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## Spice as the Cultural Symbol in *The Mistress of Spices*



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**Abstract:** *The novel talks about the life of main protagonist named Tilottama. After her stay in the Island, she is placed in Oakland as the Mistress of Spices running a Spice store. Here the word Spices refers to Indian Spices. Each chapter is named after a spice. Spice symbolizes Indian culture. Each spice here has its own history and an ancient tale rooted*

*in Indian culture and context. Not just Tilottama is a migrant in America but spices are also bearing the tag of an immigrant and are widely accepted by native people.*

**Key words:** *culture, Indian, spices*

## RESEARCH PAPER

The novel is about the woman named Tilottama calling herself a mistress of spices in the first sentence of the novel. She is not just mistress of spices she also has a good knowledge about metal, mineral, earth, sand, stone, gems, the burning liquids. She learnt all about them on island. The first chapter is entitled as Tilo. She says out of all that she knows spices are her love.

She knows the origin of spices, colours they signify and their smells. All the spices from Amchur to Zafran are under her command. If she whispers, her all spices tell to her their hidden magical powers. She knows many secrets that women in India know since generations like “vanilla beans soaked soft in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against the evil eye. And here another. A measure of pepper at the foot of the bed, shaped into a crescent, cures you of nightmare” (Divakaruni 3).

Her store has all the Indian spices, even the lost ones. She is running the store for one year. Her store is named ‘Spice Bazaar’. Apart from spices she also has grocery and Indian sweets for sale. In the novel she recalls the Old One, the First Mother who trained all these girls on island. In the entire novel she remembers her First Mother’s rules often. First Mother instructs them that no Mistress is important, spices are important. There are many Indians who visit her store. There are even Americans who visit her store to buy Indian ingredients.

The second chapter is entitled as Turmeric. She narrates about turmeric. It scents bitter like skin and almost as familiar. If it is rubbed over palm the silky yellow powder can be seen. Brides used it. “It will erase blemishes and wrinkles, suck away age and fat. For days afterward, your skin will give off a pale golden glow” (Divakaruni 13). Each spice, according to her, has a special day to it. Sunday is the day for turmeric. Turmeric which is also called as ‘halud’ means yellow, the colour of daybreak.

She grinds those roots when Swati-the star shines in the north. Turmeric says “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 prison and before the nectar and thus lie in between” (Divakaruni 13). Turmeric is “anointment for death, hope for rebirth” (Divakaruni 14).

Third chapter is named Cinnamon. Tilo describes Lanka as the most potent of spices. It was born out of Agni, God of fire. Chilli grew is very centre of the island, in the core of the sleeping volcano. Thursday is the day of Chilli. Lanka was the name of Ravana’s kingdom. City of million jewels turned to ash at last.

On island, when girls passed ceremony of purification and were ready to leave island, the Old One said that it was time for her to give new names for girl. She asks them whether they were certain about becoming mistress. Because it was not an easy life. She named girls after Aparijita, Pia after the pial tree, when Tilo’s turn came she told the Old One she chose her name. It will be Tilo-Short of Tilottama. First mother scolds her for being a rule breaker. First Mother asked her the meaning of Tilo. She explained, “Til is the sesame seed, under the sway of planet Venus, gold-brown as though just touched by flame” (Divakaruni 42). It cures the diseases of heart and liver, restores interest in life. She wants to be Tilottama-restorer of health and hope. Tilottama was a chief dancer in Indra’s court.

Fourth chapter is titled as Fenugreek. It is Tuesday’s spice. She asked Fenugreek’s help when Ratna came to her with burning womb. Fenugreek sings the song “I am fresh as river wind to the tongue, planting desire in a plot turned barren” (Divakaruni 47). Tilo describes about the knife given to her by the Old One “Kinfe to cut my moorings from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea” (Divakaruni 51).

Chapter fifth is named Asafoetida. Asafoetida is the antidote to love. Mahamul is the spice to enhance fortunes. She recollects the Old One’s teaching; Spices can never be used by Mistress for their own ends and for each person there is one special spice. She narrates how rich Indians came to her store to buy many things and few rich people sent lists. She burns Tulsi to curb their ego. Basil is a plant of humility. She puts signs on her store on Saturdays “Fresh-Fresh Methi Home Grown; Diwali Sale Lowest Prices; Latest movies. Best Actors, Juhi Chawla-Amir Khan, Rent 2 days for Cost of One. Ask If You Cannot Find” (Divakaruni 78).

