

## EXPLORING THE INTERFACE BETWEEN NATURE, WITCHCRAFT, AND MAGIC IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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The present paper is focused on studying Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* under the lens of ecofeminism. *The Mistress of Spices* is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first full-length novel. The novel barely needs an introduction as it is one of the most popular works of the Indian diasporic literature. It is a fascinating blend of myth, mystery, magic, fantasy, and romance. The novel featured on the Los Angeles Times Best Books List in 1997, and was shortlisted for the prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction. The story of the novel revolves around an Indian immigrant woman named Tilo who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. Tilo is an exceptionally gifted woman and a priestess, trained in the art of unlocking the secret healing powers of spices. Through her unique gift of understanding the magical powers of spices, Tilo is able to materially sustain herself in an alien country. Her ability to delve deep into the mystical realms of ancient spices and human desires makes her a woman with incredible inner strength and mental acuity. Spices are her "love" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 3) and she can bend them to her will.

Starhawk's interest in witchcraft was kindled in an anthropology class. Under the leadership of Hungarian activist Z. Budapest, she began to attend women's rituals. After an unsuccessful stint in New York City, she shifted base to San Francisco, where she started to meet other members of the burgeoning pagan community and to teach classes in witchcraft. Starhawk views her brand of witchcraft as a revival of traditional forms of shamanism of Stone Age Britain. She firmly believes that Wiccans should be prepared to adopt life-affirming spirituality wherever it is found. In her opinion, magic, ritual, trance, and visualization can richly contribute to the inward growth of people by enabling them to conquer their inner demons of self-hatred and self-abnegation (Ruether, *Goddesses* 280-83).

In her ritual work, she differentiates between three kinds of power: "power over", "power within", and "power with." According to Starhawk, "power over" is the form of power which is foundational to patriarchal societies. It is linked to the logic of domination. It is responsible for the literal dismemberment of the world. It paves the way for the exploitation and domination of women and subjugated classes and races, as well as the nonhuman world. "Power within", on the other hand, is a process by which subjugated people shake off the control of others. It helps them in getting rid of their own internalization of the feelings of powerlessness and inferiority projected on to them. It further empowers them to lay hold of their own innate power and goodness. "Power with" encompasses ways to share power that do not devalue or denigrate others in order to affirm oneself. Rather, it is a process of mutually affirming one another. It is a relationship of mutual empowerment in which each person flourishes by encouraging the flourishing of others. (Ruether, *Integrating* 95-96). She says:

Wiccan spirituality is about freeing individuals and communities from these patterns of domination, or “power over”, by linking each person in themselves and in community with their own inner power. By coming in contact with their own inner worth, beauty, talents, and life force, women and men can overthrow the internalized patterns of domination and subjugation within and among them. But Wiccan spirituality is more than simply coming in contact with one's own inner power. There is also a need to find new ways of respecting and interacting with each other's power in a way that is not based on new forms of control. This kind of relation to one another's power Starhawk calls “power with.” (Ruether, *Goddesses* 283)

This concept of “power with” is key to Starhawk's vision to develop patterns of leadership without setting up new hierarchies. According to Starhawk, the theory of “power with” has the potential to overcome all elements of injustice in our society. It can genuinely contribute to the development of communities where relationships are indisputably circular and egalitarian. In such communities, the special talents and skills of each individual is acknowledged (Ruether, *Goddesses* 282-83).

According to Starhawk, magic and Witchcraft are integral aspects of spiritual ecofeminism. She says that Witchcraft is a word that terrifies many people and confuses many others. In popular culture, Witches are depicted as ugly, old crones riding broomsticks, or they are shown as evil Satanists performing disgusting rites and rituals. On the other hand, modern Witches are thought to be the demonic members of a crazed cult, primarily concerned with getting even with one's enemies by poking wax figurines with needles and pins. They are thought to be lacking in depth, dignity, grace, and seriousness of character (Starhawk, *Spiral* 26).

But Witchcraft is a religion in its own right. It is perhaps the oldest religion in existence in the West. It precedes Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism as well. Starhawk calls it the “Old Religion.” In spirit, it resembles the Native American traditions and the shamanism of the Arctic regions. It is not based on dogma or a rigid set of rules, nor on infallible scriptures or a sacred gospel truth revealed by a great man. Witchcraft draws its teachings from nature. It takes inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the growth of foliage, and the various cycles of seasons (Starhawk, *Spiral* 26-27).

According to Starhawk, Witchcraft is a “mystery religion, based on ritual, on consciously structured collective experiences that allow us to encounter the immeasurable” (Starhawk, *Truth* 7).

