

Women and Sensorial Hegemony in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract: This essay reads Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* in the context of the hegemonic practices of human sensoria that relegate some senses to a lower status, a hegemony that also entails the othering of certain races, classes, or genders associated with "lower senses." The protagonist of the novel, Tilo, overcomes the patriarchal imposition of haptic prohibition and resists the deeply held prejudice of associating a woman with certain "lower" senses that keeps her within bounds, even in a diasporic setting. Tilo asserts her autonomy by overpowering the shackles of a subjugated identity, yet retaining her femininity.

Keywords: Sensorial hegemony; diaspora; identity; haptic prohibition

I. Introduction

Traditional perceptions of human sensoria often hierarchize the five senses and work as the means for political and cultural exclusion. The notion of the superiority of sight as a sense and the relegation of "other" senses, those of smell, hearing, touch, and taste to lower status essentially lead to the excluding or othering of certain races, class, or gender. *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni incorporates a complicated trope of hegemony through the representation of an Eastern woman in America who deals in the magical, sensorial power of various spices. The novel potentially combines three commonly "othered" elements in the portrayal of the protagonist Tilotoma, or Tilo: a woman's embodied self stripped of its desire, her Eastern origin and diasporic identity, and the so called "lower senses" her spices relate or appeal to. The touch, smell or taste of each spice she sells can do wonders such as healing people or fulfilling their various needs and desires. Tilo is an initiated clairvoyant who, nevertheless, has to obey certain rules imposed on her by her foremothers for the preservation of her power. She must stay within the boundaries of her shop and must not touch any of her clients—a code of practice that symbolizes the imposed femininity on, as well as the segregation of, a woman who is allowed to associate with only spices of "lower senses". However, Tilo's fulfilling her desire by getting intimate with Raven, her American lover, and yet her attempt to prioritize the spices over all else is how she tries to break free from her subjugation and choose her desired identity.

II. The Magical and the Realist in *The Mistress of Spices*

The plot of the novel has some magical elements inserted into everyday realistic happenings, which complicates our reading as well as offers an opportunity to read the text from multiple angles. On the one hand, the novel deals with an Eastern woman immigrating to the West as in a typical diasporic novel and, on the other, the protagonist's

mysterious journey from the past and her supernatural power over the spices give the story a touch of magical realism. However, most of the magical incidents in the novel seem to be happening in Tilo's imagination and recollections, or they seem to nicely blend into realistic possibilities. Gita Rajan views *The Mistress of Spices* as a simple story told in a complicated manner with special effects, which makes the novel's mysticism comparable to the works of Marquez, Rushdie, and Allende. However, rather than drawing the magical elements on a big canvas of realism, Divakaruni's magical realist plot operates on a small-scale "Orientalized mysticism" within which Tilo's imaginary workings lend her an apparent mystical power (Rajan 216). According to Rajan, Divakaruni represents Tilo's mystical power to challenge the imposed reality of an imperialist brand. Rajan maintains that the traditional classification of the realist novel works as an instrument of imperialism since the realism portrayed in such novels is essentially Western and requires "realist" novels from other locations to conform to the Western norms. The endorsement of the Western realist tradition as the marker of global realism, thus, imposes certain expectations on writers. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the magical elements give the realist plot a unique mould that defies the traditional idea of a realist work but, at the same time, these elements do not occlude the struggles of diasporic people in the novel. Tilo's deeply held belief in the power of spices helps some people who struggle with their marginalized existence in a cosmopolitan setting. Rajan postulates that the magical elements in the novel represent symbolic aspects of love and care of human nature that offset greater forces of hegemonic power. Such forces not only exercise power on marginalized groups but also bind women to a subservient existence of lower senses and strict patriarchal regulations.

