

The Traumatized Psyche in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

¹Anjana R B, ²Beena S Nair

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri Campus, Kollam

²Assistant Professor(Sr. Grade), Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri Campus, Kollam

Abstract

Childhood experiences can create a mark in the character and attitude towards life of an individual. One reflects on what he sees around him, what he is told off by others and his experiences. It is based on all these that one creates his Identity. For women even this Identity is induced by others – family and society. She is said what is right and what is wrong and indeed given a manifesto of life. She tends to follow it knowingly or unknowingly and it is at a later stage that she starts her Quest for Identity. This paper throws light on the life experiences leading to trauma in Tilo, the protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo is unaware that she is being controlled or trapped into a pool of mysteries. Though she attains nor is awarded the identity of *The Mistress of Spices*, she is bound by a number of rules restricting her wishes and desires. This paper reflects on how the identity and mystical power she attained becomes a bane to her. The story reveals the traumatic experiences the protagonist had to undergo while she helps out the people around her using her mystical power at the same time failing to fulfill her desires. She is an epitome of the normal women who has the same flesh and blood of a human but whose desires and wishes never find an outlet. The paper reveals her experiences from childhood to adulthood, the trajectory of her Identity through names and situations – from Nayantara to Maya, who is torn between the sensual pleasures and her mystical and healing powers.

Keywords: *The Mistress of Spices*, Identity, Trauma, Women, Childhood experiences, duty, desires.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. It sets in after any distressing or life threatening event. Jasbir Jain states Trauma as an experience and as a process is transmuted into a literary artifact through indirections. Often it is written about through an observer status, from the outside. In such a case there is likely to be in depth intertwining of the writer's mind with the trauma victim – a kind of getting in and out of it, a sharing of the experience of

suffering and loss. While a statement may prod one to think and look for a solution, a literary piece pulls the reader in and transfers the anxiety to the reader, thus widening the sphere of the traumatic experience. *The Mistress of Spices* (2005), a film directed by Paul Mayeda Berges based on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) deals with the life of a traumatized women, Tilo which is acted out by Aishwarya Rai. The movie was a huge hit with the intermingling of the traditions and female self. The film itself introduces it as:

"India is an ancient land famed for its myths, magic and traditions. But when the people

leave to start new lives in the faraway lands of America and Europe, what happens to the magic left behind? This is an immigrant's tale about keeping the magic alive."

Tilo, the protagonist was born to a middle class village family where she was taken up with avoidance for being a girl child. As she grows up she starts to expose her mystical powers like foretelling future, giving blessings to villagers etc and she was indeed visited by people from far places. The fame she gained ended up in a bandit attack in the village and Tilo was kidnapped. In the midst of the river she escapes and finally reaches the sea shore where she was taken care of by an old lady who was known as the First Mother. She became her disciple along with other young girls and have studied the Magic of Spices. Attaining the title of "Mistress of Spices" she moves to California carrying all the mystical and magical powers of spices for the betterment of people there. She along with other Mistresses were asked to abide by three rules, on disobeying them, the magic of spices will ruin her life along with people who uses her spices. The First Mother says "If a Mistress fails in her duty, the Spices will punish her." The three rules which the First Mother demands is that look after the desires of others and never use the magic of spices for yourself, secondly, never leave the Spice store and thirdly, never touch anyone else's skin.

Imbibing all the rules, Tilo moves to California where she sets up a Spice Bazaar and used her knowledge and power of spices to heal her customers who kept coming to her Bazaar for help. Her regular customers were Lalita, Jaggit and Haroun whom all were satisfied with her Magic of spices. As time passes, she meets Doug, an American for whom she falls. Yet remembering the rules of spices she tries to keep him back. But this goes in vain. It was from this point that she started drifting away from the life of Mistresses getting carried away by the mind fluctuations whether to follow her heart or brains – to lead a sensual life or a life as Mistress of Spices. She says to Doug "Every man has a spice". She explains that turmeric is hope for rebirth, Chilly for cleanser of evil, fennel for cooling tempers, Kalijeri for reducing pain and suffering. Yet when Doug

comes for his spice, she gives him the wrong spice intentionally for her selfish motives, thereby breaking the first rule.

Tilo once moves out of the Bazaar to help her customer Haroun when she foresees that he will meet with an accident. She couldn't meet him and that day ends up spending time with Doug. By the time she reaches, she witnesses Haroun's accident. Hence, though she tried to help him by coming out of Bazaar, that didn't work out which makes her breaking the second rule. At the end of the story she realizes that the spices have started punishing her and the power of spices has started working negatively on her customer's life. This made her decide to go back to India shutting up the Spice Bazaar. So she decides to meet Doug for the last time which ended up in making love, thereby breaking the third rule of spices. The movie ends with an earthquake and destruction of her bazar which is symbolic to the destruction of established order and crumbling of the segmented cultures of the world. The last sequence presents Doug and Tilo trying to rebuild the shop and city.

