



An Eco feminist Perspective in 'The Mistress of Spices' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: This paper delves into the ecofeminist perspective portrayed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel 'The Mistress of Spices,' which explores the interconnected oppression of women and nature in a patriarchal society. Ecofeminism, a branch combining feminism and environmentalism, highlights the parallels between the exploitation of the feminine gender and the degradation of the natural world. The novel delves into the symbolic representation of nature through the mystical properties of spices and the feminine protagonist's profound relationship with the earth. It examines how both women and nature face subjugation by patriarchal forces, while emphasizing the need to reclaim power, agency, and respect for the sacred feminine and the environment. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism and political ecology that explores the interconnected oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminist theory asserts a feminist perspective of Green politics, calling for an egalitarian, collaborative society without dominant groups. The analysis draws parallels between the subjugation of women and nature, perceiving both as property to be dominated by patriarchal systems. In 'The Mistress of Spices', nature and its elements are intricately woven into the narrative, reflecting the ecofeminist themes of the novel. The spices are personified and given a feminine identity, with Tilo as their 'mistress' who commands their magical abilities, symbolizing the interconnection between women and nature.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Feminism, Nature, Patriarchal Domination, Spices, Nature

Empowering the Feminine and the Natural World: An Ecofeminist Perspective

Materialist ecofeminism connects institutions like labour, power, and property as the source of domination over women and nature, seeking to eliminate hierarchies that favour production over biological and social reproduction. Spiritual and cultural ecofeminism values intuition, an ethic of caring, and human-nature interrelationships. However, ecofeminism has faced critiques of essentialism for reinforcing gender stereotypes and dichotomies. Socialist feminists have criticized the focus on mysticism over practical activism to help women. Concerns were also raised about overlooking the experiences of minority women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and the effects of race, class, and ethnicity on women's social positions.

'The Mistress of Spices' is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that tells the story of Tilo, a young woman born in another time and place who is trained in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress charged with special powers. Tilo travels through time to Oakland, California, where she opens a shop from which she administers spices as curatives to the local Indian community. Although it is her duty to remain emotionally detached, Tilo breaks the rules of the spices and is drawn into the lives of her customers, helping them through their troubles. When an unexpected romance blossoms with a handsome stranger, Tilo is forced

to choose between the supernatural life of an immortal and the vicissitudes of modern life. The novel explores the themes of choosing between a life of special powers and one of ordinary love and compassion. The spices become characters in the novel, taking from and giving to Tilo. Tilo's name and its significance, as well as the role of names in the novel, are important. The novel is written in the first person present tense, which adds to the story. Divakaruni's use of lyricism and rhythm creates a poetic quality in parts of the novel. The novel explores the Indian immigrant experience and the differences between women and men, and between Indians and Americans.

The main character is Tilo, a shopkeeper born in India and trained in magic, who helps customers with the mystical properties of spices. Tilo falls for an American man named Raven, who is implied to be Native American. Tilo disregards the rules of her training to pursue this romance and seek out customers outside her shop. This results in the spices inflicting punishment on Tilo and those she cares about. To save Raven, Tilo decides to leave him after one last night together. Tilo accepts the punishment for her actions, which leads to the destruction of her store in an earthquake. Tilo and Raven reconcile and decide to help rebuild the shop.

Symbolic Representation of Nature:

The novel employs vivid imagery, metaphors, and personification of natural elements to depict this connection. The five elements of nature - air, water, earth, space, and fire - are incorporated symbolically and meaningfully into the story. For instance: the devastating earthquake at the end symbolizes the cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction in nature. Natural elements like fire, water, islands, oceans, and serpents are integral parts of the setting and characters. Through this symbolic representation, the novel highlights the parallel between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the natural world by patriarchal forces. The characters' realization that a new world can be built from the ruins reflects the regenerative power of nature, emphasizing the need to reclaim respect for both the sacred feminine and the environment.