However, if we endorse Gita Rajan's view that the plot of the novel is essentially a simple one leaning towards the realist type, it has an impact on the way we explain the sensory experiences in the novel. The sensory descriptions in the novel dwell evidently in both the magical and the realistic realms, but a lot of the sensory experiences seem flattened once we explain the allegorical aspects of the novel only as elements of the realistic struggles of a diasporic community, which includes a subjugated woman, Tilo. The more plausible sensory engagements in the book, which are not too many, are Tilo's physical relationship with Raven, and her touching, tasting and smelling of the spices in the shop before she delivers them to the customers. However, the major sensory details in the novel, such as the inexplicable power the spices exercise on people's lives, and the mysterious moments Tilo and the other women spend on the island, seem to bear only symbolic significances. The ordinary usage of spices in culinary practices represents cultural values and practices. But the miracles done by the spices in the novel are explainable by the mere reasoning that it is only people's belief or just the passage of time, not the actual power of the spices, which eliminates the troubles from people's lives. For instance, when Tilo thinks of the best spice for Raven, she picks "*mahamul*, the root spice...to enhance fortune, to bring success or joy, to avert ill luck" (74). But, we immediately come to know that it is only the spiritual contemplation which brings out the effect of *mahamul*: "When you do not know how else to help someone, you must go deep into your being and search out the *mahamul*" (74). Again, Tilo believes that the sensory power of basil can help to bring different classes and cultures of people closer because the "burn[ing] of *tulsi*, basil which is the plant of humility, curber of ego", emits "sweet smoke" and can turn people's "thoughts inward, away from worldliness" (79). In other words, we can relate the effect of basil to the idea that the acts of humility and

sweetness can remove discrimination and compartmentalization from the society. The act of walking on fire on the island can symbolize both the women's process of purification and their punishment for transgression. The allegorical significance of the overall plot, therefore, flattens the sense experiences to a great extent and symbolize, and even heighten, the existential situation of the characters.

Given a range of choices we can make for our reading of this novel, the plot of Divakaruni's novel can be read as an allegory of a woman's sensorial journey through patriarchal and hierarchical order to the point of her attempt to attain autonomy. Tilo's inheritance of mysterious power allows her to travel in an old woman's body through time and arrive at her chosen place Oakland, California. From her spice shop there, she serves the needs of people by discerning the sensorial qualities of different spices and their applicability to solving the problems of people. The story, therefore, is embedded in the power of multisensorial experiences from which we can make a strong case for understanding the deeply held prejudices of associating women with some "lower" senses. Nonetheless, Tilo's later disobedience to her matriarchal order does not necessarily indicate her dissociation from the so-called "lower" senses; it rather asserts that the association of women with their priorities of senses can be a potential source of power. She shows how a woman can retain her femininity while dealing with certain senses yet can also break free from the shackles of a subjugated identity. Her union with Raven and yet her unbending ties with the spices not only promise her authenticity but also reflect that women's association with spices doesn't necessarily have to be a patriarchal imposition but can be a choice.

III. Haptic Prohibition, Ocularcentrism, and the "witch" Identity

The association of women with certain senses which are deemed as lower has been the result of the historical rise of ocularcentrism, or the rise of sight as the supreme sense. In his seminal work *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History*, Mark M. Smith outlines the historical and political factors that have contributed to the ocularcentric practices in our society and shaped a system of power that exploits human sensorium to its advantage. The "Introduction" of Smith's book takes up the issue of the "great divide" theory that places the dominance of vision in Western thinking in contrast to the "synesthetic sensorium" of the Orient and many tribal societies in Africa (9). This sweeping binary in the historical reading of sensorium parallels Tilo's "Oriental" sensory engagements in a Western setting. Although Tilo complicates such binary by exercising her power of spices and regulating people's lives, she, nevertheless, falls victim to the same divide by belonging to the other side of power. For instance, she fully identifies herself with the condition of Mohan, an Indian who leaves America after facing a racial assault that leaves him physically and mentally shattered. In her mind, she speaks to Mohan, about whom she reads only in the newspaper: "My limbs ache as after long illness, my sari is damp with silver-sweat, and in my heart I cannot tell where your pain ends and mine begins" (182). Such moments in the novel demonstrate her association with the struggling diasporic community and heighten her own existential dilemma and her "Oriental" roots.

