

## **THE MISTRESS OF SPICES: A STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF SOUTH ASIAN TRADITIONAL THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES**

**Dr. Gunjan Agarwal<sup>1</sup> & Gunjan Kapil<sup>2\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Professor (Department of Mathematics and Humanities) Maharishi Markandeshwar University, India.

<sup>2\*</sup> Research Scholar (Department of Mathematics and Humanities) Maharishi Markandeshwar University, India.

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**ABSTRACT:** *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent South-Asian literary personality, unfurls the vivid colors of her creative genius through various genres and her concern for immigrant women has largely been transfigured into her writings as well as her participation with the organizations i.e. “Daya” and “Maitri” that aim to serve South Asian or South Asian-American women entangled in the situations of domestic abuse. Divakaruni’s award winning novel entitled The Mistress of Spices has been studied as an epitome of several global issues i.e. racial intolerance, domestic violence, class and gender discrimination and above all the emotional and spiritual hollowness to which Divakaruni attempts to remove through the depiction of her fictional character, Tilo, the Indian spices illumined with the power of healing and the Old One who seems to be an adherent of Buddhism. Besides using the Buddhist healing practices, philosophical notions, myths and folktales into the expatriate theme of the novel, Divakaruni actually shares her knowledge of the Ayurveda, an ancient science of herbs and spices, which originally relates the healing properties of the Indian flora and fauna since antiquity. Being the only medicinal system of the ancient India, Ayurveda, comprising of the easiest and natural healing theories, has been customary and retains its importance almost in every household even today. The core of the present research study lies in engraving the striking amalgamation of the holistic and mystical healing practices found in Tibetan Buddhism or scriptures about the Medicine Buddha and the ancient Indian medical science of Ayurveda, probably to cure the South Asian diasporic community’s ailments and issues.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ayurveda; Spices; Medicine Buddha; Immigrant Issues; Conflicts etc.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1965, following the Civil Rights Movement, the United States of America withdrew several long-standing rules restricting the permanent migration of non-whites to this country and since the prohibition on Asian migration that had been in place from 1917 was also ended, larger numbers of “new” migrants from several Asian countries came to the United States. After receiving her undergraduate degree in English and Bengali literature from Calcutta University at the age of nineteen, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni chose to move to the United States for her further studies and thus joined the migrants’ group in the late 1970s and accordingly shared the hyphenated label of South Asian-American. Divakaruni’s prose has been consistently admired because of the skilful use of lyrical descriptions, the narrative vitality that drives the stories and her representation of the

immigrant experience as well, not as something exotic, but as a part of human story which is shared largely. In her essay entitled “Dissolving Boundaries”, Divakaruni reveals her suffering experience after childbirth and states that, “That encounter with death affected me deeply, though not in the ways one might expect. . . . But at times I would feel a strange, lightheaded sense of peace, of emptiness, in the way Buddhists use the term” (“Divakaruni”). The above quoted lines denote to the religious proclivity of the author and her awareness of the essential nature of the religions of Buddhism and Hinduism which particularly emphasizes the idea of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” which means the world is one family and continuing this belief she added *The Mistress of Spices* in the South Asian American literary realm as she says, “that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about. I ached to give this discovery a voice and a form. But I didn’t know how until Tilo, my heroine, the Mistress of Spices, came to me” (“Divakaruni”).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni has incorporated a number of contemporary issues such as interracial tension, ethnic identity, immigrant assimilation, adolescent anxiety, domestic violence, abusive and broken marriages, forbidden interracial romances along with Hindu myths, fables, and magical realism as she also asserts that, “It’s actually a kind of magical-realist genre heavily influenced by the folk traditions of India especially of Bengal” (“Divakaruni”). Herein, she emphatically depicts the immigrants’ issues and tries to resolve them through the depiction of spices’ magical properties, for Divakaruni realizes that, “It’s quite mysterious the way art is created. We talk about it a lot, but it’s mysterious and intuitive” (Mangla n.p.). The present study explores some of these mysterious levels and erects the elements of the ancient Indian medicinal science of Ayurveda and the healing practices preached by the “Medicine Buddha”, one of the “Buddhas” in the vast Mahayana Pantheon, as have been illustrated in *The Mistress of Spices*. While conversing with Patricia Gras, Divakaruni also expresses that:

I’ve always been very interested in spices and particularly in Ayurveda which is the ancient science of herbs and spices, a very very old and still practiced in India. So I did a lot of Ayurvedic research about what spices can be used for spices and herbs which are not only used for cuisine and for flavoring but also for medicinal purposes and often for physical purposes where also certain spices have effects on the mind. Also in our traditions certain spices are associated with mystical qualities, certain spices can bring you good luck, certain spices can avert the evil eye, and so I put all of that into *The Mistress of Spices* where different people will come into her store and she will give them various things to help them. (“Divakaruni”)

Divakaruni leaves indelible marks of her religious proclivity in this mystical tale which exquisitely bring together the culture of India and America, as she inscribes on her blog that, “I did not think I had a story to tell. Moving to a very different culture and learning to live on my own made me see the world much more clearly. . . . I thought about India more than I had ever before. I realized what I appreciated about it; the warmth, the closeness of extended family, the way spirituality pervades the culture” (Shekar n.p.). In *The Mistress of Spices*, each chapter has been named after a spice such as: Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalo Jire, Neem, Red Chilli,