Tilo, the protagonist, has a profound and intimate connection with the natural world that is deeply woven into the fabric of her existence. Her bond with nature transcends the physical realm, as she possesses a unique ability to communicate with and harness the mystical powers of spices, which are intrinsic elements of the earth. The spices Tilo tends to are imbued with spiritual and healing properties that she can tap into to aid her customers. She can converse with the spices, using their inherent qualities for various purposes, such as turmeric for healing wounds, cumin for warding off evil, and coriander for soothing troubled minds. The spices are personified and share a strong bond with Tilo, who has an intimate knowledge of their origins, properties, and powers.

Tilo's Attunement with Nature's Rhythms:

Tilo's connection to nature extends beyond the spices, as she can sense the natural rhythms and energies around her, like the changing of the seasons and the flow of the tides. Her life is deeply intertwined with nature from birth – she is fed the milk of an ass, possesses magical powers, and is trained by the First Mother to wield the powers of spices. Tilo's journey, from being Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama, showcases her profound bond with nature, as she is guided and protected by natural elements like snakes. Tilo can communicate with and harness the spiritual and healing properties of spices, using them to aid her customers. Tilo can sense the natural rhythms and energies around her, and her life is deeply intertwined with nature from birth. Tilo's character represents the connection between women and nature, as she is able to harness the power of spices (integral parts of nature) to help her community. Tilo's deep bond with the natural world gives her a unique perspective and power that she uses to guide and heal the people who come to her shop. Her role as the Mistress of Spices represents the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature and using its gifts wisely to benefit humanity.

Parallel Oppression of Women and Nature:

'The Mistress of Spices' explores the parallel oppression of women and nature by patriarchal forces, highlighting their shared experiences of exploitation and marginalization. The novel draws a direct connection between the treatment of Tilo, the protagonist, and the spices she commands – both are taken away from their origins and forced to serve others. As the Mistress of Spices, Tilo is bound by strict rules that limit her freedom and agency, mirroring the societal constraints imposed on women. Her breaking of these rules leads to the destruction of her spice shop, symbolizing the consequences women face for defying patriarchal norms. The spices, personified as feminine entities, are uprooted from their natural habitats and forced to serve humanity's needs, reflecting the exploitation of nature by patriarchal systems. The cyclical themes of creation, preservation, and destruction in nature mirror Tilo's own journey, as well as the shared experiences of oppression between women and the natural world.

Despite the oppression they face, both Tilo and the spices possess an inherent power and resilience. The novel's resolution, where Tilo and her lover Raven decide to rebuild the spice shop, symbolizes the opportunity for a new beginning – a chance to reclaim power, agency, and respect for the sacred feminine and the environment. Through this parallel exploration, the novel emphasizes the ecofeminist perspective that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected issues, both stemming from patriarchal systems that seek to dominate and control. By highlighting these parallels, the novel calls for a recognition and reclamation of the power and agency of both women and nature. 'The Mistress of Spices' presents a strong ecofeminist perspective by highlighting the intimate connection between women and nature, and the shared experiences of marginalization and exploitation. Through Tilo's journey, the novel advocates for a more holistic, sustainable, and spiritually-grounded way of living that respects the sacredness of the natural world. The novel explores the idea of an 'earthly paradise' that can be created from the ruins, highlighting the resilience of nature and women. Tilo's decision to rebuild her spice shop with Raven symbolizes the opportunity for a new beginning, where the power and agency of both the sacred feminine and the environment can be reclaimed.

The novel highlights the ecofeminist themes of the interdependence between humans, nature, and the divine feminine. Tilo's life is highly intertwined with nature, as she has the unique power of understanding the spices, introducing herself as a 'Mistress of Spices' and acting according to their instructions and guidance. The novel critiques the patriarchal structures and capitalist exploitation that threaten the balance between humans and nature. Tilo's oppression, mirrored in the exploitation of the spices, symbolizes the need to challenge and dismantle these oppressive systems that subjugate both women and the natural world.

Through this exploration of reclaiming power and agency, the novel advocates for a paradigm shift – a move towards a more harmonious, sustainable, and spiritually-grounded way of living that respects and celebrates the sacred feminine and the natural world. In 'The Mistress of Spices', the spices are not merely culinary ingredients but are imbued with profound cultural significance and a feminine identity. The novel personifies the spices, portraying them as living entities with their own personalities and powers. Tilo, the protagonist, is referred to as the 'Mistress of Spices', a title that bestows upon her the ability to command and harness the mystical properties of these spices.