The rise of ocularcentrism has largely shaped gender roles and social organizations to the disadvantage of women. In the chapter titled "Seeing" of his book, Mark M. Smith discusses the emergence of sight as the superior sense, an emergence that also created unequal power relations and promoted the segregationist intents of human beings. For

example, Smith refers to the Renaissance period to point out how men were meant for sight-oriented tasks, such as reading, writing, and travelling, whereas women were supposed to work in the kitchen where other senses like tasting, touching and smelling were more prominent. Smith therefore shows how the sense of sight worked as a tool for exclusion to preserve "relations of dominance and subordination" (2). The association of women with the so-called lower senses helped men confine women virtually in the household and exert their patriarchal control over women. Tilo's training in the island to deal with the spices exemplifies the continuation of the Renaissance intent of viewing woman from a segregationist ideology. She is expected to know every sensory detail about the spices, and their usage for preparing food. In her case though, the order of the senses is partially reorganized. She can use her sight if she stays within her shop, and she is not allowed to touch people she sells her spices to. Nevertheless, her engagement in culinary matters represents the historical subjugation of women through their association with household works such as cooking.

Tilo's magical power might give us an indication that she has the power to overcome her subjugated identity, but the bestowing of the same power on her can also be seen as the continuation of an ancient tendency to view women as social outcasts. In her essay "The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," Constance Classen offers a historical overview of the systematic, masculine domination of women's sensibilities, as she recounts the treatment of women and their association with senses in our society from the Renaissance to the modern times. Classen claims that, even though women have always contributed their intelligence and sensibility to civilization, they have been assigned a secondary status which dates to the Renaissance practice of associating women with witchcraft. Classen shows that witchcraft is an identity factor that has been associated with women to exoticize them and exclude them from the mainstream society. Even though the identity of a witch gives women certain powers, it, nevertheless, is a patriarchal mechanism of segregating them. The way the initial chapters of the novel represent the supernatural power of Tilo and other women on the island, followed by Tilo exercising her magical power of spices in modern America, reads like a representation of her as a witch brought back from the magical realm of the Renaissance to modern America. The Renaissance witch could use the power of odour and flames for cure, but her transgressive use of the sense of touch would turn her into a seductress and a "mistress of the sense of sight," Classen observes (76). Likewise, Tilo is allowed to operate with the taste and smell of the spices; her touching of any people or leaving the compound of store would be considered transgressive. Her representation is, therefore, that of a modern-day "witch." Like the Renaissance witch, she is a social outcast who can use her power to heal people but she is not allowed to set her feet out of the shop and merge with the people in Oakland.

Tilo's haptic prohibition or her spatial boundaries, or even her "witchlike" representation in the novel, evidently reflects the imposition of patriarchal expectations on women and their exclusion from the mainstream life. First of all, Tilo's earlier life on the island before she comes to Oakland symbolizes the timeless burden of Indian femininity; the island's mystical training has an influence on her life and shapes her agency. The Old One, the unnamed first woman who is all powerful, says to all mistresses that they are not as important as the spices are, which is an indication that their role is subservient to the people they serve with the spices. One frequent warning that the oldest woman gives to Tilo and others is: "It is not allowed for Mistresses to touch those who

