
**The Interstitial Spaces of Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
*The Mistress of Spices***

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her novel, 'The Mistress of Spices,' presents before us a woman character who is capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a unified One but rather as Many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities. In *The Mistress of Spices*, self-perception is the basis of individuality formation for the central character, Tilotamma (Tilo). Divakaruni depicts Tilo not based on any singular location but rather a movement along many places. Tilo is simultaneously the "old world and the "new," juxtaposing differing geographical spaces, times, and cultures. She is enmeshed between the lands of her past and her future by the relationship between time and Space. Time and Space are no longer solely corporeal locations (past or present, continents or nations) to Tilo but rather states of being intertwined with her consciousnesses, spanning numerous locations and incorporating the presence of various spheres simultaneously. The novel closes with Tilo renaming herself Maya, which can mean many 'Things' embodying the multiplicity of her identities or the many consciousnesses within her. She prefers a life that spans the endless boundaries of Space and time and in which identity is filled with the promise of endless possibility and eternal evolution. This paper analyses Tilo's changing identities in a world of flux about time and Space.

Keywords: Identity, Space, self-perception

Introduction

The interstitial passage [liminality] between fixed identifications opens up the case of cultural hybridity that engages difference without an assumed or imposed order - Homi Bhabha

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, the process of self-perception is the foundation of identity formation for the central character, Tilotamma, who is known as Tilo in the novel. As Tilo seeks to express herself as South Asian and American, she creates multiple consciousnesses that display themselves in both her adventures about her sexual identities. While Tilo is living in America, she is ineffectual in pure self-perception. She can only see herself through the eyes of those around her, leaving her self-viewing much relegated to the marginal Space. Tilo views herself through the lens of her surrounding society, leading to multifarious and often conflicting simultaneous visions or interstitial spaces of her identity. Initially, Tilo allows these perceptions of herself to dominate her thinking, though later, she

claims her self-perception. Surprisingly, she later recognizes her multiple consciousnesses. Although this variety is packed with paradoxes, Divakaruni nevertheless gives it as a possible "solution" for Tilo's dilemma of cross-cultural equivalence formation.

The Interstitial Space of Identity

Tilo's gift as a benediction is her ability to extract detailed powers innate in spices and use them to cure the conditions of those around her. Tilo talks about her unique ability to interact with spices, "I am a Mistress of Spices. I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells...At a whisper, they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers." (3) In Tilo's childhood days, pirates unexpectedly encroached into her home, murder her entire family and abduct Tilo, taking her on board their ship as a criminal. Eventually, Tilo displaces the pirate captain to become the pirate queen. However, Tilo abandons this exalted position when mystical sea serpents convey to her the existence of an island upon which she and other women like her can create their supernatural skills to use them for the greater good. This remote Island is a haven for these women, who call themselves the "Mistresses of Spices" and are under the care of the First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher of all the women. The women are trained in hearing and holding the spices and are sent forth into the more wonderful world to aid humanity. After Tilo knows all that she can, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny Indian herb shop where she must begin her tasks of recovering the masses. Thus, she is pushed into the mess of American life and the novelty of a culture to which she must adjust, forming gaps in her identity.

Divakaruni explains Tilo as inseparably mired in the workings of the Diaspora, and the notion of "home" becomes displaced, converted into an intangible condition that is not founded on a singular place but rather a trend among many places. When Tilo arrives on the Island, she and the other young girls are given new identities, indicating that the past is being relegated to memory and new personas are being forged. Tilo meets the First Mother, who foreshadows the paradoxical identity that Tilo will soon find herself coping with. The First Mother is elderly and maternal, representing the traditionalist notion of the South Asian woman in the domestic sphere. However, simultaneously, she is outside the boundaries of conventional culture, for she lives on an isolated island, possesses magical powers, and urges the young girls toward progression and change rather than maintaining the status quo. She is at once the "old world and the "new," a juxtaposition of differing geographical spaces, times, and cultures. First, the mother allows new names for the daughters as they remain nameless once they enter this new Island. Tilo receives her new name and identity, leaving her childhood in a village in India behind her and assuming a temporary persona of the uncertain present rather than the definitive and historical past.

Tilo spends decades learning the delicate art of the spices, but the moment arrives when she must leave the Island and continue her diasporic journey. Tilo has entered a state of liminality, a space between the past and the future without a precise knowledge of where the present is. She is treading the dark waters between the lands of her past and the lands of her future, a theme that will reappear throughout the text's representations of the relationship

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between time and Space. Divakaruni genders the Island as the first diasporic Space. The Island conspicuously exudes femininity. Divakaruni constructs it as a maternal space with the figure of the First Mother and the presence of only females on the Island. The Island nurtures Tilo, educating and preparing her for the next stage of life she will encounter when she leaves and imbuing Tilo with a sense of the singularity of identity. While its women learn and grow, the Island itself never changes. The daily routines of the Mistresses remain the same, and an ambiance of group unity amongst all females is nurtured. Such community cohesion and support will later contrast sharply with the multiplicity and solitude that Divakaruni presents as indicative of the diasporic experience of America.

