates on an Indian immigrant Tilo, a young woman born in another age and time and trained in the curative art of Indian spices. Snakes take Tilo to the far away magical island of the first mother and spices take her to the 'Spice Bazaar', her home come store in Oakland. In Indian folk belief, spices are used for more than flavourings. They have magical powers all their own and they provide remedies for physical maladies as well as cures for spiritual ills.

The novel written in the first person narrative, Tilo introduces herself as the mistress of spices and 'the architect of the immigrant dream'. Her name signifies Tilo, the sun burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment, life-giver, restorer of health and hope. Tilo also refers to the extended name Tilottama, the most beautiful apsara of Rain - God Indra's Court. The 'Mistress' is a deliberate gendering of the word 'Master', one who has supernatural powers over spices. Tilottama, the powerful mistress of spices, negotiates a new identity and chooses a name Maya, which according to Hindu terminology, defines the everyday world of desire, pain and joy as the world of illusion, a place of inevitable sorrow from which the Hindu is trying to escape.

Chitra Divakaruni may have been influenced by the mythological tale of Yayati in shaping Tilo. The Yayati syndrome is said to exist when there lays a wish, amounting to a yearning,



for youthfulness when one is on the verge of losing it or has already lost it. Realizing the loss of her youth on meeting Raven and the bougainvillea girls, Tilo undergoes an acute sense of despair and yearns to become youthful by using the spices personally. It is inherent in the human nature, perhaps a biological fact, that the sensual things and worldly joy attract Tilo and also give a new meaning to her lonely life. Geeta herself, nevertheless, cannot be identified as just Indian anymore, "Geeta whose name means sweet song... Geeta who is Indian and America all mixed together into a new melody..."

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