come to us. To upset the delicate axis of giving and receiving on which our lives are held precarious" (6). They must shun their desire at any cost. The Old One also warns Tilo about her sensuousness which might transpire from "her lava hands" (51), hence the need for a haptic prohibition. The fact that the island life for Tilo has actually been a training in typical, subdued femininity becomes evident from her remembrances: "much of our time was spent in common things, sweeping and stitching and rolling wicks for lamps, gathering wild spinach and roasting *chapatis* and braiding each other's hair" (54). Also, the test of the Fire of Shampati the mistresses have to go through is another instance that demystifies the island life and reflects it as a training in "traditional femininity." In Hindu mythology Sita walked through the fire to prove her chastity to her husband. In the same fashion, the rebellious women on the island also have to walk through fire to prove their virtuousness and loyalty to their training. Tilo's coming to America promises her an escape from such practices and expectations since she wishes to come to California when they are given choices of places in which they can run their spice shops. However, despite overcoming many of the "superstitious" beliefs and breaking many of the rules, she ironically holds onto some of them till the end. One such practice is the rite of Shampati's fire, which she decides to go through when she realizes that she has broken a major commandment of her training by becoming physically close to Raven. It's only when she cannot convince the spices to set the shop ablaze, she realizes that she might not have committed any sin.

Tilo's mission of running a spice shop in California, especially following from her earlier training on the island, makes her appear like a religious ascetic aiming to achieve spiritual salvation. A very important creed of her training is to shun physical desire and to dedicate her life to the service of others. Both on the island and in Oakland, she leads an enclosed life like many women who live an isolated life in monasteries. Such monastic enclosure promises transcendence but, on the flip side, is also an attempt to separate women from the public sphere. Women are traditionally considered prone to transgressive desire so, such enclosure of them is validated by the hierarchical, regulatory mechanism of the society. The paradoxical juxtaposition of Tilo's apparent spiritual transcendence and her physical confinement, therefore, resonates women's monastic enclosure. Her engagement with the spices also reflects the sensorial, religious rituals women perform in the confines of monasteries and households. However, Tilo's spiritual ascent provides her with the strength to renegotiate her confined, "othered" identity. Also, she has the ability to walk on the fire like the ancient and modern firewalking ascetics from Africa, India and other parts of the world who believe that fire empowers and rejuvenates them. By according her such supernatural power, Divakaruni seems to be figuratively stating that the subjugation of a woman or anyone marginalized might not just ensue from their lack of strength; the subjugation may also result from their lack of effort to break free from the psychological shackles created by oppressive forces.

IV. Diaspora and Desire in Oakland

One of the other hegemonic conditions that Tilo negotiates is her diasporic identity in the cosmopolitan California. Even though she stays confined within her spice shop, she shares a deep bond with the expatriate people who visit her shop. She empathizes deeply with their existential crises and tries her utmost to help them with counsels and spices. Swathi Krishna views Tilo as a character who signifies the struggles of a diasporic woman's attempt to attain autonomy for herself and for the others of her kind. Krishna

claims that Tilo's attempt to rescue individuals by the magical power of spices symbolizes her empathy to uplift individuals from the discrimination of class, race and gender and, therefore, she is represented in the novel as a partial exception to the normative diaspora characters. Krishna observes: "what she achieves in the end is what she truly desires and gains [which is] not only the autonomy from the control of the spices but also a new and independent Indian American identity" (15).

However, Tilo's allegiance to the regulations forced on her denotes the fact that she herself remains ironically mired in her duties set by a patriarchal order. She herself admits this dilemma when her struggles surface with her falling in love with the "lonely American," Raven. When she witnesses the discord between Geeta, her friend, and Geeta's parents and grandfather over her intent to marry a Chicano American, she sympathizes with all of them but aligns herself more with Geeta because of her own desire for her "lonely American." In her mind she says, "Geeta, like you I too am learning how love like a rope of ground glass can snake around your heart and pull you, bleeding, away from all you should", as she admits that Geeta's case essentially reminds her of her Americanness, therefore, her own precariousness (95). Tilo, thus, struggles to renegotiate her identity of a "third world" diasporic woman since her magical power keeps her in the confines of her imposed identity. Krishna sums up this tension in Tilo's diasporic existence in the following lines:

Notably, while Tilo upholds the mystical powers and tradition of India that in turn grant her supernatural abilities as a healer and a nurturer, ironically, it is these powers that entrap her under stringent gender norms emanating from traditional Indian value-systems. Likewise, while America bestows upon her the independence and autonomy to run a spice shop, it nevertheless exoticizes her. Tilo, the magical healer, therefore, inhabits a liminal space between the east and the west where she constantly negotiates with cultural codes in order to attain autonomy and identity. (8)

The words uttered by Ahuja's wife, another of Tilo's customers, also mirror Tilo's liminality since both of them are trying to escape the same dictates of a patriarchal order. Just the way Tilo expressed her desire for freedom by opting to come to America, Ahuja's wife also thought America could be the place for the fulfilment of her freedom from womanly expectations. However, though these women have physically escaped their original locations of oppression, the ghost of patriarchy haunts their unconscious, given the long standing, systematic oppression that still binds them to certain feminine duties. Ahuja's wife says: "Here in America may be we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman's duty. But ah the voices, we carried them all the way inside our heads" (107). These voices are symbolic of the language of domination which is used for "disciplining" women. Ahuja's wife and Tilo, representatives of women who have escaped their original country and their original locale of gender discrimination, are still controlled by those voices. The cautionary words of the Old One that Tilo often recalls throughout the novel are also like these voices in her unconscious that force her to curb her desire and other expectations.

The liminal space between the east and the west that Tilo inhabits is powerfully and symbolically represented by Divakaruni through Tilo's spatial isolation within her shop. Though Tilo has arrived at the western setting of Oakland, she is symbolically trapped within the magical world of smell and taste of the spices in her shop from which she cannot step outside. The representation of her shop, Spice Bazaar, sounds like a typical upscale Indian spice shop located in the middle of, yet tucked away from, the happenings

of the cosmopolitan Oakland. The tendency to equate Indianness with strong spices has been a historical trope of Indian femininity. Paroma Roy's book *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* studies the effects of culinary issues on human lives and identity. She captures a range of political, historical and thematic ideas that concern the Indian subject's identity in relation to the culinary history from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Roy's discussion in her book about Madhur Jaffrey's writings and about Sara Suleri's book *Meatless Days* tells us how ideas of food play a role in shaping the Indian identity in cosmopolitan and transnational settings—an idea that extends to Tilo's negotiation of her diasporic identity in the cosmopolitan setting. Tilo's customers are mostly Indians, and we can say that even within the cosmopolitan buzz of Oakland, she is inhabiting a little India in which the cooking spices greatly dictate her identity formation. In "Appetites: Spices Redux," the fourth chapter of her book, Roy refers to Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* as a work in which "spices have served as a favored trope of cultural representation" (156). She observes that Divakaruni trades "overtly in the exotic aura of spices" and essentially "deploy[s] spices to a number of parabolic ends, to signify, variously, magic, enchantment, healing, and the cultural sedimentations of diaspora" (157). Accordingly, Roy concludes that Divakaruni's use of spices mainly serves "a linguistic and ideological" purpose to offer a gastronomic angle to the cultural representation of a diasporic community (157). In other words, Roy claims that Divakaruni's treatment of the spices makes the sensory appeals secondary to the meanings the spices render or symbolize. The spices, therefore, symbolize the Indianness that marks the "otherness" and the restrictions associated with Tilo's evolving identity.