Makardwaj, Lotus Root, and Sesame, except the two i.e. Tilo and Maya, which are exquisitely associated with the two distinct identities (referring to both the India and America respectively) of the protagonist. In a reading series conducted by UCTV, Divakaruni says that, “The spices are very important in this book, as characters they have personalities of their own, different sections are named after them, these are the sections where they play an important part, and they develop relationship with Tilo and speak to her in their own voice” (“Divakaruni”). The present study intricately focuses on the presentation of the Mistress of spices, Tilo, as a healer who knows the spices’ magical properties or the ancient science of herbs and spices i.e. Ayurveda, and uses them to heal both the body and the spirit, to change the path of events, and to remove the issues encountered by the characters of different race, religion and gender. Tilo, the spice Mistress also explains that, “Different spices may help us with different troubles,’ the Old One told us after she had taught us the common cures . . . ‘for each person there is one special spice’. No, not for you- the Mistresses must never use the spice for their own ends” (*MS* 71-72). But the problem arises when the “lonely American” (*MS* 67) ventures into store, and the troubled Tilo becomes unable to find the correct spice for Raven for he arouses in her the forbidden desire which if she follows would result into her loss of magical powers as Tilo states in these following lines, “Lonely American, how shall I begin, I who have always prided myself on the quick remedy?” (*MS* 72). In an interview with Morton Marcus, Divakaruni says that:

In Indian folk belief, spices are used for more than flavourings. They have magical powers all their own, and they provide remedies for physical maladies as well as cures for spiritual ills. You have to be careful how you use the spices, since their misuse can be dangerous. If you don’t follow their rules, the spices can destroy you. In the novel, I made the rules into laws from the divine realm, laws Tilo could not transgress without serious consequences. (Marcus n.p.)

In general it may be said that psychological and social conflicts are almost an in built feature of the human predicament, which the Buddha describes as *dukkha*. In Indian culture, the concept of *dukkha* has been elucidated by the Buddhist scriptures, which illustrates that every human being is the subject to ‘mental disease’, except the *arahants* who have destroyed, *asavas* which literally meaning, ‘influxes’, “*asava* is a figurative name for the four biases- sensuous bias (*kamasava*), bias for eternal existence (*bhavasava*), the bias of views (*ditthasava*), the bias for of ignorance (*avijjasava*)” (De Silva 123). The Buddhist text entitled, *Gradual Sayings*, remarks that diseases are of two kinds, diseases of the body and the diseases of the mind and presenting the proneness to psychological conflicts and disturbances, the Buddha states that, “There are to be seen beings who can admit freedom from suffering from bodily disease for one year, for two years, for three, four, five, ten, twenty . . . who can admit freedom from bodily disease for even a hundred years. But, monks, those beings are hard to find in the world who can admit freedom from mental disease even for a moment” (De Silva 123). The western notion about suffering is that the abnormal or psychologically disturbed is not restricted to a closely labeled group of neurotics and psychotics, but that the average person can possibly be the subject of a great deal of anxiety, depression and fears. Even Sigmund Freud, who often labors to point

out that he is not seeking an absolute ideal of normality but merely to transfer ‘hysterical misery into common unhappiness’, sometimes claims that ‘we are all hysterical at times’ (qtd. in Drassinower 59). Charaka, a classical Ayurvedic writer, defines disease and health thus: “A disharmony in the constituents which support the body is known as disease, their harmony is called health, the state of normality. A sense of well-being is characteristic of the absence of disease, for disease is always associated with discomfort” (Heyn 16).

“Medicine Buddha” or “the Healing Master of Lapis Lazuli Radiance” . . . is “renowned as the king among medicines because of its effectiveness in treating both mental and physical diseases” (Landaw & Weber 99). The discourse between Raven and Tilo (the Mistress) unravels the awareness of Ayurveda and its methods persisting in the West as when she asks him the reason of his visiting the store, he utters that, “Perhaps you can read it on my pulses, like I’ve heard your Indian doctors do” (*MS* 110). Further as Tilo narrates that, “And he extends to me a slim arm with skeins of Lapis lazuli running under the skin. . . . I cannot resist saying. ‘Our doctors go to medical school, just like yours’. But forgive me spices, still I take his hand. I place my fingers on his wrist” (*MS* 110). Though the word Lapis lazuli refers to a semi-precious stone of blue color, and she uses this word for the color of his skeins, it resolutely establishes the Mistress’s mindfulness for the Medicine Buddha of “Lapis lazuli Radiance” (Kelly 25). After asking for the forgiveness to the spices, Tilo violates one of the rules prescribed for the Mistresses i.e. “not to touch those who comes to you” (*MS* 6). Thus, her reading of the pulse indicates to an intricate and foundational aspect of Ayurveda, which is used to discover what’s going on with the “body, mind, and energy flow” (Spear & Garivaltis 53). In Asia, a number of alternative medicinal practices have been existing for the thousands of years such as Acupressure, Acupuncture, Ayurveda and the other methods which are believed to, “bring back the body’s balance into normal healthy state. The idea is that the body, the mind as well as the spirit have to be in a balanced state, which is going to keep it in a harmonious healthy condition” (Singh & Davidson 4). Being rooted in the rich philosophical and spiritual scriptures, Ayurveda is a spiritual science and, “a stream of the knowledge passed down from generation to generation since time immemorial, much in the same way as Vedic literature and scriptures were” (Dass n.p.). While introducing the skills and knowledge of Tilo, Divakaruni narrates this essential aspect as, “You have forgotten the old secrets your mother’s mother knew. Here is one of them again vanilla beans soaked soft in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against the evil eye. And here another: A measure of pepper at the foot of the bed, shaped into a crescent, cures you of nightmare” (*MS* 3). WHO also regards Ayurveda as one of the streams of traditional medicine and defines it as follows:

Traditional medicine includes diverse health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animals and/or mineral-based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to maintain well-being as well as to treat, diagnose or prevent illness. . . . A large population from all over the world is attracted towards this ancient system of healthcare because of the terms associated with it like ‘Holistic Medicine’, ‘Herbal’, ‘Free from side-effects’, ‘Mind-Body and Spiritual approach’ etc. (WHO)

*Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English* defines Ayurveda as an ancient Indian system of holistic medicine drawn from Vedic literature that seeks to balance individual imbalances through adjustments in diet, exercise and sleep and involving herbs, aromas, meditation and yoga to address health issues. The book entitled *An Introduction to Ayurveda and Its Benefits* describes that, "the origins of Ayurveda are also found in the Atharvaveda. It contains incantations and hymns that cure various diseases through magic. . . . While it originated in the ancient books of Hinduism. Ayurvedic medicine was later adopted by other religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism" (Rockefeller n.p.). Divakaruni has also established the antiquity and the heavenly origin of Ayurveda when she depicts that, "And king of all, makaradwaj rejuvenator whom the ashwini Kumars, twin physician of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers" (MS 82-83). Lord Dhanvantari, known as the father of Ayurveda, was "the first divine incarnation to impart its wisdom amongst humans and first appeared during the great churning of the cosmic ocean of milk (Samudra manthan) to deliver it to the demigods" (Dass n.p.). Brigit Heyn's book entitled *Ayurveda: The Indian Art of Natural Medicine and Life Extension* also describes that, during the reign of Asoka, "hospitals were founded up and down the land, doctors and nurses were trained, herb gardens were planted, and medical knowledge became a most formidable weapon in the hands of Buddhist monks as they proselytized throughout Asia" (Heyn 26). Thus the medical system spread with Buddhism, and Ayurveda or one of its offshoots is still being practiced today in Tibet, in Central Asia, Sri Lanka, Indochina and Indonesia and in parts of China and Japan. For the *Charak Samhita* describes that, "Ayurveda is the most sacred science of life, beneficial to humans both in this world and the world beyond" (qtd. in Frawley 3). Ayurveda which was kept enliven by the Buddhist nuns and monks who practiced this ancient medicinal system to heal people along with the mystical practices, and as Rabgay's translation of the text "Ba.Jung.Don.Gong. 'Thad" states the following, "For the sake of beings, the Sugata through his manifestation, taught the methods of compounding medication in India, moxa and vein clearing in China; and bloodletting in Dolpo (North to Tibet). To the assembly of Gods, he taught the "Verses of Healing" and to the Rishis he taught the "Eight works of Charaka" (qtd. in Micozzi 544).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni brings in another facet of what she was growing up with, i.e., the elements of the folk tales, the tales of magic, and mythical tales, for these tales contained, "important and powerful women figures, usually older wise women, who have learned the secrets of the natural world and can use those secrets to help others. In the process, they become very powerful. They become leaders of their community" (Shekar n.p.). Following the medicinal teachings preached by the "Medicine Buddha", one among the three of the supreme "Buddhas" in the vast Mahayana pantheon, the Old One, seems to impart the knowledge of Ayurveda too, as she instructs about the potency of spices and herbs to the mistress, and thus after trial by fire, and sends each mistress to a far off land to serve the people probably of the Indian diaspora. In this study it becomes indispensable to establish the association of Ayurveda with the Buddhist religion because Divakaruni combines the medicinal knowledge of Ayurveda along with the mystical healing methods practiced by the monks and nuns in the Buddhist religion and presents it emphatically through the fictitious characters of the Old One (as the Buddhist nun) and Tilo (a disciple).



The protagonist Tilo, born somewhere in India, possesses the foretelling power which makes her to be famous widespread and therefore is plundered by the pirates from her village. After getting rid of the plunderers, Tilo plunges into the sea and sails until belched up on the shore where she comes across the Old One guided by the spirit of humanitarianism, seems to spread the word of “Medicine Buddha”, i.e. to serve humanity, by her skilled mistresses throughout the world, as Divakaruni has represented the Old One who “surrounded by her novices, and the sun a halo behind her head and shimmering many-coloured in her lashes” (*MS* 32), resembles a spiritual soul.

In 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. . . . The liquids that burn their hues till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island. But the spices are my love. . . . They are the ones I work with” (*MS* 1). In these quoted lines, Tilo probably presents her interests and expertise in the field of Ayurveda wherein, “the heat of sun, light, air, and water, and mineral, vegetable, and animal substances (unprocessed if possible) are employed in therapy and as remedies” (Heyn 16). Tilo, being one of these mistresses, chooses her name after the sesame seed, “Til which ground into paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver. . . . I will be Tilottama, the essence of *til*, life giver, restorer of health and hope” (*MS* 42) and heads for Oakland, California. As Divakaruni also defines that, “the main character of the book is Tilo, the mistress of spices, who has learnt of the magic of herbs and spices and has chosen to come to Oakland to help her people. She dispenses spices from her store to the people of her community; she tries to help, solve their problems to give them what their hearts’ desire and to find happiness for them” (“Divakaruni”). Describing the role of a healer Christopher Partridge has also described that:

The healer is like a channel, passively, yet, paradoxically, with discernment permitting the cosmic energy to flow unobstructedly through his or her own energy fields into those of the client. The healer must be aware of the disturbances in the client’s wholeness at high levels . . . like an electrical transformer, the healer transforms the prodigious cosmic energy into a form that can be used by the client’s body-mind-spirit system. (33)

