

Environmental Facets in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

The whole structure of physical world can be referred in a single phenomenon called nature which is connected with the environmental life of human being. The study 'Environmental Facets in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, illuminates the relationship of living thing and its environment. Divakaruni beautifies the novel with natural imageries and five basic elements -fire, air, water, earth and spirit. These five components help Tilo, the protagonist, to survive and leads her from the physical to the magical environment. This paper aims to study the multifaceted environment in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

KEYWORDS: Ecological, Myth, Environmentalism, Magic Realism, Exploitation

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a famous celebrated writer in the field of Diaspora. She is a prominent Indian American award-winning author. She is considered to be the best in different fields of literature and is well known as a poet, novelist, activist and teacher. She has secured a credible place in the genre of South Asian Diasporic Literature. As one can come to know about her writing, Divakaruni casts a spell over her writings, whether in a novel, a short story or a poem. Her words flow swiftly, sweeping readers along and at times they whisper so softly, tempting to read. Most of her works deal with the themes of alienation, gender discrimination, ecofeminism and so on.

The novel chosen for the present study is *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), is the debut novel of Divakaruni. Throughout the novel, she uses her chameleon-like voice and mastery of rhythm to create unforgettable characters and create stories that are both exotic and familiar by remaining and universal. The plot of the novel is pivoted on a girl child Nayan Tara who is entangled with nature and magic from her birth. Her name changes through each phase of the environment whereas she survived like a pet of mother nature. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the writer who is famous for his writing on magic realism, Divakaruni has used a bunch of natural elements which are connected to naturalistic technique with surreal elements to make the plot more real and vivid. One could take spices as an example, which plays almost a character next to the protagonist in the novel. The following paper is an attempt to figure out the survival of the central character in the multifaceted situation of the environment and the role of nature and environment in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

The story of the girl child Nayan Tara, which means 'the star of the eye' and 'the flower that grows by the dusty road', is settled in a small village in South India. Her birth does not provide any joy and solace to her parents because she is a girl. She is considered as a burden in the family. According to them, a girl child could only mean dowry and debt for the family. Divakaruni centralized her main character, Nayan Tara, into nature from her birth that the incident proves when she is an infant. Once her mother has failed to feed her, mother nature helps her from hunger. It is

given as, “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”(7) That is how Divakaruni connects the protagonist to nature and which clings her over her entire life. Almost all the elements of nature; like water, fire, earth; surrounds and protects her from danger. Though Nayantara is an abandoned child, her ability to foresee the future and foretell the occurrence of natural calamities made her famous around her village and far from there. Since then she has become the Goddess to her village people. Until pirates’ abduction of her, she has not realized everything she has possessed is a gift from mother nature. As a child Nayan Tara, she has survived from poverty and unkind parentage with the help of nature.

The next phase of her life is with pirates. They have abducted her and made her as their lucky charm and named her as Bhagyavati which means ‘bringer of luck’. After being captured by the pirates, she usurps the position of the chief of pirates and becomes their Queen. This is one typical quality of Tilo that normally helps to transform her into a particular situation which she could adopt easily as Indian women do. There is an exposition of supernatural self of her and bond between the real world and the magic world. She helps to lead the pirates to their destiny of fame and glory until her thirst of vengeance got over them. She has been helping them unwillingly. It is the typhoon which helps her out of there. Her ship has withered every rack and she has sent a calling thought via water which is one of her supernatural powers. It is given as, “the calling thought can draw to you whoever you desire. . .” (17-18) Her significant power of calling brings out the sea serpents (snakes) in front of her and saves her life. Each realm of her environment has given her a life to adapt to it. But her inner thought has not got the rightful place to endure with. She is offered a place to dwell and name as SarpaKanya by the serpents. But she has not accepted it and goes to seek her own destiny. Even though the serpents are a supernatural or mythical creature, it claims to be one from the domain of nature. The Mistress of Spices of Divakaruni abounds with the element of myth and a mythical creature like sea serpents. From the serpents, she has learnt about the island of spices. Meanwhile, she has seen the gleam of spices in her skin. And here ends the second phase of her survival mission with the help of a natural element, water and water serpents. Divakaruni blends the supernatural realm with the natural familiar world that has explored in the novel.