The novel's setting in Oakland resonates the history of migration into America of many Asian and African communities and, so, magnifies Tilo's status as a diasporic character. Located across the bay from the more affluent and cosmopolitan San Francisco, Oakland accommodated mainly an African American community in the late 20th century and, therefore, has its own history of marginality. The different communities in Oakland mostly maintained their differences from each other, and food was an essential trope to understand their intermingling as well as detachment. In her essay "Race in the study of food," Rachel Slocum discusses culinary cultures, especially those the migrant communities reflect, as indicative of racial identity and politics. She claims that the production and consumption of food is "central to the development and preservation of racialized identity and belonging for women, diasporic populations, immigrants and the displaced, enslaved and impoverished" (305). She mentions the African American "soul food" as an example of how a certain type of food that reflects racial identity can, at the same time, evoke pride and dislike based on its coexistence and history in terms of other culinary cultures. In comparison to vegetarian diets preferred mostly by the whites, soul food was considered unhealthy and, thus, reflected the association of "junk food" with racial identity. However, Slocum highlights the fact that, now, "embracing soul food is a statement of racial pride precisely because it reclaims foods previously despised" (306).

Being part of a similar culinary scene of diverse cultures, Tilo's spice shop, therefore, represents both her separation from, as well as connection with, other communities. However, her interactions with other communities are restricted to only a few individuals like Raven. So, the assemblage of her spices and their sensory applications mainly signify Tilo's isolation from the scene of cultural exchange as much as they denote the compartmentalization of cultures and classes in Oakland. Divakaruni interestingly shows how people's preferences for different sensory appeals of different spices separate their

classes as well. The rich Indian class prefers Basmati rice for its sweetness, mustard oil for the look that comes via an expensive bottle, and the very expensive box of saffron which is “like shavings of flame” (78). There are other rich Indians who are so isolated from her shop that they just send their attendants instead to buy spices for them. Culinary practices, along with the associated sensory experiences, thus unpack some cultural and class elements of diasporic identity.

V. Power, Commerce, and Tilo’s Haptic Prohibition

The historical understanding of Indianness via spices has its own power dynamics which can, in turn, echo the power structure that subjugates Tilo. Andrew Dalby’s book *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* studies the history of spice trade and the historical determinants associated with power and capital behind the transcultural movement of spices in general. Dalby concentrates on the origins and historical passages of cloves, nutmeg, ginger, pepper, chili, coriander, and cumin which represent various causes and dynamics of movement that embody human desire, belief, exchanges and longing for tastes—observations that parallel Tilo’s adoption of the power and sensory appeals of most of the same spices. Above all, spice trade gave rise to routes that connected the different parts of the world, which was a development towards acculturation and globalization. The sensory representation of spices, both in Dalby’s book and in *The Mistress of Spices*, opens up a dialectic for spotting how movement of people and spices are regulated by certain power dynamics as well. The old-day imperial trades have now been replaced by the modern-day globalization in which Tilo’s shop captures the implications of a similar power dynamics. In the cosmopolitan, free setting of Oakland, Tilo’s oriental, feminine identity cannot transgress the boundaries of “lower senses” and their playfield within her shop. She can exercise her “supernatural” power about the spices through mainly the senses of smell and taste, and only within the boundaries of her shop.

The legacies of patriarchy and the dynamics of the capitalistic market reduce Tilo’s role to mere exchange value, symbolically expressed in her prohibition against touching people or leaving her shop. Luce Irigaray observes that women’s position in the society is determined merely by their exchange value: “all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are organized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business... wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men” (800). Although we do not quite see Tilo being directly exchanged via her relations with men, she has to go through a patriarchal order of exchange: from her past training in being a “pure” woman who cannot desire men, to the present suppression of her desire for a man from another culture.

Tilo’s life hanging between her desire and duty becomes a battle of the senses for her. This is a battle between her expected engagement in the dealing of smell and taste of spices, and her transgressive desire to upset the haptic prohibition imposed on her. This dilemma marks an important point of transition from her enforced identity to attaining her desired agency by getting physically close to Raven, an American man who one day walks into her shop and immediately attracts her. The description of a typical day inside her shop gives us an impression that Raven is penetrating her protected sensory world: “At the store each day has a color, a smell. And if you know to listen, a melody” (69). Her increasing desire for Raven alarms her about an impending disaster, in the form of “the first tremor” of earthquakes (77). The transition from her expected virtuous image to