The first of the spices and herbs presented in this study is, “Turmeric which is also named *halud*, meaning yellow, color of daybreak and conch-shell sound. Bring it to your face. Rub it on cheek, forehead, chin. Don’t be hesitant. For a thousand years before history began, Bride and those who long to be brides- have done the same. It will erase blemishes and wrinkles suck away age and fat. For days afterward your skin will give off a pale golden glow” (*MS* 13). With the spice called turmeric, Divakaruni disseminates the practices of using turmeric as a cosmetic product and also delineates the situation of domestic abuse of Lalita, an immigrant women, who came to America “four years back when a neighbour came to her mother and said, “Bahenji, there is a boy, most suitable, living in *phoren*, earning American dollars, and her mother said Yes” (*MS* 15). With her magical powers the mistress already senses the situation of Lalita and sees the “tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears spilled like pomegranate seeds, and Ahuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes” (*MS* 15). To escape from this intimate partner violence which used to

cause her the physical, sexual or psychological harm, and also included “controlling behaviors” (WHO), Lalita desires for a baby who “would make everything right, even the heaving, grunting, never-ending nights, the weight pinning her down, the hot sour animal breath panted into her. A baby to negate it all . . .” (*MS* 16). Regarding the relationship of Lalita and her husband, Mr. Ahuja, the psychological discourses of Buddhism can be summed up as it clearly state that everyone who is dominated by craving and subject to the delusion of a permanent ego generates different degrees of anxiety, depression and discontent etc. Tilo for her “Child longing, deepest desire, deeper than for wealth or lover or even death”, (*MS* 16) slips “a handful of turmeric wrapped in old newspaper with the words of healing whispered into it”, which is “shield for heart’s sorrow, anointment for death, hope for rebirth” (*MS* 14), into her grocery sack as she says, “The string tied into the triple flower knot, and inside, satin-soft turmeric the same colour as the bruise seeping onto your cheek from under the dark edge of your glasses” (*MS* 16). An analysis of classical and antique literature on Ayurveda reveals that turmeric has multifaceted uses as, “It heals wounds and works as an antiseptic and antimicrobial agent. It is useful in the management of chronic wounds and skin lesions . . . Turmeric has also been found to regulate uterine activity and minimize menstrual pain” (Nair 222). So far as pain and its treatment is concerned, there is a distinct difference in the teachings of official Western medicine and Ayurveda as, In this connection, Ivan Illich remarks that:

People are forgetting to accept pain as an inevitable part of the conquest of reality, and they interpret each headache as a call to resort to applied science’ in Western practice, pain is killed with medications, narcotics, or medical intervention, the main aim being to fight the disease. In Ayurveda- as in Yoga- ‘Pain is a help in orientating the unfolding of the Patient’s personality’, the aim being health education. (qtd. in Heyn 16)

With the depiction of its (turmeric) mythological origination “out of the ocean of milk when the *devas* and *asuras* churned” (*MS* 13), the idea of the churning of the inner self can also be proposed here which is regarded as, “the spiritual endeavor of a person to achieve Self-realisation through concentration of mind, withdrawal of the senses, control of all desires, austerities, and asceticism” (Dass n.p.), and is thus considered, “the highest form of Self-healing” (Frawley 6). This idea of self-healing is shown when Tilo, who senses that Lalita, “too has a gift, a power, though she does not think of it so. Every cloth she touches with her needle blooms” (*MS* 14), asks Lalita to, “work in this country” (*MS* 15), the tailoring work would certainly help in concentrating her mind and keeping it away from all desires and also the second of vows preached by Medicine Buddha, describes that after achieving the Enlightenment or being adorned with the virtues one should awake, “the minds of all beings dwelling in darkness, enabling them to engage in their pursuits according to their wishes” (Thanh & Leigh 19). Further, Divakaruni uses other spices of clove, cardamom and especially cinnamon to depict the condition of Jagjit “who has trouble in school because he knows only Punjabi still. Jagjit whom the teacher has put in the last row next to the drooling boy with milk-blue eyes. Jagjit who has learned his first English word. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot” (*MS* 38), and, “In the playground they try to pull it off his head, green turban the colour of a parrot’s breast. They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his long uncut hair. And push him down. Asshole, his second English word. And

his knees bleeding from the gravel” (MS 38). Further her mother’s chiding as she screams, “Jaggi how come you’re always dirtying your school clothes, here is a button gone and look at this big tear on your shirt, you badmash, you think I’m made of money (MS 38). . . . Don’t spend so much time with your friends. Don’t miss any more school, they gave us two warnings already. Don’t go out so late in the night, it’s not safe. *Hai* Jaggi is this why we brought you to Amreekah” (MS 119), reveals the implacable situation of the second generation children of the immigrants for they face the label of minority, suffer racist attacks and the expectations of family. An ethnographic study of Valleyside High School from 1980-82, written by M. A. Gibson, reveals that, “Punjabi teenagers are told they stink . . . told to go back to India . . . physically abused by majority students who spit at them, refuse to sit by them in classes or in buses, throw food at them or worse” (qtd. in Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, Qin-Hilliard 95). Gibson also analyzes how:

Punjabi parents pressured their children against too much contact with white peers who may “dishonor” the immigrants’ families, and defined “Americanized” as forgetting one’s roots and adopting the most disparaged traits of the majority such as leaving home at the age of 18, making decisions without parental consent . . . At the same time urged children to abide by school rules, ignore racist remarks and avoid fights, and learn useful skills, including full proficiency in English. (qtd. in Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, Qin-Hilliard 95)