According to Starhawk, the religion of Witchcraft began more than thirty-five thousand years ago. Clan mothers, called “Queen of Elphame”, which means Elfland, steered the covens, in solidarity with the priest, the Sacred King, who epitomized the dying God, and underwent a ritualized mock death at the end of his tenure. They celebrated the eight feasts of the Wheel in a grandiose manner which included wild processions on horseback, singing, dancing, chanting and the lighting of ceremonial bonfire. The persecution of Witches began slowly. In 1484, the Papal Bull of Innocent VIII unleashed the fury of the Inquisition against Witchcraft. The Old religion was declared a heretical act and the groundwork was formulated for a reign of terror that held the whole of Europe in its cold-blooded grip until well into the seventeenth century. The persecution

was staunchly directed against women. An estimated nine million Witches were executed, out of which eighty percent were women, including children and young girls (Starhawk, *Spiral* 27-30).

The atrocities meted out to the accused were unspeakable. A suspected Witch was apprehended suddenly, without any warning, and not allowed to return home again. Often they were stripped naked and shaven completely in order to locate the Devil's "marks" on their bodies, which might be moles or freckles. At times, the accused Witches were subjected to vicious beatings. They were brutally abused and tormented until they signed confessions prepared by the Inquisitors. Most cruelly, they were tortured until they named and identified the full coven quota of thirteen Witches. Confession earned them a merciful death which was strangulation before being burned at the stake (Starhawk, *Spiral* 30).

Witch hunters and informers were paid handsomely for each conviction, and many made it a lucrative career. The growing male medical fraternity welcomed this opportunity to eliminate competition from midwives and village herbalists, their foremost economic rivals. For others, the Witch trials offered opportunities to get rid of haughty women and loathsome neighbors. Witches themselves came forward to attest that many of those tried during the Burning Times did not actually belong to any covens. However, many Witches and Faeries escaped to faraway lands where the Inquisition could not reach. In America, as in Europe, the Craft went underground, and became a closely guarded secret religion. Knowledge of the Craft was shared with only those individuals who could be trusted completely. They were usually members of the same family. Communication between covens was discontinued with immediate effect. No longer could members meet on the Great Festivals to share knowledge of various healing rituals and magical spells. Parts of the Craft became lost or forgotten. Yet somehow, in secret and in silence, the knowledge of the tradition was passed on (Starhawk, *Spiral* 30-31).

According to Starhawk, the word Witch has so many negative undercurrents that many people wonder why it is still being used. Starhawk asserts that "to reclaim the word Witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful; as men, to know the feminine within as divine" (Starhawk, *Spiral* 31-32).

She further says that the religion of Witchcraft sees the entire earth body as sacred. According to her, in order to be a Witch, one has to "make a commitment to the Goddess, to the protection, preservation, nurturing, and fostering of the great powers of life as they emerge in every being" (Starhawk, *Truth* 8).

Starhawk states that "Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry, not theology" (Starhawk, *Spiral* 32). She says:

The myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for "That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told," the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know. The mysteries of the absolute can never be explained—only felt or intuited. Symbols and rituals acts are used to trigger altered states of awareness, in which insights that go beyond words are revealed. When we speak of "the secrets that cannot be told", we do not mean merely that rules prevent us from speaking freely. We mean that the inner knowledge literally cannot be expressed in words. It can only be conveyed by experience, and no one can legislate what insight another person may draw from any given experience. (Starhawk, *Spiral* 32)

In Divakaruni's novel, Tilo is hailed as a *Witchwoman* (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 6). She was named Nayan Tara at birth, Star of the Eye. In the novel, Tilo recalls that when she was born, her parents were crestfallen at the birth of another girl-child. As a result, Tilo was virtually left to fend for herself. Perhaps that was the reason why the words came to her so soon accompanied by the sight to view the unseen (7-8). She is the one whose life is infused with magic since birth. In her own words:

I knew who stole Banku the water-carrier's buffalo, and which servant girl was sleeping with her master. I sensed where under the earth gold lay buried, and why the weaver's daughter had stopped talking since last full moon. I told the *zamindar* how to find his lost ring. I warned the village headman of the floods before they came.

My fame spread. From neighbouring towns and beyond, from the cities that lay on the other side of the mountains, people travelled so I could change their luck with a touch of my hand. They brought me gifts never before seen in our village, gifts so lavish that the villagers talked about them for days. (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 8)

She further says that many grown men trembled in her presence and threw themselves at her feet. The travelling bards sang her praises, gold-smiths impressed her likeness on medallions that were worn by thousands of people for luck, and merchant sailors carried tales of her powers across the seas to distant lands (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 8-9).