Trauma inflicts in the life of character Tilo right from the childhood to the end of her life as a Mistress of Spices. Childhood trauma has made its mark in the psyche of the character from the birth – she was not accepted by the family for being a girl child. From the avoidance, she attained a great acceptance when her mystical powers were revealed. Later on she was accepted in the village as a holy figure or as a vampire having magical powers. A 10-year-old girl was made to behave as a 25-year-old which made her loose the charm of her childhood. She never got a chance to play and spend time with her village friends like others did. She was always entangled in her duties of foretelling and blessing others. An Identity was being built on her even from her childhood days which never had a pinch of human touch and emotions. Being the victim of a kidnap and witnessing the destructions of the bandit attack on her family, her mind has become numb even at the early age without knowing that it was her boon that has become a bane for her family.

The Magic of Spices has induced a feeling of fear and threat in her. She adamantly believed that she cannot live without spices and that her life is connected or rather dependent on the spices. This fear of losing the magic of spices made her lead a detached life from external world. Though she had a liking for the external world outside the spice Bazaar, she always feared that her likings may end up her life. This fear makes herself restricted from all the likings and thoughts and even her emotions. Chilly – the spice of cleanser of evil is often showcased in the film. Chilly with its acute redness instills a kind of threat or warning in the psyche of Tilo.

Trauma works in Tilo as a conflict between the Duty and the Desire – whether to follow her brain or her heart. She believed that the only duty in her life is to protect and save her customers using her art of Spices, not using it for herself. She falls in the dilemma of using it for herself for the sake of Doug. She feels that it is her duty to save Haroun for which she even breaks her rule of getting out of the bazaar. She leads the life of the Mistress of Spices as her duty to paying back to her First Mother and to the betterment of the humanity. She at times feels that her life has been bounded into the four walls of the Spice Bazaar. She was entangled into the clutches of the Magic of Spices. The Power which is sacred and of high value restricts her from leading a normal life fulfilling her dreams and desires. As a foil to her fulfillment of her duties, she is an epitome of a normal women with flesh and blood, having feeling and emotions to the colors of life. She urges to lead the life of a normal girl – role of Mother, child, sister, daughter, lover and wife. This is evident from her passionate observing of life outside the bazaar and also accepting her customers to be her own ones, trying to console them and tackling their problems. Her heart proposes her for a life outside the Spice Bazaar, life of a normal women making up all familial roles.

As the story progresses, we can find that the Mistress of Spices is known by different names. In the shell of a name her Identity shifts. She is first known by the name Nayanthara – the seer of stars. She was called

by this name by her villagers accepting her magical powers of foreseeing the future. This soon changed to Bhagyavathi as her fame has brought prosperity to her village and her family. She continued with this for long and later when she moved to California, her name was changed to Tilo. She came to be known as the Mistress of Spices with her name Tilo. Towards the end of the story, when the Spice bazaar burned down and the Old Tilo vanished, she came out as a Maya – leading a new life. This Identity change has instilled a trauma in the character as for accepting which is her true self. The change in Identity made her believe that name is no longer an essence of life. The quest for identity has probed in the protagonist as she was titled the Mistress of Spices at her early age and was forced to carry that identity throughout her lifetime. She was doubtful of her own position and identity. She was even forced to structure her life limiting to that Identity.

The conflict of Love v/s duty arises in her relationship with Doug. Out of love for Doug, she wants him to be with her. When Doug comes for a Spice for himself, though Tilo's mind offers her with a spice which will make him move away from her, Tilo purposefully gives him the wrong spice so that he doesn't move from her vicinity. It is because of the absolute love she has for Doug that she forgets her duty or rule of not using the spices for herself. She used the spice for her personal gain – her Love. At this point, she is tattered between her duty to use spices for others and not for herself when she badly needs one. She even rejects and tries to conceal her love thinking about her responsibility towards the Spices and her identity as Mistress of spices.

Immigrant Trauma is well evident in the story through the character Tilo. She is deeply mourning in her heart for staying away from her land, she has longing for her family and village – the love and care she used to get. This is evident from her memories of India. We can trace out a feeling of alienation and Cultural conflict in the character Tilo. Another similar character is the old man who often visits Tilo's shop for Spices. He says that he is not at all satisfied with his life in California along with

his children and grandchildren. He says Tilo that he cannot accept the modern ways of living of his family members and he objects with his Granddaughter's marriage to a Muslim. He is presented as a man who strongly holds the cultural values and customs of his Mother country. It is Tilo who is the only person to whom he could open up his mind and it is she who suggests him ways to come out of this trauma, consoling him.

The Central theme of the story could be read from the lens of the Decentralization of Power. The Power, which is always connected with Man, which decides the destiny of life is now shifted to the Spices. The Spices which becomes a part of our cuisine has an inseparable role in determining or rather modifying the life of The Mistress of spices – Tilo. Man becomes a mere puppet in the Magic of Spices. The story stresses on the colour Red which is both depicted as beautiful and threatening. Chilly is often used as a symbol to portray this concept. Red which denotes danger or a warning, through chilly warns Tilo not to move out of the Bazaar and also to hold her thoughts. This in turn has inflicted trauma in the psyche of the protagonist Tilo. As Laurell K Hamilton says "There are wounds that never show on body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds."

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