Divakaruni foreshadows the process of Tilo's identity formation, using the fire as a metaphor for the recreation of the self and presenting identity as erratic rather than permanent. Tilo's journey to America is a form of rebirth as she steps and disappears in the "Shampati's Fire" and is transported to America. Shampati is the eastern version of the phoenix that rose new from ash. She emerges from the fire on an ash bed in a small spice store in Oakland that she will make her own. The presence of this ash serves as an ambiguous omen for Tilo, who enters into her new life upon the remnants of her old, with life and death inextricably linked together, just as they are for the phoenix. In America, Tilo is immediately placed in yet another interstitial space, unable to forget her history but still wanting to move forward with life. She lives "in between," for the Island of the past is no longer her home, while America is still too unfamiliar to describe as such. While Divakaruni has gendered the Island as female, America is now portrayed as an almost hermaphroditic space, as ambiguous and uncertain in its many identities as Tilo is in hers. In America, Tilo interacts with all genders, identifying with her male and female customers and friends. She experiences the sadness and anger of the young and confused adolescent Indian boy who is tormented at school while at the same time sympathizing with the pain of the newly-wed Indian bride who suffers from the terror of domestic abuse.

Although she now lives in California, Tilo cannot relinquish her time on the Island with the First Mother and the other Mistresses. The memories are with her night and day; reminders and warnings of the past channel into her thoughts, creating conflict in her present life. As her relationship with her lover Raven progresses, Tilo finds the past inescapable, for the possible admonitions of the First Mother constantly plague her present consciousness. There is a sense of simultaneous universes or different spheres that exist simultaneously and in the same place. To Tilo, no apparent dichotomy relegates the Island to the past and America to the present. Tilo's past does not simply haunt her; instead, it is part of her current sphere, making it impossible for her to live "in the present" because the present does not exist by itself. This new sense of time is also expressed in the very structure of the text itself, for Mukherjee jumps from one temporal location to another. Tilo also feels unmoored spatially, for America is only a temporary place for her as it is her home only as she is fulfilling her duty as a Mistress of Spices. Ironically, Tilo does not have a home in the traditional and permanent sense, and America is simply one point between her geographical migrations. "I am a Mistress of Spices.

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I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells...At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers." (3)

Tilo's understanding of time and space results in the creation of a schema in which her existence relates to these constructions through a dialectic of mentality and physicality; that is to say, time and Space are no longer solely corporeal locations but rather states of being that are intertwined with her consciousnesses, spanning numerous locations and inculcating the presence of various spheres simultaneously. Ironically, she has the most profound vision for the innermost selves of all others yet is still incapable of actually perceiving herself. Tilo is forbidden to look in a mirror while she lives in Oakland and fulfills her duties as a Mistress of Spices. This severe prohibition of mirrors is a conceit for Tilo's inability to sense herself through her own eyes; instead, she develops her identity upon the idea of others based upon the differing perceptions of herself as seen by friends, patrons, and lovers.

Tilo's female supporters consider her a traditional "older" South Asian woman, unattractive in her age, sexless in terms of her passions, and submissive to the choice of others. She is not seductive but rather matronly, repressing any sexual desire. She is silent in her opinions and offers advice only when asked. However, Tilo's sense of passion and her ability to seduce are evident in her relationship with Raven. The language that Divakaruni uses to describe Tilo's sensations is replete with a sexual suggestiveness that grows more overt as the relationship between Raven and Tilo progresses. When they finally consummate their love, Tilo appears as a highly knowledgeable and sensual lover, and her sexuality is in stark contrast to the older asexual woman from the spice store. Strangely, there is a sense that this sexual knowledge was already there for Tilo, existing though implicit while she perceived herself as the asexual woman from the spice store. Tilo's American lover, Raven, visits her as a paradigmatic model of Eastern beauty. While Raven views her as his Eastern exotic fantasy, Tilo comes to see him as her token American lover.

Conclusion

Tilo's moment of "self-perception" occurs after she questions the prohibition of mirrors for Mistresses. Physical transformation represents the illusion of the notion of a singular "true identity," for in trying to reveal a "real self," Tilo finds that she has lost all that was human about her. Later, when Tilo gazes into the mirror, she finds a blank reflection reflection, the only hint of life residing in the eyes that stare back at her. She comprises *many* different and contradictory perceptions of the self, or she is blank. Tilo is surprised to find that the flames do not envelop her as they did once long ago. Instead, she is transformed into the older woman's body, wrinkled with age and bereft of her youthful beauty. The transformation back into the body of the older woman further reinforces the notion that identity is not a question of cohesion, for when Tilo returns to the body with which she experienced the different perceptions of race and sexuality, she is, in essence, accepting her fragmented selves in place of a unified identity. The book closes with Tilo renaming herself Maya, a name that embraces the multiplicity of her identities and the many consciousnesses within her. Tilo lives in between spheres, with contradictory spaces and times comprising the somewhat ambiguous landscape of her

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existence. She is living a life that travels the endless limits of Space and time and in which individuality is filled with the assurance of endless practicability and timeless evolution.

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