

Nature in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract: Nature is God's precious gift to man. The Life of the human beings is highly interlinked with their environment. Literature which deals with nature is called as green literature. Ecocriticism brings connectivity to nature, literature and human life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the renowned diasporic writers. Her debut novel *The Mistress of Spices* is filled with environmental imageries. Spices in the novel are also personified to display its inevitable role in the novel. It is about the magical properties of spices and the relationship between spices and human beings. The writer has employed a lot of natural elements in the novel gives vivid descriptions. This paper studies the effects of spices, the role of nature and environment in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* from an ecocritical perspective.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Woman and Nature, and Spices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among the most talented women writers of Indian Diaspora. She herself is an immigrant settled in America. She has written eleven novels, three anthologies, four poetry collections, and five adult children books. Her works mostly deal with the themes of diaspora, gender discriminations, and ecofeminism, etc. She is well known for her unique style of narrating the plot. *The Mistress of Spices* is the debut novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which is shortlisted for Orange Prize in 2000. It portrays the day- to- day life of immigrants living in California. In the novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has employed a lot of natural elements to make the descriptions more vivid. For example, spices play a key role in the novel next to the protagonist of the novel. The whole novel revolves around the protagonist and her relationship with spices. Tilo, the heroine of the novel upholds the power of sensing spices. Spices were also personified to display their inevitable role in the novel. The attempt is made in the paper to analyze the effects of spices on the pivotal character, the role of nature and environment in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* from an ecocritical perspective.

Nature is God's precious gift to all. It provides food, cloth, and shelter. Nature is omniscient. It can be a creator, preserver, protector as well as destroyer. Nature holds an unsurpassable place in one's life. The Life of human beings is highly interlinked with the environment they live in. As literature scrutinizes human life it has recorded the importance of nature in it. Any Literature which deals with nature is called as green literature. In the United Kingdom, the study on green literature is called as green studies, whereas in the United States it is called as Ecocriticism. Criticism which combines literature and ecology is called as ecocriticism or green studies. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment." (Barry, 239) It is an umbrella term which covers various ecological theories like anthropocentrism, ecofeminism, ecocentrism, etc. The term 'Ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his essay entitled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* published in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in 1978. It was derived from two Greek words *oikos* and *kritis* meaning house and judge respectively. It is an earthly centered perspective in reading literature. It brings awareness about the bond between nature and life. Ecocriticism serves as a bridge between literature, nature and human beings.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, the heroine of the novel is a trained expert in perceiving the secret powers of spices, dedicates her life to spices. Her knowledge helps her in sensing the problems of people. Tilo (Nayan Tara) was born in India. Nayan Tara means the star of eye. She is enabled to sense the problems of people. As she was a girl child she was neglected by the family members. Once in her childhood when her mother was not able to feed due to fever nature becomes Tilo's mother and feeds her. Nature has the quality of supporting people during the critical situation. The novelists writes that: "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". (MS 7) The author brings the heroine closer to nature and entangles her entire life with different elements of nature from her birth. She was considered a special child as she had an inborn magical power of predicting the future which she uses for solving the problems of the villagers. She becomes luxurious and brings wealth to her family. She has really become a flower grown in the dust as her name Nayan Tara refers to.

Change is the only unchangeable thing in the life. Nature serves as a bringer of change in the protagonist's life. As her fame went beyond seas and mountains pirates kidnap her and make her as queen of pirates and call her as

‘Bhagyavathi’. Because they think that she will bring luck in their life. In order to describe the appearance and the wealth of the pirates Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes:

The pirates had teeth like polished stone and scimitars with handles made from the tusks of boars. Their fingers were laden with rings, amethyst and beryl and carbuncle, and around their necks hung sapphires for luck at sea. Polished with whale oil, their skin gleamed dark as mahogany or pale as birchbark, for pirates come from many races and many lands. (MS 17)

She doesn't want to remain as a pirate queen. In order to escape from the pirates she sends her calling thought over the water and it helps her with a typhoon. She gets released and is saved by the serpents of under water. Water and fire become an important part of her life that change her life from a village belle to a pirate queen and now takes her to an unknown world of spices and magic led by the serpents. She jumps into the water and in the morning she found herself naked on the shore. The nakedness mentioned here also reflects the nature and it also refers to her openness to adopt the future. Later, she is taken to a mystifying island where she is trained by the First Mother to use spices as healing elements. She is chosen by the First Mother as the spice girl and she is named as Tilo after sesame, the spice of nourishment. It means life-giver, and restorer of health and hope. The sesame seed is known for its tiny sharp flower that mothers pray for their children to have a nose shaped like it. It is golden brown in colour under the sway of planet Venus. Sesame ground into the paste with sandalwood sesame cures diseases of heart and liver. When sesame is fried its own oil restores luster if one is lost interest in one's life. The name Tilo also refers to the Apsara Tilottama in the court of God Indra. She is the most elegant of all dancers. She is crest jeweled among women.

