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Exegesis as Exemplification of the Character Tilottama in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

This paper explores present status of women, which pressurizes them to conclude their life before it naturally happens to them. Through this novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni introduces the protagonist Tilottama to exemplify this world, about the deconstruction of the taboo as the social construct, which has been acted as the shackles for the women to suppress their feelings, which results in the prevention of their self-development. It was once the intensity of the men purposely to make the women weak because every man are well aware of the capability, strength and perseverance of women in achieving their desired goals. Through this novel, it also reveals the author's indignation towards the violation against women and insists the fact that if the woman is very happy and satisfied, she definitely can make everyone around her happy throughout her life.

Keywords: Mistress, First Mother or the Old One, spices, exemplify, Magic realism, Folklore, Personification, Symbolism, Immigrant.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a famous author, recipient of many awards and has proved herself as a versatile personality in delivering all her talents through poems, short-story, and novels and has involved herself in teaching, as the professor exclusively for creative writing. She is basically people person that is why she connects herself with her readers through the

social media namely *Facebook* and *Twitter*. She is the activist who founded and served the organization Maitri, a helpline in San Francisco, and Daya, in Houston for South Asian women immigrants, have found themselves in an abusive situation and Pratham Houston, a non-profit organisation to help in educating the underprivileged children in India. She is the winner of numerous awards, including the *American Book Award*. For this paper, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is used to explore the character of Tilottama and about the rules associated with being a mistress and her violation of them, as a representation of all women. The author attempted to exemplify Tilottama as a path finder for all women endeavoring to satisfy their own needs and as well as take care of their family members and other dependents.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is about a girl named Nayan-Tara, who was considered only as another dowry-debt, definite impending investment for every girl children at the time of their marriage. She was left unattended in the village. One day, the villagers realized her fortune-telling ability and her fame spreaded. In addition, she has other incarnations in her single life itself at every stage of her life: as Nayan Tara, the fortune-teller and Sorceress, as Bhagyavathi, the Pirate-queen, and Tilottama, the apprentice of spices and the mistress of spices.

Each of her name has a special meaning attached to it: Nayan-Tara means star seer, a flower that grows by itself on the road side; Bhagyavati means fortune provider; Tilottama means the subsistence of whole life itself; and finally the name Maya represents the supernatural power that keeps this world on its course every day. As the Mistress of spices, she is expected to leave all her desires and wishes behind, and only sacrifice the throughout the remainder of her life to help all the customers who approach the Spice Bazaar, in Oakland, Esperanza Street, especially the South Asian Immigrants or Immigrant Indians or otherwise called Hindoosthani's. She has to live only for the spices and her customers alone.

This paper focuses on the prevailing conditions of women, irrespective of the places they live. Each and every line presents about the incarnation that women take, to shift her whole self from one struggle to another in the relationship's web. Apart from family, husband and children, the women too in need of personal space to live her own life of their own wishes. The protagonists Tilottama in this novel represents the women of the south Asian community, their lives after marriage, as well as the rules, customs, and rites of that particular house. The protagonist Tilottama belonged to the spices after the ritual of the Shampati's fire, and the duty assigned to her to service the people of the place, where she has specified with the First Mother or the Old One. In connection with the service as the mistress of the store, there were rules to be followed like she has been into the mother-in-law's house: should not love and touch anyone except the spices and store's things which are considered as her family; should not step out of the spice bazaar; shouldn't give any things as free to the customers etc., because these actions will definitely bind her emotionally and prevent her to continue with her duties. The author's

intention might be for having created the protagonist Tilottama to exemplify to the women community that inspite of the rules she has crossed the boundary to live her own life and started to know the world to the fullest. Through this novel, the author deconstructs social construct that has been the taboo for several years. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the protagonist Tilottama exegetically on the positive note, to make the women readers to understand that they too have life of their own as individuals and they too can attain their achievement and success through developing themselves rather than treating someone's success, that is her husband or children's success as her own. To be frank, the women have to realize that they too have the separate self and they have to respect it by giving life to their own wishes.