The above lines show that Divakaruni has used the principles and ethics of Witchcraft in her novel in order to explicate her feminist and ecological concerns. Starhawk considers Witchcraft to be a constantly changing and dynamic religion. She takes immense pride in calling herself a witch, despite the fact that the term *Witch* intimidates and scares people in general. She says that she much prefers the appellation *Witch* to charming labels, because the concept of a *Witch* goes against the grain of the culture of estrangement. It rubs us the wrong way by offending our sensibilities. Starhawk is of the opinion that by arousing our fear and negative assumptions, the word *Witch* prods us to openly challenge and transform the oppressive thought-forms which are deeply entrenched in our society (Starhawk, *Dreaming* 25).

In Divakaruni's novel, Tilo is extremely proud of her work as a priestess of spices. She calls herself "architect of the immigrant dream" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 28). The novel is interspersed with Tilo's painstaking efforts to uplift and inspire the local Indian immigrant community. She feels protective and concerned about all her customers in a way she cannot quite fathom, but from the beginning of the novel she is eager to assuage their pain. When Ahuja's wife, Lalita, visits her store, she is quick to sense her agony. Tilo knows that she has the power to alleviate her misery. But she cannot initiate anything until Lalita herself is ready, and holds herself open to the storm. In the meantime, she gives her turmeric to soothe her spirit. She wraps a handful of Turmeric in old newspaper with the words of healing whispered into it, slipping it slyly into her grocery bag (16). Here, Tilo is trying to help Lalita reclaim her personal power.

As Starhawk says, reclaiming our personal power is an integral aspect of the healing journey, but not an easy one. The snake is an important Wiccan symbol of rebirth and regeneration. Women and serpents have had a long association that goes back far beyond Greek mythology and the book of Genesis. Starhawk says that the snake is the ancient symbol of the Goddess. It stands for life's renewal and restoration, for the snake sheds its skin in order to be

continually reborn. According to Starhawk, Snakes symbolize a deep awareness of how people are feeling. She says that a snake is able to glide through water, can see from below the surface, or burrow into the earth in order to bring up the dirt (Starhawk, *Truth* 280). However, Starhawk uses the imagery of snakes to identify collaborative groups and community roles. In her opinion, the role of Snake within a non-hierarchical group can be an extremely uncomfortable one. She is of the view that Snakes violate the Censor, speak the unspeakable, and bring out into the open what others may not feel comfortable discussing (280).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, snakes, too, heighten the element of magic and Witchcraft within the narrative, albeit in a different manner. In the novel, the snakes have been the guardians of Tilo, right from her childhood. In her own words, Tilo explains the crucial role played by the snakes in her life:

Snakes. Oldest of creatures, closest to the earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast. Always I have loved them. In the heat-cracked fields behind my father's house, the land snakes shielded me from the sun when I was tired with playing. Their hoods spread ripple-wide, their smell cool as wet earth at the bottom of banana groves. In the streams that ribboned the village, the river snakes swam with me skin to skin, arrows of gold cutting through sun-flecked water, telling stories. How after a thousand years the bones of drowned men turn to white coral, their eyes to black pearl. (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 21)

Tilo further says that her spice store is also full of snakes. She tells the reader that every morning before the customers flock to her store, she keeps earthen bowls of milk for the snakes in the far corners of the store (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 20). She further says that the snakes of the ocean, the sea serpents, save her life when she is queen of the pirates, and calls up the great typhoon from "its sleep in the ocean troughs of the east" (22). Tilo says that when she asks the serpents the reason they save her from the frightening typhoon, they give her no answer. As she says, "What answer is there for love (23). At the end of the novel, when Tilo decides to return to Oakland to help the victims of the earthquake along with Raven who also decides to accompany her, instead of escaping into some imaginary utopia, which he fondly calls the "earthly paradise," the serpents blink their approval (317).

The discussion in this paper illustrates that Divakaruni has used elements of magic and Witchcraft in *The Mistress of Spices* in order to expand our awareness and give us a new vision for protecting and healing the greater earth body. The novel ends with Tilo's decision to return to Oakland to provide crucial aid to the victims of the earthquake which brings to the fore her latent ecological sensibilities. Moreover, the novel builds on the belief that we need both inner and outer change to awaken from the sleep-fog of apathy and inaction. For we cannot truly remain indifferent to the impending environmental apocalypse any longer.

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**PURVA MIMAANSA**