Tilo offers some *burfi* for Jagjit, as she says, “here’s some *burfi* for you . . . I see him bite eager into the brown sweet flavoured with clove and cardamom and cinnamon. . . . Crushed clove and cardamom, Jagjit to make your breath fragrant . . . cinnamon destroyer of enemies to give you strength, strength which grows in your legs and arms and mostly mouth till one day you shout no loud enough to make them, shocked, stop” (MS 39-40). Ayurveda might be a recent arrival in the West, but in India people have believed for centuries in its teachings that suggest that, “of the six tastes, ‘sweet’ is thought to be soothing, nourishing, energising and satisfying” (Monroe ). Tilo advances to be friend with him, as she reflects, “Jagjit who has learned his first English word. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Shy-eyed Jagjit in your green turban that the kids at school make fun of, do you know your name means world-conqueror?” (MS 39). The book entitled *Ayurveda and Aromatherapy* also inscribes that cinnamon is “empowering to the will and also removes sluggishness” (Miller & Miller 240). In the same way Buddhist psychology suggests that, “noble friendship; suitable conversation” (De Silva 129), also prove helpful in eradicating laziness, drowsiness, sluggishness and boredom. John Bradshaw in the book entitled *Name That Baby* finds the meaning of the name cinnamon as “Spice of Life”, and finds its Biblical reference in the psalm 19:14 as, “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer” (Bradshaw n.p.). With the usage of the spice of life, cinnamon, for the adolescent anxiety and the racist attacks to which Jagjit undergoes, Tilo seems to pray for Jagjit that may God govern and sanctify his words and thoughts and this was necessary in order to his preservation, even from presumptuous sins, which have their first rise in the thoughts, and thence, probably, proceed to expressions before they break forth into actions. Be really good and holy, and so well pleasing to thee. O Lord, my strength — O thou who hast hitherto strengthened him, both against his



temporal and spiritual enemies, and whose gracious and powerful assistance is absolutely necessary to keep him from being overcome by his sinful inclinations and other temptations.

After using the spice for Jagjit's predicament, Tilo assures herself as, "Cinnamon friend-maker . . . to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it's not so bad" (MS 40). Tilo provides Jagjit a bottle filled with elixir of manjistha to cool his blood and make it pure and she rushes "a prayer over it, missing words because he's at the door already yelling 'Hold on dude' to someone outside" (MS 122), and thinks over and over the cause of Jagjit's state as she reflects, "was it him, was it parents, was it America?" (MS 122), Tilo remains unable to find the answer. Further following the third of the great vows established by the "Medicine Buddha", which is to "provide all sentient beings with an inexhaustible quantity of goods to meet their material needs" (Thanh & Leigh n.p.), she provides Jagjit the money which she had hoarded so that he could accomplish his interests and thus succeeds in relinquishing both his body and the mind. Taittiriya Upanishad, one of the Indian Sanskrit scriptures related to the Vedic era, also encourages the piteous nature of the human beings and suggests that, "There should be no deviation from righteous activities. Do not neglect auspicious activities. . . . The offering should be with honour; the offering should be in plenty. The offering should be with modesty. The offering should be with sympathy" (qtd. in Patwardhan, Gehlot, & Rathore 5). Fictionalizing the plantation of fenugreek by Sabari, a mythical woman, as Tilo says that, "Fenugreek methi, speckled seed first sown by Shabari, oldest woman in the world. The young scorn you, thinking they will never need" (MS 47), Divakaruni depicts the conditions of the uses of fenugreek as:

I fenugreek who renders the body sweet again, ready for loving. . . . Fenugreek, I asked your help when Ratna came to me burning from the poison in her womb, legacy of her husband's roving. . . . Yes I called to you when Alok who loves men showed me the lesions opening avid as mouths on his skin . . . When . . . Binita with a lump like a nugget of lead in her breast and the doctors saying cut, and in her husband's eyes as he paced and paced the store saying, 'What shall I do, please'. (MS 47)

*Food is your Medicine*, a book by Dr. Jitendra Arya, also discusses the usage of various spice in an elaborative manner and illustrates that fenugreek is used for, "mouth ulcers . . . infection of the tissues beneath the surface of the skin (cellulitis) . . . cancer. . . . Fenugreek is sometimes used as a poultice. That means it is wrapped in cloth, warmed and applied directly to the skin to treat local pain and swelling, muscle pain, pain and swelling of lymph nodes, pain in the toes, wounds, leg ulcers, and eczema" (Arya 106). While treating the customers, Tilo gets envied to see the beauty of bougainvillea girls who have, "hair polished as ebony, coiled in agile braids. Or rippling like mountain water around upturned faces so confident you know nothing bad has ever happened to them" (MS 48), and thinks to use unguents but remembers that, "You'll be tempted", said the Old One before I left. You especially with your lava hands that want so much from the world. . . . Remember why you were given your power" (MS 49). As she states that, "A desire leaps clawed like a tiger from its hidden place in me. I will boil petal of rose with camphor, grind in peacock

feathers. Say the words of making and be rid of this disguise I put on when I left the island. . . . Draped in a veil of diamonds. Tilottama most beautiful, to whom these girls will be like mud scraped from the feet before one crosses the threshold" (MS 49). This very method emerges from "Rasayanchikitsa or Rejuvenative Therapy" in Ayurveda and it deals with treatments for maintaining youth, prolonging life, promoting resistance to diseases, and increasing mental strength and intelligence. Though she realizes it soon and wipe her contrite hands on the sari as she says that, "My sari old and patched and stained to guard me against this vanity" (MS 49). Though the sixth of the great vows of the "Medicine Buddha", preaches that, "Whose senses are deficient, who are ugly . . . crippled, hunchbacked, leprous, insane or suffering from various other illnesses- will, upon hearing my name, acquire well-formed bodies, endowed with intelligence, with all senses intact. They will be free of illness and suffering" (Thanh & Leigh 21), but time and again, Tilo succumbs herself to violate this vow and wishes to be free from her own crippled old body. In fact, Eric Fromm, searching for a viable concept of mental health and well-being comments, "Well-being is possible to the degree to which one has overcome one's narcissism; to the degree to which one is open, responsive, sensitive, awake empty. . . . Well-being means, finally, to drop one's Ego, to give up greed, to cease chasing after the preservation and the aggrandizement of the Ego, to be and to experience one's self in the act of being, not in having, preserving, coveting, using" (De Silva 126). Again, in another context, in the *Kindred Sayings*, the Buddha King advises an old man in the last stages of life that: "Wherefore, housefather, thus you should train yourself: - 'Though my body is sick my mind shall not be sick'. Thus, Housefather, must you train yourself" (De Silva 124). It can also be suggested that Tilo due to the knowledge of Ayurveda which, "sees an immediate connection between the use of the senses and the origin of disease" and wherein, "every wrong use or non-use of the senses leads to a disharmony in man, and to disharmonies between man and nature" (Heyn 13), she ceases to vent her emotions and sensual urges. Not only this, the Old One also provides ginger-root to give Tilo's heart steadfastness and to keep her strong in her vows as she says, "Tilo my daughter . . . I have here something for you'. And from the folds of her clothing she removed it and placed it on my tongue, a slice of ginger-root, wild island *ada* to give my heart steadfastness, to keep me strong in my vows" (MS 58). A very similar concept of health is also found in homeopathy, as Dr. M. Dorcsi puts it, "Man is healthy when he is in harmony in himself because he is holistically intact, with himself because he knows what he wants, with his environment in the social sense, and with his Creator because he has grasped the meaning of life. On this sowing, disease is the consequence of an external or internal disturbance of the balance" (qtd. in Heyn 16).