There are not just unhappy people who visit her store. There are happier ones too. She gives examples of them. Tilo's store is a hub of Indians. Many Indians showing their native language and culture come to her store. Tilo describes Makaradwaj as "rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers" (Divakaruni 83). She also says that it should be used with greatest care.

Chapter sixth is named as Fennel. Wednesday is the day for Fennel. "Waists that have given up, mouth drooping with the weight of their average lives they once dreamed would be so different", (Divakaruni 104) it helps them. It freshens the breath, aids the digestion, keeps the temper cool.

Chapter seventh is named 'Ginger' It is the ginger she ate while getting into Shampati's fire. The Old One wanted the Mistresses to have very less temptation. She takes ginger so that she can stay away from all the temptations the land had. But she again breaks rules by becoming a more desirous woman.

The eight chapter is Peppercorn. Tilo's store is closed on Monday. It is the day of silence, the day of white mung. On Mondays she goes to the inner room. Closing her eyes, sitting in lotus asana recollects island, coconut palms, sweet air and the pure world it was. Mondays she talks to the Old One. It is the day for mothers. But she doesn't tell everything to the Old.

Chapter Ninth is titled as Kalo Jire. The Old One told her once, "Events in the Outer world are nothing to Mistresses. When you fill your head with inessentials, the true knowledge is lost, like grains of gold in sand" (Divakaruni 168). Tilo wants to split Kalo Jire tonight for all the people who suffered from America. She realizes that she became a self-indulgent woman. She recollects the teachings of Old One, "Power is weakness", "greatest happiness brings greatest loss" (Divakaruni 174).

The tenth chapter is 'Neem'. Tilo prepared a face paste using Neem leaves. Her spices sing to her a song "Come Tilo use us, we give ourselves gladly to you who have tended us so faithfully. Lotus root and Abhrak, Amlaki and most of all Makaradwaj kingspice, we are yours to command. Use us for love for beauty for your joy, because that is why we were made" (Devakaruni 189-190).



Chapter eleven is named 'Red Chilli'. Red Chilli is also used to keep the evil eye away. Tilo opens the Chilli Jar and uses her chants. First Mother appears to warm her and says she should not have opened the jar of Red Chilli. First Mother shares her experience of throwing herself into Shampati's fire for the second time.

Chapter twelve is named after Makaradwaj. It is king among spices. Tilo asks Makaradwaj to make her such a beauty that never existed on earth. By next night it says, she will be at the summit of beauty and next morning it will be gone.

The thirteenth chapter is Lotus Root. As the last day gets over, she sells everything in the store except the thing that is needed for Shampati's fire. She plucked the seed from Sears store to plant in the store. It was correct time to do that. She wears dress given by Raven, looks herself in the mirror young and ageless after using Makaradwaj. Only her eyes remain same. She recollects her identifies as Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati and Tilo. Lotus root is gifted to one of her customer's would be wife to wear on night of wedding for a life time of passionate loving.

Chapter fourteenth is Sesame. In this chapter she contemplates on what she had done so far. She is ready to call Shampati's fire. She dips her hands in turmeric-spice of rebirth. She sits in lotus asana on the pyre of spices and for the last time opens the jar of chillies. She holds a single Chilli and speaks invoking words. She is scared. At any moment fire shall turn up. She chants the words continuously but nothing happens. She chants again but nothing happens. She fears for the life without Shampati's fire without the power of spices. She is sad and says "I am doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom I can turn" (Divakaruni 297).

The last chapter is named 'Maya'. She imagines to be dead and experiencing the afterlife. Raven talks to her she imagines him and all others to be dead. She opens her eyes to find herself in Raven's car. She is old Tilo again, all her beauty gone. She wonders why spices have not punished her. She hears an answer for the questions "Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also" (Divakaruni 305).

Tilo asks him to stop the car and wants to return to Oakland when he talks about the damage, fire and earthquake brought. He convinces her finally. She asks him to give her a new name. When he asks what kind of name she wants. She answers, “One that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now” (Divakaruni 316). He names her ‘Maya’. She hears the serpent songs and thanks them for being with her in all ups and downs.

Each chapter is named after each spice narrating its remedial power. Out of all the customers, her intimate customers were Haroun, Jagjit, Kwesi, Lalita-Ahuja’s wife, Gita’s grandfather, bougainvillaea girls, Raven later turned to be her life partner. She used each spice for each customer. Spices have the power to heal the mind and body of all her customers. Based on the problems her customers faced, she gave each one of them the suitable spice. So here the spice symbolizes everything that is Indian in culture. If we go in depth each spice has its own history to narrate. And their history of usage is rooted deeply in India.

#### WORK CITED

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