In this novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni has appropriately used the literary terms namely magic realism, folklore, personification and symbolism. Magic Realism is a pattern which shifts forever that presents the story with fantasies and dreams along with fairy tales and myths. All these terms have been used in the perfect way from the beginning to end, especially the shifts, the protagonist has taken from one life to another: when the Mistress has got new birth through Shampati's fire; when the protagonist has used her calling thought to bring the pirates to while away her boredom; during the description of the island ; appearance of the snakes; through the appearance of the First Mother or the Old One to Spice Bazaar; when the Mistress tries to cure the customers' trouble through the spices; when the Mistress uses her vision to see the things clearly and sense the things; when the First Mother or the Old One travels through Spirit-travelling to alert the Mistress of spices and uses the thunder-writing to communicate with the God, and in addition to all the above stated things, the story of Illwal, " Fennel which the Sage Vashishta ate after he swallowed the demon Illwal so he would not come back to life again" (Divakaruni 106). Moreover, about the story of Tilottama, one of the dancers in Rain God Indira's court has been stated by the First Mother or the Old One.

Folklore means the oral compilation mixed with sayings and social truths that is handed over to the next generation in the oral form rather than in the written form. The folklore stories have been used in this novel are the story of Tilottama – the dancer of Rain God Indira's Court, the story of the snakes and through the snakes the story of Samudra Puri, which has been submerged under the water, the story about the First Mother or the Old One, about the island of spices through the snakes and importantly the story of the spices by the spices itself and that is where the literary term Personification has been applied. Personification describes the expression or the voice given to the non-living object or the vegetable-like things to make the concept to reach the readers in the very effective way. In everyone's life in general, the myths and folklore are taking its space through the elders at home to refine the children from their coarse path.

Above all, Symbolism has been rightly fixed in the novel to deliver the concept of life. The symbols that have been used in this novel are the knife and the snake, to make the readers to understand the concept of life and indication of other births of Tilottama, the Mistress of spices

too. "Symbolism – that is a coherent system composed of a number of symbolic elements -" (Abrams 397)

In this novel, the protagonist has been sent as the Mistress of spices to act as a consul in the foreign country to help their customers, if they have any problem as an immigrant. Since, this is the first novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, it has automatically revealed a lot about the author's experience as an immigrant and how she might have had expected anyone to guide her in her unknown crowd when she stepped into it. That thought actually might have had acted as a catalyst to frame a character called Tilottama. The thought is revealed clearly as when the First Mother or the Old One has instructed the Tilottama as, "Remember why you are going,' the Old One said. 'To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need' " (Divakaruni 68).

The protagonist Tilottama has been purposely sent to run the Spice Bazaar in Oakland, California, since the Indians wherever they are, they would be attracted towards the names of the shops in Indian, the spices they would use to enrich the taste of the food they eat and the hotel that display the list of any food items they eat in their homeland or the people of their own kind with their mother tongue. The author especially wanted the immigrants of her kind need not get into the trouble in getting the assistance from their own race and kind.

Tilottama has been sent only to run the Spice Bazaar, but apart from that she has stacked the video movies of black and white. The reason behind that the author's intention might be to make the second and third generation immigrants, to understand the nuances of their Indian culture and to realize the identity of, who they are, their race and their homeland. It would definitely instigate them to know the reason for their deportation. In this part, Tilottama has acted as a messenger as well as silent activist to spread the values of their homeland, culture, and tradition, spices' value and speciality of their own race, which in turn, she has been expected to make the quest in the second and third generation immigrants to know their history and their origin.

Before becoming the Mistress itself, the protagonist has known and used some of the charms, chants and calling thought. The reason behind the author's idea for having chosen a person with all the sensing power is to extract the problems from the customers and assist them accordingly with the spices. Since, the majority of Indians are said to be introverts, they may need in of a person who is an expert in introspection and extra sensory perception (ESP) like things in knowing the problems to console, counsel, and heal them such as the Mistress of spices, Tilottama with the spices in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* and the protagonist in the novel *Queen of Dreams* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is to interpret the dreams of the immigrants to make aware and prepare them for their future. On the topic "Why are so many Indians introverted?" The *Times Magazine* has made the survey on "why are so many Indians introverted?" and in an response Vijay Kumar in his reply, "Having worked with Indians, Americans and British and of course being Indian myself, I have to agree to the statement that

very many Indians are introverts, shy and not very outspoken. I myself am extremely reserved while in India, but somewhat find myself talk confidently in the US” (www.quora.com).