While helping her customers, Tilo happens to meet the lonely American who comes into the store on a Friday evening, as Tilo starts to say, "I'm closing, but then I look at him and I can't. It's not as if I haven't seen Americans" (MS 68), but remembers what the Old One has said, "why you are going . . . To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need" (MS 69). There was something quaint about the lonely American which ignites a forbidden desire in Tilo, as she asserts that, "I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know. I want to tell him this" (MS 69). Instead of bidding him "good-bye good night" (MS 70), I

pick up a packet. ‘This is dhania,’ I say. ‘Coriander seed, sphere-shaped like the earth, for clearing your sight. When you soak it and drink, the water purges you of old guilts’ . . . his hand is on the rim of the bin, touching mine. I snatch my hand away obedient to the Mistress laws, but the sensation stays” (MS 68-70). “Lonely American, how shall I begin, I who have always prided myself on the quick remedy? (MS 72). Again Tilo reminds the Old One who had said if you becomes unable to find the correct spice to help someone, you must search out root cause “*mahamul*” (MS 72), and Tilo realizes that “the fault is in me, in my distracted soul. I Tilo who cannot stop thinking about those eyes dark as a tropical night, as deep, as filled with peril” (MS 72), and thus Tilo who begins to weave her own desires into her vision of life, “the true seeing is taken” from her and “the spices no longer obey you” (MS 72). After the lonely American leaves, I wander the store, aimless-sad. Dissatisfaction, that old poison I thought I’d been cured of, bubbles up thick and viscous in me. I can not bear to lock up. Barring the door would be to admit that he is really gone. . . . I am looking for a spice for him. (MS 71). “Maybe you need loving to cure your heart, I say smiling also” (MS 114). ‘When you begin to weave your own desires into your vision,’ the Old One told us, ‘the true seeing is taken from you. You grow confused, and the spices no longer obey you’. It further depicts that, “suppression of the natural urges is considered to be unhealthy in Ayurveda and considered to be the cause of the diseases of the body, mind, and soul” (Rockefeller n.p.).

Playing the role of a healer, Tilo helps Daksha, a nurse, who entangled in the situation of arranged marriage and the values of Indian patriarchal system, works the whole day and after reaching home accomplishes the needs of her family members as a good daughter in law and a meek wife should do, and is thus shackled, and subjected to countless miseries and humiliations, Tilo gives Daksha, “seed of black pepper to be boiled whole and drunk to loosen your throat so you can learn to say No, that word so hard for Indian women. No and Hear me now” (MS 80). Black pepper is a medicine for those especially suffering from coughs (Johari 39), and to give black pepper to Daksha, denotes to her obstruction which stops her to scream ‘No’ (MS 80), to the . Amla which I too would like to take some days to help bear the pain that cannot be changed, pain growing slow and huge like a monsoon cloud which if you let it will blot out the sun” (MS 80-81). “I give a bottle of brahmi oil to cool his system. ‘Dada,’ I say, ‘you and I are old now, time for us to spend our time with our prayers beads and let the young ones run their life as they see best’” (MS 86). Harish Johari in his book entitled *Ayurvedic Massage: Traditional Indian Techniques for Balancing Body and Mind*, describes that Brahmi oil aids memory and insomnia, and is used, “for mental strength and sinus problems; stimulates brain tissue” (37). Furthermore, Sandra Ponzanesi in her essay “In My Mother’s House” states, “As far as the condition of migration and Diaspora is concerned, women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country. The idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage, and continuity; there is even an intense emotive politics of dress for some communities” (245). As Divakaruni also explains that, “The book is a metaphor and the characters are metaphorical. But they are also realistic, very human. They exist on both levels at once. Tilo, for instance, is her own person, but she is also a metaphor for the struggle between social responsibility and personal happiness. I wanted the novel to work in that way, on several levels simultaneously” (Marcus n.p.).