Tilo's life is highly intertwined with nature as she has the unique power of understanding the spices. She identifies herself as a mistress of spices. She acts according to the instruction given by the spices around her. She introduces:

I am a Mistress of Spices.

I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island.

But the spices are my love. (MS 1)

Tilo is running a famous spice bazaar in California. All spices in her shop bow to her command and yield their magic powers and their properties. Every Indian spice found in her store can communicate with her. And when she places her hand they speak to her and even direct her during necessary times. Even though it supports her in various situations it didn't let her go beyond the rules. As it serves as a companion to Tilo it has the rights to warn and punish her. As red chilli is a symbol of danger it warns her when she thinks about the American guy, Raven. "For a moment I hold their glances and the air around us gross still and heavy. A few chillies drop to the floor, scattering like green rain". (MS 6) In order to give importance to spices, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has personified the spices. They talk, sing and express their emotions. Tilo says, "In the store spices displeasure waits for me. I must beg pardon". (MS 30) Spices are not depicted simply as an ingredient added in recipes but as an embodiment of the native culture. Jayashree Singh quotes in her article Spice's Action in the Internal World as: "Divakaruni takes up the image of the spices and the woman as complimentary, and fuses them in the enigmatic and mysterious character of the mistress of the spices. But here the spices also represent the heritage of tradition that forms and restrains the mistress". (Jayashree Singh 307)

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* is divided into 15 chapters of which thirteen chapters are named after different spices such as Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalo Jire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makaradwaj, Lotus Root and Sesame which reveal their powers and their origins. She has also presented an astounding story on spices with a mix of nature. Thus, Nature becomes an essential part in the setting of the novel. It helps her describe her thoughts in grandeur. It also helps her in portraying the emotions and the feeling of both the author and the narrator. It also reflects the tradition of the land the spices belong to. The First Mother lives on the island where Tilo lands and spends her time among the serene yet mystical island to learn from the old one. From the magical island of spices, Tilo is transported through the fire of Shampati (the Eastern Phoenix) to Oakland. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses the elements of nature to transcend the world of nature. The novelist writes that "Seamiest, the island casts its pearl light around us." While describing the island she notes: "The sky is black and smoky. There is no sky, and no sea either." The author uses similes, metaphors, and adjectives from the nature to bring depth to her narrations and descriptions. She describes the other spice girls as "they become water wraiths, spirits of mist and salt, crying in the voice of the gulls. (MS34)

While the mistresses are leaving the island they says: "We had known it would be hard to leave this island of women where on our skin the warm rain fell like pomegranate seeds, where we woke to birdcall and slept to the First Mother's singing, where we swam naked without shame in lakes of blue lotus". (MS 54)

Nature is filled with colours. Each colour has its own significance. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni had cleverly employed colours to describe certain things. Yellow colour signifies the new-year where green suggests harvest, and red denotes the luck of bride. The five elements of nature the air, water, earth, space, and fire are skilfully interwoven in the story. The Shampati fire which turns Tilo into a spice girl, the water through which Bhagawati sends messages, the names of mistresses and even the figures of speech used in the novel are eternal parts of nature. Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni uses nature to put forth the oxymoron in the sentence “Raven, tonight lay on my windowsill amritanjan, ointment that is like cold fire, hot ice.” (MS 205).

Nature serves as a deciding authority in the novel. Raven, the lover of Tilo is a wealthy man addicted to the drug. His life is refreshed by the advice of a raven that he finds in a hospital. Raven is instructed by the raven to meet Tilo which brings him the joy of life. Maya, the name given by Raven to Tilo, reveals the reality of her thinking over earthly paradise “High up in the mountains, pine and eucalyptus, damp odour of redwood, bark and cone” (MS 199). However, they realise that a new world can be created from the ruins of the devastated world. The novel reads: Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. (MS 315).

This way the cycle of nature also comes along with the whole story from the beginning until the end. From the birth of Nayantara as a foreseer and further in her life journey nature is preserved and reinstated towards the end of the novel. The powers given to Tilo are taken back and is destroyed as she breaks the rules of getting emotionally and physically attached to someone else. Towards the end of the novel, the devastating earthquake symbolizes the Indian philosophy of creation, preservation, and destruction completing the cycle. The earthquake in the novel comes as *dues ex machina* to resolve the critical situation of Tilo. The earthquake destroys everything but not her faith to emerge from the ash. Nature is the great nurturer of life. It can protect, it can demolish, and it can rejuvenate life from the destruction. As Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Queen of Dreams* writes that “Death is not the end it can be a beginning too”. (QOD 20)

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* is filled with the elements of nature. It portrays the inevitable place of nature in the life of the people. It has brought out the different faces of nature. Thus the novel is written with a message that nature should be protected.

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