Accordingly, the spices are to be given to various customers at least to lessen the pain if not to make them happy or altogether to free them from their troubles. Turmeric and Fennel to Ahuja’s wife, Lalita; Cinnamon to Jagjit; Fenugreek to Ratna and Binita; Asafoetida and Peppercorn to Raven, the protagonist’s lonely American; Kalo jire to Haroun; Neem, Red Chilli, Makaradwaj and Lotus root to herself; Lotus root to herself and Hameeda; and Sesame, the talks only about herself. Moreover, the author has given the voice to the spices and has made it personified to realize the value and tradition of the Indian community. In addition, the spices reveal their secret of their birth, nature of their work, and their nature. The spices has started sharing their importance and history and their involvement in the great theistic events. As turmeric started its own “I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between” (Divakaruni 13). The dry chilli named after the partial name of Srilanka, the place which was destroyed of fire due to the curse of the woman Seetha who is the heroine of the epic Ramayana and as lanka, the dry chilli boasts like “I lanka was born of Agni, god of Fire. I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth” (Divakaruni 37). Further, in its turn fenugrees says about its own “I fenugreek who rends the body sweet again, ready for loving” (Divakaruni 47).

To become the Mistress of spices, there are some rules to be followed. Especially they should wear the old skin, should not see their reflection or directly their appearance on the mirror, should not step out of their destined place, should not touch anyone emotionally, should not live for themselves, never to use the spices for satisfying their own needs, and should not anguish about the results of the spices once it has been delivered. Above all, they should not be too close to anyone and should not give any of the things for free at any cost. The rules are all laid on purpose that make the Mistresses to be very neutral, that alone would help her in delivering their duties in the right way.

Before becoming the Mistresses itself, the First Mother or the Old One has given a chance to all of the to-be Mistresses that if they wanted to lead a normal life like the other women in the world, she would allow it. But after becoming the Mistresses, no relaxation would be there for them regarding the rules. It is said that the Mistresses are not to fall in love with anyone, because wise people use to say that ‘love’ the word itself very emotional and sentimental, that would definitely descend them from their position and it would hide the truth or true vision which they have it as the Mistresses, in front of their eye. The author has the content for the women readers that they are here in this world to deliver their duties for their family with some limits on it. If they have love and affection beyond the limit, definitely the family women cannot achieve their goals, though they are very talented and have got the expertise in any field.

As stated in the novel, to become the Mistresses they are to dance and sing and circle the piled wood about the bird of myth and memory, Shampati, who put itself into the fire and born new from the ash, as they are to do it. With a word from the First Mother or the Old One the wood would lighted up. This is the belief that if anyone wants to get into their new self, it is the must to purify yourself and feel anew yourself. The country like India could always be exemplified in the so much of the unwritten rules especially to humiliate the women; women in India are the objects that can be tested, suspected and they could prove their chaste by the purification ceremony of the flames for the guilt they have done in their life. Every people in India are well aware of the story of Ramayana, in which Seetha has been into the situation to prove her chastity through the purification ceremony of flames.

As the Mistress of spices, Tilottama is always expected to maintain the correct rhythm when she especially works with the spices. When they work with the spices, they are working with the invisible chain that connects each split grain and moreover, they are working with the dark energy to brighten their customers' lives. "Too fast, and the seed will shatter. Too slow and invisible chain connecting each split grain will break apart and dissipate their dark energy in the world's air" (Divakaruni 108). This proves that the life and fate are decided by God and the Mistresses are sent as demigods to make the corrections in the fate to convert the customers' life happily ever after. Having said about the dark energy, it will be released if the work with the spices disturbed in anyway.

From time immemorial, the darkness is associated with evil otherwise not as natural things, but it is the artificial power. But those things are learned, trained, and used by the Mistresses along with their life of celibacy and penance to use the dark energy for the purpose of making the life of the customers happy forever, if not happy, at least they could run the family in the medium run.