that of a rebel is not an easy one, so she remains perplexed and indecisive for a while. But ultimately, she opts for what the Old One has described as “life-lust, that craving to taste all things, sweet as well as bitter, on your own tongue” (86). Also, Tilo interestingly projects her complex sensory experience and desire—the Old One terms it as “life-lust”—into an understanding of the migrant’s postcolonial desire for the cosmopolitan center. Tilo perceives that, with the people who have migrated to America, there is a dilemma in their postcolonial “longing for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America” (5). She describes that shame in terms of sensory experience as she compares that desire to the “bitter-sweet aftertaste in the mouth when one has chewed *amlaki* to freshen the breath” (5).

Tilo’s transgressions, both in terms of sensory and identity issues, happen in the form of her desiring Raven to the extent that she starts to neglect her training in dealing with the spices. Her attempt to escape her confinement affects her association with the spices and their sensory power. Spices stop listening to her commands; the rising smell of burning poppy seeds behaves unusually, making her “cough till tears come” (135). In the back of her mind she hears the warning of the Old One, the incarnation of all feminine values: “Don’t let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don’t rouse the spices’ hate” (148). This warning portrays a sign of dissociation from her age-old, feminine engagement with spices, and it cautions that her femininity will be threatened if she behaves like a transgressor. For a moment she steps back, taking an oath to not falter in her purpose to serve the spices and the people who have been crushed in their pursuit of the American dream. But, her jealousy of the possibility of seeing Raven with another woman breaks her resolve. She uses hues and smells of her spices for a bath to tempt Raven further and starts to spend time with him outside her shop, promising to her spices that she will be dutiful soon. However, her struggles intensify. At one point, the people who were benefitted from her spices in the past begin to experience strange results from the spices or even face accidents. Also, an earthquake damages her shop. She takes all these as a collective sign of disaster resulting from her disobedience.

VI. Conclusion

The closure in the plot of the novel, however, provides an essential turn in favour of the discussion of Tilo’s struggle as her diasporic reconciliation. In the end, Tilo and Raven unite, and they agree that their “earthly paradise” is no utopia but it is what they can construct in the debris left by the earthquake, “in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh...in the hate in the fear” (336). As they walk towards the fire and the debris of the city left by the earthquake, Tilo still hears echoes from her past life. She is still unclear if she is advancing towards her desired identity, wondering if Raven just desires her for her “Oriental” exotica which might not bring any significant change to her agency. But there are signs which Tilo interprets as true love and her dignity: Raven’s house has secret touches of things that Tilo preferred; she is unsuccessful to initiate the rite of fire to punish her for her assumed transgression; and she realizes that the spices listen to her again and have not deserted her even after her physical relationship with Raven. This bridging of the best from the two worlds—the love for spices she inherits from the past and her love for Raven which she has now learnt to desire—indicates the possibility of a revised, autonomous identity for her. We can hardly miss the tone of conviction with which she approaches this new turn in her life: “I acted out of love, in which is no sinning” (318).

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, therefore, portrays the body of an "Oriental" woman, Tilo, as a site of oppression bearing multiple markers of hegemonic practices of power that Tilo optimistically tries to thwart. The text also allows us to see Tilo's transgression as her overturning of the popular ideas of the witch identity in which the "magical" power of femininity is expected to operate under certain rules. She, in a complex way, disregards the oppressive aspects of the rules but chooses to live with the sensory wonders of her spices. Her spice shop becomes a utopia for the ideal world of senses where spices of all kinds of colors, tastes, smells, feels, and melodies represent what Tilo desires the world to be like: a safe place for people of all races, cultures, colors, genders, and preferences. At the same time, she preserves her inheritance of power over spices and rejects the haptic prohibition on her femininity. She ultimately emerges as a true "mistress of spices" because she retains her own version of femininity yet challenges the masculine, imperial gaze of power.

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