The same aspect, nature, has followed her to the next level. As well, the protagonist has brought her hope of destiny with her. She has sensed the door of her path is not so far to glean. Without any identity, with the curiosity of what her fate carry for her, she bids farewell to the serpents and begun to swim. Here, Divakaruni pays close attention to the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is about. The central character too dissolves her boundaries and goes to seek her own destiny. In the next morning, she finds herself naked on the seashore and she is unable to remind her past because the sea strips all her clothing and magic. Divakaruni does not expect her to hang up with the past that she persists it by stripping off her clothes and magic power. It is like a newborn who comes out of an awful world to the beautiful world of nature. She is received by the Old one and other novices. They help her to find her destiny. The Old one is also known as The First Mother. She plays the role of Fairy Godmother. Fairy Godmother is a fairy who acts as a mentor or guardian for young people in fairy tales. Likewise, all the novices in the island are assisted by the First mother. From her, the protagonist of the novel learns about the origin of spices and its uses. Chosen as a spice girl, she is named as Tilotamma by the First mother. Her

name comes after Til, the sesame seed. This is given in her own voices as, the “I will be Tilotamma, the essence of til, life-giver, restorer of health and hope” (42). Tilotamma is also referring to the most elegant of all the dancers in Lord Indra’s court. It is a mythological story. Just as Tilotamma broke the promise made to Lord Indra, Tilo breaks the promise made to the Old One at the end of the story.

At the beginning of the novel, Tilo introduces herself as, “I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. . . . They are the ones I work with” (1). Divakaruni describes her central figure who works with all the elements of nature. After getting knowledge about spices, Tilo needs to get out of the island and transport to other places to help people with the power of spices. The ‘Shampati’s fire’ is another thing related to the myth which is used by Divakaruni in her novel. Tilo is transported to America by means of shampati fire, a giant bonfire into which she steps and disappears. The symbolism of fire is obvious in its action. It is the destruction of present physical form and a reduction to ashes that are then scattered to the far corners of the globe. The actual word ‘shampati’ is a reference to the “bird of myth and memory who dived into the conflagration and rose new from ash” (56). It is considered as an eastern version of the Phoenix. Phoenix is a mythical bird, which can rise from ashes. Like the Phoenix bird, Tilo emerges from the fire as a bird of ash in a small spice store in Oakland. She is burnt into ashes in the conflagration and she gets a new appearance from the ashes. She sheds her appearance as a young woman and transforms herself into an old lady. It is opposite to the natural being of Tilo. Tilo is transported to the alien world via fire which represents her endurance with nature as she has done with water once. Also, she is restricted to do certain things in the alien country. Among the rules, the vital one is to lead loveless life. She should not contact with the people outside of her given place. Unfortunately, she falls in love with a native American, Raven that is natural in the human world. Since she breaks the rule, the magic power of spices have taken away from her and turns her into an ordinary girl.

At the end of the novel, The Mistress of spices, one of the natural calamities, earth quake destroyed her surrounding. Here, Divakaruni wants to expose an idea of nature. Nature can protect and nurture the living thing; it can dismantle into pieces; it can renovate life from the destruction. It plays an authoritative role which can take decisions to both the plot and the character. The lover man, Raven changes Tilo’s name into Maya who has no power at all. The meaning of the name Maya has a deeper meaning like “Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day” (317). By destruction, nature gives the protagonist a new ordinary life and so she can live her life fully. Hence, it is proven that nature can destroy lives and gives life.

The protagonist has faced and withstood with her will power in the multifaceted situations of the environment in the novel. The elements of nature the air, water, earth, space, and fire are skilfully interwoven in the story. She has an abundance of adventure via water which turns her as Bhagyavati; through the air, she has sent a calling thought to the sea creature; Shampati fire which turns her into Tilo, the mistress of spices; the earth quake which made her into an ordinary human, Maya. Divakaruni picturized the island of spices gives the touch of the sense of nature that follows, “The sky is black and smoky. There is no sky, and no sea either.” (34) She uses similes, metaphors, and adjectives from nature to bring depth to her narrations and descriptions and even the figures of speech used in the novel. Knowing nature is

knowing everything. The person who loves and appreciates nature would know that nature is precious. Nowadays protecting nature is not so easy that one can be seen in our society as many activists who want to preserve nature are perished by the business magnets to build their factories and companies to go to their next level of business. Live with nature and it can bring peace and joy to the living thing.

Reference:

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