Feminine Symbolism:

The spices are given a feminine identity, symbolizing the intimate connection between women and nature. Tilo's role as the 'Mistress' highlights the reverence and respect accorded to women in their traditional role as keepers and preservers of cultural knowledge and traditions. The spices represent the rich cultural heritage of India, carrying within them the stories, traditions, and wisdom of generations. Each spice is imbued with unique properties and powers, reflecting the diverse and complex tapestry of Indian culture. In many cultures, spices are not merely culinary ingredients but are also revered for their healing and spiritual properties. Tilo's ability to communicate with and harness the powers of the spices reflects the deep-rooted

belief in the interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, and spiritual realms. Through the personification and symbolic representation of the spices, the novel celebrates the cultural significance of these natural elements, highlighting their role in preserving and transmitting the rich tapestry of Indian culture, traditions, and beliefs.

Ecofeminist Roots in Indian Mythology and Folklore:

Ecofeminist themes have deep roots in Indian mythology and folklore, where the veneration of nature and the divine feminine has been a longstanding tradition. Many ancient texts and stories celebrate the interconnectedness between women and the natural world, often personifying nature as a nurturing mother goddess. Hindu mythology reveres the earth as "Bhumi Devi" or "Prithvi Mata," the Mother Earth goddess who sustains all life. This reverence for the earth as a sacred, feminine entity reflects the ecofeminist principle of respecting and protecting nature. Goddesses like Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth and prosperity), Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge and arts), and Durga (the fierce mother goddess) are closely associated with various aspects of nature. Their worship and celebration highlight the intrinsic link between the divine feminine and the natural world. Indian folklore is replete with stories and tales that symbolically represent the relationship between women and nature, often depicting women as guardians and protectors of the environment. These stories reinforce the ecofeminist idea that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected issues.

Contemporary Indian Literature and Ecofeminism:

While ecofeminist themes have deep roots in Indian mythology and folklore, contemporary Indian literature has also explored these concepts in various ways. Many Indian writers have incorporated ecofeminist perspectives into their works, shedding light on the parallel oppression of women and nature in modern society. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Kiran Desai have explored the impact of environmental degradation on marginalized communities, particularly women. Their works often highlight the disproportionate burden borne by women due to the exploitation of natural resources and the consequences of climate change. Authors like Mahasweta Devi and Bama have celebrated the indigenous knowledge and traditions of tribal and marginalized communities, which often emphasize a harmonious relationship with nature. Their works challenge the dominant patriarchal narratives and advocate for a more sustainable and inclusive approach to environmental conservation.

Writers like Githa Hariharan and Shashi Deshpande have incorporated feminist perspectives into their exploration of environmental issues, highlighting the intersectionality of gender, class, and environmental justice. Their works underscore the importance of empowering women and promoting their active participation in environmental decision-making processes. Through these diverse literary representations, Indian literature has contributed significantly to the ecofeminist discourse, highlighting the importance of respecting and preserving the natural world while empowering women and promoting gender equality.

Conclusion:

The exploration of ecofeminist themes in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Mistress of Spices' provides a poignant perspective on the interconnected oppression of women and nature by patriarchal forces. Through the symbolic representation of spices as feminine entities and Tilo's profound relationship with the natural world, the novel draws parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. Ultimately, the novel advocates for reclaiming power, agency, and respect for both the sacred feminine and the natural world. Divakaruni's novel contributes to a broader literary tradition that celebrates the intrinsic link between women and nature, echoing the ecofeminist roots found in Indian mythology and folklore. Contemporary Indian literature continues to explore these themes, shedding light on environmental degradation, indigenous knowledge, and the intersectionality of gender and environmental justice. By

embracing an ecofeminist perspective, literature can inspire a more holistic, sustainable, and inclusive approach to addressing the interconnected challenges faced by women and the natural world.

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