When Tilottama has become the Mistress of spices, she has been given the knife as the parting gift by the First Mother or the Old One not only to cut the moorings of the past and the future, but also to keep her chaste and keep her away from dreaming. As stated in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, "For though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that man is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising woman only to provide for the present" (Wollstonecraft 42/43). This shows that the Mistresses' state of hanging in-between the past and the future reveals that they do not have a step forward and backward in connection with their lives. This depicts the status of women in India especially that they should always live in the present which means that there will not be any normal life of men for them, no improvement, scope and upgradation in their life.

Here, the knife has been provided with two sides, one that is to cut the connection between the present and the past, the other is that its pricking could be felt as the nudging of the lover's hands, that is to make the connection with the life. The symbol of knife has been used with juxtaposition that is, one is to create and one is to destroy. This shows very many things: one is that the First Mother or the Old One's precaution over Tilottama because of the First Mother's future vision of Tilo; next is that Tilottama's attitude of having had the knife under the mattress has made her to feel as familiar as a lover's hand pressing. The word 'familiar' gives proof that Tilottama, the Mistress of spices, might have had, heard or seen somewhere the scene of lovemaking. This shows her unconscious remembrance of her previous birth when she was Nayan-Tara, the fortune-teller and the sorceress that, "And these unending nights lying sleepless among a gaggle of girls who groaned out the names of boys in their dreams" (Divakaruni 17).

Furthermore, snakes have been used as the rescuer, when the protagonist as Bhagyavati has released herself from the role of the pirate-queen by jumping into the sea. From there, the snakes have guided her to the island and cautioned her about the retribution of reaching the island of spices. After that, the protagonist Tilottama use to think of snakes and its indication is, as Elena Harris, Spirit Animal info Editors has shared in her article titled "Snake Spirit Animal" through *Spirit Animal* web page that, "The snake animal meaning is powerfully connected to life force and primal energy. In many cultures, it is revered as a powerful totem representing the source of life, it means that healing opportunities, change, important transitions, and increased energy as manifesting" (www.spiritanimal.info).

In this novel, the appearance of the snakes indicate the beginning of the new life for the protagonist as Tilottama and at the end of the novel, again it signals the beginning of the new life for the protagonist as Maya. This clearly shows that the important transitions that Tilottama is to get in her near future also. In addition, the warning of the First Mother or the Old One for having chosen the name called Tilottama for herself. "Remember this too: Tilottama, disobedient at the last, fell. And was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives. Seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limbs" (Divakaruni 43). This proves that both snakes' appearance and the First Mother's or the Old One's warning that definitely Tilottama would have seven lives and that she is immortal is revealed through her reply to the First Mother or the Old One that, "I need no pitiful mortal man to love" (Divakaruni 43).

Through the story of Tilottama, Rain God Indira's one of the gorgeous dancers, the hint is revealed that Tilottama, the Mistress of spices also has the fate to live for seven lives. Moreover, the Mistress of spices has already taken multiple lives in a single life itself, almost five births that is: as Nayan-Tara, Bhagyavati, Sarpa Kanya, the snake girl (slipped too fast, to be direct in telling that is escaped and skipped this birth); Tilottama, and finally name Maya, and one extra birth is hinted at by the First Mother or the Old One who suggests that Tilottama

is the to-be First Mother when she is to return to the island of spices through the Shampati's fire as the punishment for having violated the rules.

When Tilottama has seen Raven for the first time, she could not judge him for his presence or sense anything out of him. It galvanizes her to realize the life's importance and she wanted to live her own life. This curiosity actually makes her to use her vision to see entirely of him which is forbidden. There are rules regarding Tilottama the mistress in getting to know about others without their knowledge and without emergency is considered as violation in the 'mistresshood'. When she could not understand or sense anything about him, she thought that he was something special and he has got some shield on, that prevents her to know more about Raven, the lonely American. The same idea reflected there in the film, *The Twilight Saga: Twilight (2008)* the dialogue between the hero Robert Pattinson as Edward Cullen, the vampire; and the heroine Kristen Stewart as Bella, the normal human being, as

Bella: How did you know where I was?