The conversation, which takes place between Geeta and her parents, chiefly centers on dating and choice of life partners but illustrates how these constructed boundaries play out in the lives of South Asian Americans as her grandfather states in a shocking tone as, “Hai bhagwan, I say. She is marrying a white man” (MS 89), which certainly refers to his Oriental thinking which does not allow girls that much freedom. As Geeta says, ‘Dad, Mom . . . please don’t be upset. He’s a very nice man, really, you’ll see when I bring him home visit. I’m so glad I finally got it off my chest. I’ve been wanting to tell you a long time. To me she says, Grandpa, he’s not white, he’s chicano” (MS 89). The relative freedom of these South Asian American females to choose their partners is the main point of conflict between the generations. The boundaries parents try to impose are based on how they defines “our group” in terms of religion, nationality and race: and such ideas are often developed in the various sections especially in interaction with the mainstream and ethnic community. In matters of dating and partners, parents have used their superior achievement standard to send messages about homogeneity, varying on whether this means people of the same class group, or more specifically defined religious, nationality and race groups. As Divakaruni also ascertains that, “The object of her taboo feelings is Raven, a bitter Native American who finds both psychological and spiritual healing through his love for Tilo and who urges her to run away with him and live a pastoral life he describes as “an earthly paradise”, away from the problems of urban America” (Marcus n.p.). With the delineation of Geeta’s grandfather, Divakaruni also portrays the disliking for the Western doctors and their ways to treat the patients, in Eastern culture, people believes in the ancient Indian medicinal system which incorporates elements to heal both the body and mind, as the grandfather says that, “I beg don’t make me go to those firingi doctors, who knows what drug they are giving me, messing up my mind and body both. Go instead to the old lady at spice bazaar, she is good at such things, she will be knowing what to do” (MS 238), whereas his son Ramesh follows the Western notions about health and believes in that medical system, “I don’t know why I even listened to him. He should be at the hospital right now.’ he glares at me though it were all my fault” (MS 238). For him, Tilo “lights a stick, incense of rarest *kasturi*” (MS 239), focusses on praying and hopes that, “the old man too is sending his mind power to aid mine” (MS 239). *kasturi* (MS 239), which a wild deer hunts crazily through the forest, not knowing he holds it in his own navel, just like *Love* (MS 239) which gets lost in the lives of the grandfather, Geeta and her parents, and they don’t realize it because of their ignorance. About such mystical prayers in the Buddhist scriptures also, it has been stated that these mystical prayers of Medicine Buddha, assure that the, “sentient beings afflicted with various illnesses, with no one to help them, nowhere to turn, no physicians, no medicine, no family, no home- who are destitute and miserable will . . . be relieved of all their illnesses. With mind and body peaceful and contented, they will enjoy home, family” (Thanh & Leigh 21), and eventually the grandfather realizes that his happiness lies in the togetherness of his family, and thus helps in strengthening the bond of father, Ramesh, and daughter, Geeta.

Tilo feels passionate love for Raven who, as Tilo feels, in fact was attracted towards the Mistress for the quaintness of her Indian beauty, her skin color, the accent of speaking and the customs which no American girl could provide him, as while sleeping Raven calls her, “My tropical blossom” (MS 290), and “My mysterious Indian beauty. Then he is gone

again, unaware that I have drawn back” (MS 290), the strong desire of Tilo generates strong attachment and anxieties towards Raven, but the shattering of the image of love, further creates hatred that brings about discontent and even depression on the part of Tilo, which compels her to reflect about her relationship with the “Lonely American” (MS 149). This kind of ill-will only create delusion in Tilo’s mind as she assumes, “American, it is good you remind me, I Tilo who was at the point of losing myself in you. You have loved me for my skin, the accent of speaking . . . I do not blame you too much. Perhaps I have done the same with you. But how can the soil of misconception nurture the seedling of love?” (MS 290). This condition further gives birth to the inactivity and to the mind that lacks zest, enthusiasm and energy which and thus succumbs to weariness and boredom; and suddenly she starts feeling for Raven that, “You of all people should know how uncertain life is, how fragile. . . . Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going- life or death, I do not know which- I will carry its brief aching sweetness. For ever.” (MS 291). Thus her agitated mind swings from greed to aversion and attachment to discontent and thus Tilo wishes to end her life before the doom should occur on the people around her. There are different kinds of antidotes which are recommended for these maladies and to deal with sense desires, different levels of therapeutic techniques have been recommended in the Buddhist texts. These hindrances can be enumerated as: Sense desire (*kamacchanda*), Ill-will (*bypada*), Sloth and Torpor (*thina-middha*), Restlessness and Worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), Sceptical Doubt (*vicikiccha*). These are called hindrances because they obstruct the development of the mind (*bhavana*). For achieving these absorptions, the overcoming of the five hindrances is a preliminary condition and their emergence has to be first noticed and recognized and these hindrances can only be overcome by the development of mindfulness, and this malady has also been exuberantly delineated as:

Doubt blocks directional movement and clarity of purpose. While these five can be considered as the roadblocks to spiritual development and mental health, they also provide, structurally, the ground that creates different types of mental conflicts and pathology. They range from meditational exercises like meditating on impure objects which can break through a lustful personality orientation, to others, like guarding the sense doors, moderation in eating, noble friendship and engagement in suitable conversation. Ill-will can be handled by the antidote of the meditation on loving kindness. Also, reflection on the doctrine of kamma is useful. If we are dealing with a virtuous man, we cannot destroy him by anger; if he has vices he has to reap what he has sown; if one’s own position in life is irritating, one can remind oneself, one is the master of one’s journey through samsara. (De Silva 80)

It is often thought that many philosophies with a religious orientation generator body-mind dualism, where the body is looked upon as something to be tortured, rejected and eliminated. This attitude is often combined with a kind of Cartesian dualism of body and mind. Though in certain contexts the Buddha refers to body and mind as independent variables, (‘subdued in body but not subdued in mind, unsubdued in body, but subdued in mind . . .’), the deeper emphasis is on the notion of mutual dependency and reciprocity. Ayurveda is a holistic medical system, and it has no room for that split between the spiritual



and the physical that is part and parcel of our Western Faustian archetype. At the heart of Ayurvedic thinking is the insight that the universe as macrocosm and man as microcosm are in direct relationship, that they reflect one another, and that the one is always present in the other. When Raven comes to know about the letter written by Tilo, he leaves to meet Tilo and make her aware of the reality of his love. Without falling into fatalism, the doctrine of *kamma*, provides valuable therapeutic resources and to realize this loving kindness noble friendship and suitable conversation have also been recommended in the Buddhist scriptures. De Silva in his book entitled *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* also depicts that, “When doubt is present, one has to notice it, without identifying oneself with it” (De Silva 130). But Tilo asserts, “‘I cannot go with you’ . . . ‘I have to go back there.’ ‘What?’ ‘Yes to Oakland’ . . . ‘even if I did not cause it, I cannot just leave such suffering behind’ . . . ‘Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make there, in the soot, in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh’ . . . Then I guess I’ll have to come too” (MS 314-16).

