

## Reconstructing the Self Through Narrative: Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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### ABSTRACT

Time and Space are the two building blocks that create the layers of any narrative work. Andre Lefebvre while talking about the 'Historical Notions of Space' deals with the idea of 'Lived Space' and the 'Third Space' in reconstructing the self in imagination that has been kept alive and accessible by the narrative art. Space, along with time, is inherently embedded in the narrative structure of a text and both cannot be dissociated from each other. Space has the power to prefigure the balance between the different layers that create the narrative of any literary work. This paper will explore the idea of Time and Space that compose the narrative in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. This paper will also deal with the idea of time as the shifting construct and space as a locale in the structure that has been redefined through narrative in *The Mistress of Spices* by Divakaruni.

### Keywords:

Building blocks, Temporal reading, shifting locale, Narrative Structure, Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*

A chronology of the experiences and the related events frequently is presented either through written or oral mode or a combination of both which is termed as Narrative. The presence of 'Narrative' is traced in every source of human creativity starting from art, entertainment, speech, literature as well as in sculpture and drawing. In literature, it is defined as a recounting of certain true or fictitious events or a chronology of the different events as recounted by a narrator to a narratee. Narrative as connoted by Fludernik 'the discourse of human experience' (91), the characterization of the stories as the representation of

the events as present in a sequence that foregrounds time at the spatial expense (i.e; of Space). The change in the time and space that affect the existence of the bodies can be termed as 'Events'. Events occupy some amount of space and are situated itself in time with the movements taking place from one point to another.

*Narrative Space* is the physical environment in the narrative in 'which characters live and move' (Buchholz & Jahn, 25). Narrative Space in narrative is alternatively termed as 'Setting', but the notion of setting is further refined as an event represented from the dimension

of the broader world alluded to by the characters living and moving within a given space. Narratives are not always presented on spatial subjects but can also be inscribed within the real-world space. The relation of 'Narratives' with 'Spatial Subjects' goes far beyond the mimetic representation of space. *The Mimetic Space* as presented in a novel deals with the empty or vacant background needed for the unfolding of human histories and creation of human places. The empty background serves as the place in which the human history unfolds, creates and recreates and gives birth to the new human places. The spatial explorations in any fictional story depends on where it happened, the actual location of events, how it is being represented and the spatial situations arising out of it.

The 'Narrative Space' is further distinguished by following notions that delineate the laminations of narrative space:

- (a) *Spatial frames*: It refers to 'the immediate surroundings of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse or by the image' (Ronan & Zoren, 84). Spatial frames are related with the shifting scenes of action which may flow in and out of one another and are directly related with each other. In the story 'Eveline' by James Joyce, the examples of spatial frames can be the living room of Eveline's house and the Dublin harbor.
- (b) *Setting*: Setting in any narrative is greatly defined as the general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the necessary action takes place. Setting is a relatively stable category in comparison to spatial frames that celebrates the entire text. We may say that the setting of Emily Bronte's 'Wuthering Heights' focuses and shifts in and around two neighboring houses on the Yorkshire moors- Wuthering

- Heights and Thrushcross Grange.
- (c) *Story Space*: Story Space is the space which is relevant to the plot, which is mapped by the actions as well as by the internal thoughts of the characters. It comprises of all the spatial frames plus the locations mentioned by the text which are not the scene of actual occurring events in the story. For example in James Joyce's 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man', the story probes into the space between what belongs to the individual alone and what belongs to others, truly others.
- (d) *Narrative (or story) world*: Narrative or Story World is termed as 'the story space completed by the reader's imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge and real world experience' (Ryan, 91). In the story 'Eveline' by James Joyce, Narrative World refers to both the real and imaginary locations that superimposes the locations that is particularly inscribed to the text as per the geography of the actual world. Narrative World is conceived of the imagination as a concrete and coherent one, materially full with existing geographical entity.
- (e) *Narrative Universe*: It refers to the Universe that can be constructed at par with the text plus all the metaphorical and imaginary worlds constructed by characters as wishes, fears, speculations, dreams, hypothetical thinking and fantasies. In the novel 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' by James Joyce, Stephen examines his own world in his Geography textbook, beginning with the city, county, country and so in ascending order ending with the Universe itself.

Henri Lefebvre argues that a space can never be constituted as a singularity,

as other traditions of spatial thought might suggest the subjective and objective dimension of space. Based on this, Lefebvre develops a 'concrete abstract' tripartite model of space that attempts to take account the spatial structure and draw a coherent figure that ensembles the subjective and objective dimensions of space. Lefebvre believes that any historical space that produced socially can also be constituted dialectically through the different matrix of 'spatial practices', 'representations of space' and 'spaces of representation' through which 'we represent it to ourselves: respectively, the domains of the perceived, the conceived and the lived' (Lefebvre, 46). Lefebvre also writes, 'conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived' (38).

Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* talks about an immigrant narrative, Tilottama living in the US. Tilo being a mistress of spices owns a spice shop named Spice Bazar in Oakland, California. The past and the capabilities of Tilo as a mistress of spices create a narrative fantasy, while Tilo's experiences as an immigrant is considered contradictory with that of her Indian customers make for a realistic narrative. Being an immigrant in America, Tilo too cannot escape from 'homelessness'. For instance, while stepping out of the store for the first time, Tilottama experiences a desire for a place to call home, because she does not have a home in the 'traditional and permanent sense', as she points out in the novel, "I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness" (Banerjee, 128). She 'perceives' the space as alien to her and this makes her view troubled. As the mistress of spices, Tilo's identity is in direct

tandem with the way she appears in front of the customers who visit her store. She feels sad that no one would ever know her true self as she puts it: 'They do not know of course. That I am not old, that this seeming body I took on in Shampati's fire when I vowed to become a mistress is not mine..... Sometimes it fills me with heaviness, lake of black ice, when I think that across the entire length of this land not one person knows who I am' (Banerjee, 12). The store serves as 'a land of might-have-been' for other immigrants who visit her store. A place which was according to Tilo, 'A self-indulgence dangerous for a brown people who came from elsewhere, to whom real American might say why?' (Banerjee, 5). Tilo's shop serves the flavor of mini-India for the nostalgic immigrants. Tilo as the mistress acts like a bridge between different cultures. Thus she 'conceives' of a space that brings solace to her and other immigrants like her. Tilo believes that she can reduce the miseries of the fellow immigrants by the magical powers of her spices. The spices have medicinal qualities which can decrease physical ailments, but Tilo's belief in her powers as a mistress and the supernatural powers the spices are said to have, add the magical dimension to the realistic portrayal of the immigrant's experiences in America. Tilo's search for her own space gets reflected in the narrative when Tilo suffers from the sense of 'Homelessness' and tries to establish her own identity through the 'lived space' (i.e; Tilo's shop). The representation of the lived space as represented by Tilo carries a sense of 'homelessness' and 'belonging' as Tilo, being an immigrant in America tries to eliminate the dilemma of other immigrants.

A mistress is required to follow strictly certain rules and regulations which are like some of the discriminatory cultural norms, which eventually suffocate the true identity of an individual, here it's about Tillotama's. Change is required in a

new place, in an alien culture. The need to establish one's identity, to be recognised, is being felt by every individual. Tilo also has similar desires. She wants to step out of the prison of her spice store, explore America and create an identity of her own. She is frightened by the fact that there is no one who knows her in this vast land of America. She seeks for freedom, wants to be with Raven, whom she loves, but obviously not at the cost of her work and identity as a mistress, whose primary work was to eliminate all the sufferings and miseries of the common people, especially the other fellow immigrants. So here the 'perceived' space, the land of emigration having no welcome for the immigrants who have taken it up as their 'lived' space becomes the formative factor for her to 'conceive' of creating a conducive space for all.

Spices are an integral part of Indian cuisines. Besides, having the medicinal and culinary values, some of the spices like the turmeric, for instance, are used in traditional rituals, that Tilo points out. This is a performative aspect of the Indian cultural nationalism. In the novel, spices are also endowed with supernatural qualities, which guide Tilo's course of actions and destiny; as Tilo points out, "When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world. The spices have created a space in Tilo's life and speak to Tilo and she sways to the rhythm of their power, describing, here, for instance the power of Turmeric, "You are turmeric, shield for heart's sorrow, anointment for death, hope for rebirth" (Banerjee, 14).

Once settled in her Oakland store, Tilo dreams of a geographical space which is her 'lived' space beyond the store, having her own identity in the alien place, which were forbidden for the mistresses to even think of: 'When I lie down, from every direction the city will pulse its pain and

fear and impatient love into me. All night if I wish I can live it, the ordinary life I gave up for the spices, through the thoughts that roll into me. Tilo whose life is so calm so controlled so always same, is it not fine as wine, this taste of mortal sorrow, and mortal hope' (Banerjee, 60). Tilo is tired of the monotonous life of being in the store all the time, attending to the needs of the customers. She now desires a normal life-space for her own which lay beyond the store, in spite of its hardships. The spices create different space for Tilottama as whenever she holds spices in her hands, the spices start speaking with her. This is in sharp contrast with the 'lived space' as Divakaruni uses the magical nature of spices to portray the different intricacies of narrative space. The story space as revealed in *The Mistress of Spices* as enjoyed by the readers in their imagination because of its continuous shifting between the 'real-world' and 'narrative-world' experiences.

The representations of the different spaces filled with magic, myth and history related to spices have been artistically depicted in 'The Mistress of Spice'. It evaluates the importance of spices in creating socio-cultural space through narrative in the life of the protagonist. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the magic realist writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a new space to the narrative in her novel –the narrative mixes together with the lived space and the self that has its own space as supported by the character of Tilottama (Tilo). The Lived Space broadens and bifurcates the real so as to encompass imagination and the other extraordinary phenomenon in nature or experience through the spatial constructs created by Tilo for herself. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a world which is familiar to her readers with her own cultural and psychological point of view. Banerjee creates the Magic Realistic web to convey the problems that exists between disparate cultures

and uses it as a literary and a narrative mode. The novel has the magic realist narrative that goes beyond the traditional and interweaves the supernatural with ordinary daily events. The novelist fills the gap of the forgotten history through the narrative as self through lived space that transgresses the identity of Tilottama.

### **Conclusion**

In the novel, 'The Mistress of Spices'

Chitra Divakaruni Banerji 'perceives' the land of immigration, America as a n alien land for the immigrants and to make this 'lived' land bearable and tolerable to all the immigrants like herself she 'conceives' of using her special powers though her spices. Thus, as Lefebvre posits, the perceived space and lived space are managed through the conceived space in the novel under consideration.

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