Edward Cullen: I didn't.

(Bella started to leave).

Edward Cullen: Don't leave me.

Bella: Did you follow me?

Edward Cullen: I... feel very protective of you.

Bella: So, you follow me.

Edward Cullen: I was trying to keep a distance unless you need my help and then I heard what those low lives were thinking.

Bella: wait, you say, you heard what they were thinking. So, are you, you read minds.

Edward Cullen: I can read every mind in this world apart from yours. (Edward Cullen started showing her mind reading technique by reading the minds of the people of those who are sitting in the same restaurant of, where they are.) money, sex, money, sex, cat, and then you nothing, and it's very frustrating. (Video clip: www.youtube.com)

This reveals clearly that when you do not know of anyone, naturally it would attract the attention to know about them fully.

Whenever Tilottama has violated or tried to violate the rules: one is for Haroun to cover over his fate through the spice of Kalo jire; another one is for Geetha's Grandfather to approach Geetha for the reconciliation of the family; and the other one is for herself to satisfy her own needs, all the violation has been purposely done by the author to make the protagonist to move beyond the boundary line to know who she is, her capability to face the world, what is real life and what is happening in and around the world. From the beginning, Tilottama, the Mistress of spices has wanted someone to recognize her behind her old skin especially through her eyes, which has been hers from the life of Nayan-Tara until she becomes Maya. This makes her calling thought for someone to pull her out of her old skin and prove her real self to the outside world and this shows her longing for her real self and recognition towards it. The protagonist

actually manifests the real case of every woman in their family life and how they always expect some situation to bring out their hidden real self to this world, along with their hidden talents. Through this, the author conveys this world of women, to come out of the relationship's web mentally to know who they are and their strength and asked them to show their recognition by and through their actions itself.

During the violation of the rules of the Mistresses, the First Mother's or the Old One's thoughts or through the spirit-travelling, the First Mother or the Old One used to appear straight as the spirit to warn her of these things. In fact, when Tilottama, was in her apprenticeship, the First Mother or the Old One used to discourage her or never listened to what Tilottama wanted to say. It demonstrated that the First Mother or the Old One already knew Tilottama's future, since the First Mother or the Old One has felt that Tilottama is the reflection of her own younger self.

In this novel, the spice bazaar is shown and is treated like *thirisangu sorgam*, which hangs in-between the earth and the heaven and nobody could see it except the fate that which drives them to it. There in the spice store, Tilottama can rule everything with the spices' assistance and help the people those who are approaching them. In addition, the Mistress of spices could be treated as God, the spice bazaar could be treated as shrine, from where God never come out and watch the people but with the vision that has been provided to her like God. As a result, the Mistress of spices and the spices have to decide when to give, which spice to give to cure the illness of life and brighten it. This specifically has taken the note of the longing of every woman to have someone as the representation of God to know the problems that is unsaid with them all the time.

When the sea pulled the protagonist onto the shore, Tilottama, the First Mother's or the Old One's voice could be heard like, "“What has the god of the sea belched up on our shore this morning?”" (Divakaruni 32). This shows that many women in India are in a deprived state and they have got upset and confused with regard to their own lives. The confusion, oscillating mind, unsteadiness in life drives them to commit suicide. Among them, some women have been pulled onto the land like the mistress Tilottama and brought to the island of spices, rescued and guarded by the First Mother or the Old One. They have been pushed to learn the skills to uplift themselves and their community, where immigrant Indians, especially the south Asian women immigrants, are helpless. This shows the character of the First Mother or the Old One has depicted Divakaruni herself, who has taken responsibility in guarding the women through Maitri Foundation, especially for South Asian Immigrant women.

Through *The Mistress of Spices* novel Divakaruni shows the world her longing towards the women's upliftment and emancipation. She wanted women to be empowered and work towards achieving their own desires and wishes. She challenged every woman to deconstruct

the social taboos that restricts them by having defined their responsibilities in their relationships with others. Divakaruni wanted women to have the power to transgress boundaries in ways that enable them to reach their personal goals with full satisfaction.

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