Thus Tilo makes Raven to adopt the humanitarianism that lies at the core of the Indian culture and also releases the people who “be caught in the thicket of wrong views”, and “lead them to correct views, gradually inducing them to cultivate the practices of Bodhisattvas” (Thanh & Leigh 22). As the metaphysical and psychological frontiers of the wrong notions about the self-breakdown, space emerges for the development of greater self-knowledge. By the continuous practice of mindfulness, hidden crevices of the mind open, rigidities disappear and a greater receptiveness to the present becomes possible. It also becomes possible to see the past for what it is. A deep and penetrating awareness, which can break through distorting conceptual, intellectual and semantic baggage, emerges. It is with this clarity of perception that one can sort out one’s thoughts as well as emotions” (De Silva 127). Further, it can also be added that, “with the greater self-knowledge, satisfying relations with others become possible. Thus instead of developing relations based on greed, domination, dependence, and power, there are productive relationships of care, friendship, trust, and compassion” (De Silva 127). An agitated mind of Tilo seeks quietude by accompanying Raven who possess dignity, restraint and calm and after providing Tilo a new name i.e. Maya (MS 316) which spans to the land of both the cultures of India and America, Raven leads her towards joy, concentration, tranquility and equanimity. As she feels, “How different this naming is from my last. No pearled island light, no sister-Mistresses to circle me, no First Mother to give her blessing” (MS 317). All this becomes helpful in conquering restlessness and worry, and generates a tranquility of mind on the part of Tilo and finally she calls Raven, “Come on . . . and hand in hand we walk toward the car” (MS 317). This mental state has been illustrated by De Silva also, as he writes that, “As the mind becomes open, flexible and pliable, it becomes easy to break through automatic, conditioned and compulsive behaviour. Voluntary decisions become easy and a great degree of freedom and autonomy in our volitional activities emerges” (De Silva 127). From this life account of Tilo the, three dimensions: the one on the path towards perfection, or the *arahant* conception; the one which, while dealing with the routine anxieties and conflicts of the householder, aims at the righteous and harmonious life; and finally that which indicates different types of breakdowns, adjustment problems of a radical variety, or psychosomatic illnesses, as depicted by the Buddhist scriptures can be extracted.

Though, “this last group may not always be that actively within the Buddhist fold as such, but may benefit from the therapeutic resources which have been given more secular orientation, so they are accessible to people with diverse worldview orientations” (De Silva 130). The Mistress, while dealing with her doubts and limitations and anxieties, leaves her selfish motives behind and aims to serve the humanity. As a dutiful healer she gives priorities to her customers and their needs, and as *Sushruta*, the father of surgery, has also stated that, “He who regards kindness to humanity as the supreme religion and treats his patients accordingly, succeeds best in achieving the aims of life and obtains the greatest happiness” (qtd. in Ranade 17).

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively it can be said that with the usage of spices in their traditional form and scientifically as used in the form of medicines as described in ancient Indian Medicinal system of Ayurveda, Divakaruni lays bare the issues and conflicts; physical and psychological. For Ayurveda, “helps us to recognize the correct way to live at a given moment in order to overcome special problems; it helps us, in fact, to analyse our habits and our environment and to see where we are going wrong” (Heyn 12). Assuming the role of a negotiator, Divakaruni tries to impart the knowledge of ancient Indian medicinal system of Ayurveda to the West through her fictitious attempt of *The Mistress of Spices*, though in the introductory pages of the book, she warns the readers to use them only under the prescription of a skilled Mistress. The protagonist Tilo’s role as a healer, reformer and as a bridge between two distinct cultures can be summarized in the words of Divakaruni who in her essay entitled “Dissolving Boundaries”, depicts that, “For me, Tilo became the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and finally the trial of earth-burial to emerge transformed, each time with a new name and a new identity” (“Divakaruni”). Through the portrayal of Tilo, Divakaruni seems to delineate the Buddhist notion of enlightenment or Nirvana which is “to think about society and transform it by service of humanity. It is possible to attain Nirvana in this world itself. It is not essential for us to escape into another world. Deep meditation is deep thinking about society” (Karunyakara 153), Nirvana is not to withdraw from the world but to participate in it and further the author’s statement that, “I think writing is definitely activism, especially if one’s passions outside of writing intersect with one’s interests within writing” (Shekar n. p.), strengthens this notion. As Divakaruni is involved with the organizations that help women immigrants in real life, she has delineated the character of Tilo with an intent desire of serving the entire humanity without the consideration of their race, religion and nationality and this pious desire of the author can be summed up in these consistent words as expressed in an interview by Metka Zupancic, “My hope is that the books will bridge cultures. In all of my books, I convey my great desire that people may ultimately come together and make a better world” (Zupancic n.p.), and goes on to chant this holy Sanskrit hymn as, “Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, Sarve santu niramayah, Sarve bhadraṇi pashyantu, Ma kashchit dukkha bhag bhavet” (May all beings be happy, May all beings be healed, May all behold only what is good, May no one experience sorrow) (Zupancic n.p.). Finally it can be asserted that the present study would certainly prove to be helpful in

understanding the devoutness and the therapeutic practices that pervade in the cultural atmosphere of India.

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