

**JOURNEY OF THE MISTRESS: A SELF-EXPLORATION IN CHITRA****BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF THE SPICES**

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**Abstract**

Self-exploration is one of the major themes in the diaspora. The diasporic individual undergoes lots of struggle while involved in the process of self-exploration. This article explores the journey of the mistress in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*. The mistress undergoes lots of changes in her entire lifetime. Her identity keeps on changing right from her birth till the end. She is been in constant conflict throughout the novel and also undergoes lots of struggle throughout. She has different names in different stages of her life and finally, she was able to find herself.

Key Words: Diaspora, Identity, Self-exploration and Transformation.

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. -Erik Erikson

The idea of identity is fascinating when it comes to psychology and literature. This idea is the central theme in many contemporary literary works. 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, 2). Alexander Wendt observes identities as, "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt, 397). Identity is one of the main themes in diaspora studies. The immigrants find it difficult to adapt to the host culture and they can't leave the culture of their home country and thus end in the major dilemma of identity crisis of where they belong to

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer. Born in India, Kolkata, and currently resides in Houston. She has written several novels such as *Mistress of Spices*, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, *Arranged Marriage*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusion*, *One Amazing Thing*, etc., her fiction has been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* was made into an English film, the novel *Sister of My Heart* was made into a Tamil TV serial, a short story, "The Word Love," from the collection *Arranged Marriage*, was made into a bilingual short.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* revolves around the life of the mistress. The mistress runs a shop named *Spice Bazaar* in Oakland, America. She has many customers, most of whom are immigrants. The mistress is capable of reading their minds and getting to understand the struggles and challenges they face in the new country. The mistress tries to solve their problems with the help of the spices. She helps them to face the challenges and struggles they face as an

immigrant. The spices play a major role in shaping the life of the immigrant customer who visits the shop of the Mistress. The mistress goes through four different phases in her entire life. She faces a different set of challenges she undergoes during every phase. She faces lots of struggles and challenges during the process of finding herself. At the end of the novel, she is able to understand who she is. It also depicts the transformation of the mistress from Tara to Maya.

Tilo, the protagonist of the novel is born into a poor family as a third girl child. Their parents were not happy with her arrival as they considered a girl child as a burden to the family and might bring dowry debt. As she was growing she was not taken into much care of and she wandered carelessly in the village. She was named Nayan Tara which is her very first name. “They named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents’ faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girlchild, and this one colored like mud” (7). She did not get the childhood love from her parents that everyone would long for. Nayan Tara also means starry-eyed “I Nayan Tara, the name which also means Star-seer” (8). Soon she gained some magical powers and could foretell the happenings in the village. She would predict the weather and could tell about the things that were lost. Everyone was scared of her as she had some powers. She was looked upon like a goddess. Everyone brought valuable gifts while visiting her. Her family was happy with the luxury her daughter had brought in. Soon it spread everywhere even to the nearby villages about her powers and everyone started visiting her from neighbouring villages.

Her happiness did not last for a long time the pirates looted her village, and they killed their parents in front of her she couldn’t do anything. Her powers didn’t work at that time. They burnt the village and kidnapped her to the ship. They used her to bring more fortunes, she started guiding their ship. They named her Bhagyavati which means bringer of luck, this is the second which is given to her. “The pirate chiefs voice lifted above dying moans, giving me in awful

irony my new name. Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck, for so I was to be for them” (19). She was feeling very lonely on the ship as she had no one to talk with other than the pirates. “Nights I walked the decks alone and sleepless, I Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, bringer of luck and death, my cloak dragging in salt dust like a torn wing” (22). She didn’t last there for a long time; she was soon thrown away by them into the sea as soon as their ship got hit by a storm. She was then taken to the island of the spices.

She was taken to the island by the other women of the island to the old woman who was in charge of the island. She then teaches her the spells for each spice to make them work according to it. She learned everything quickly and was one of the very smart ones among them. When she learnt everything she was given a name before going into the shampathi’s fire. “My name which is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment” (5). The old woman is the one who chooses the name and the city which they would go after entering the shampathi’s fire but Tilo chooses her name and the city. This is the third name that is given to her “I will be Tilottama, the essence of til, life-giver, restorer of health and hope” (42). The Old woman warns her about the forth comings but she doesn’t listen to it. Tilo runs a shop named *Spice Bazaar* in Oakland America. Most of the customers of her shop are immigrants who visit her shop in search of their homeland. The mistress has the power to read in their mind and she helps them with the spices accordingly. She helps the immigrants cope with the struggles and challenges they face in the host land with the help of the spices. The mistress has a certain set of rules to be followed if at any instance they fail to follow it they might be punished by the spices. She fails to follow the rules. She falls in love with the Raven, which makes the spices angry.

The mistress at last decides to give u the role of the mistress and decides to go with the Raven. She used the spices for herself which is not allowed but she did to return to her younger self. When she looked at the mirror she loved her younger self. She spends a day with him returns to the store and decides to give herself to the spices.

Finally, she ends up in the middle of an earthquake. She was saved by the Raven from the earthquake. The shop was fully burnt, she was alive and the spices had not punished her instead they had shown her love by saving her. She was happy about it.

... “Now you must help me find a new name. My Tilo life is over, and with it that way of calling myself.”

“What kind of name do you want?”

“One that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now. Is there such a name?”

He considers. “Anita,” he says. “Sheila. Rita.” I shake my head.

He tries a few more. Then says, “How about Maya?”

Maya. I try the sound, like its shape. The way it flows, cool and wide, over my tongue. (316)

She was ready to start her new life with the Raven. She wants to have a new name as she thinks that Tilo’s life is over and it’s entirely a new phase of her life. She takes the help of the Raven to find her new name. She wishes for a name that would be neutral to India and America. Raven suggested so many but she is not satisfied with it, so he suggests the name Maya. It is the fourth and final name given to her in the entire journey. She loved her name, she loved the shape,

the way it flows, and everything about it. She was very happy with her new name and was ready to start a new life with the Raven.

Tilo undergoes numerous disguises and changes her name frequently in the novel. It highlights the identity crisis that every Indian attempts to manage while living in the host country. As a dutiful daughter, she was known as Nayan Tara, then Bhagyavati while living with the pirates, Tilo as a mistress of the spice shop, and lastly Maya when she met her true love. At the very end of the book, Tilo labels herself as “Maya,” a Hindu phrase that describes the ordinary world of desire, suffering, and bliss. After taking in numerous roles in her life she was able to discover herself.

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