

The Portrayal of Ayurvedic Practices in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices"

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Abstract:

The writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflect the nuances of the Indian knowledge system (IKS). Ancient Indian medicinal practices called 'Ayurveda', play a significant role in healing a multitude of diseases. In her novel, "The Mistress of Spices", all the characters are spices imbued with the power of healing. For example, Tilo the Indian spices illumined with the power of healing and the old one who appears to be an advert of Buddhism, incorporates Buddhist healing practices and philosophical ideas, which are intertwined with various themes of the novel. Through this novel, Chitra showcases her knowledge of Ayurveda, an ancient science of herbs and spices. Ayurveda is the easiest natural healing system which is almost present in every household even today. This research paper focuses on the portrayal of Ayurvedic principles and practices in "The Mistress of Spices".

Keywords: Ayurveda, Buddhism, Tilo, Philosophical ideas, Spices.

INTRODUCTION

India is the land of Ayurveda and regarded as the cradling ground of knowledge and healing. The methodical system of medicine suggested by various vedas and puranas of India often targeted the diseased. Therefore, the Indian System gives importance to mind. The imbalance between mind and body results in 'Vyadhi'. In order to maintain a sound relationship between mind and body, the Indian Ayurvedic system suggests various herbs and plants. In 'The mistress of spices'. Chitra Banerjee Divakarui uses the "Magic" of these spices both literally and metaphorically.

Unlike the western philosophy which prioritizes body, Indian philosophy which prioritizes body, Indian philosophy celebrated the mind. The Sanskrit word for a human being is manusya which is derived from the root manas (noun) which means mind and man (verb) which means to think. As a result of this, Indian philosophical traditions give importance to the analysis of human psychology rather than human physiology. A minor Upanishad of India, named Amrithabindu states, "Manamevajeetham manushyanam bandha mokshaye" (Rao, 2002, p.316) meaning mind is the cause for both bontage and liberation. The knowledge of the eternal truth brings 'Moksha' or liberation whereas 'maya' which is the ignorant State of a human being brings bontage. Moreover, in due course of time what happens is mind gets injured, diseased or even lose its balance. Healing practices are often implied to nurse the mind. Healing often has been defined as,

The process of bringing together aspects of one's self, body, mind, spirit at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading toward integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value (Egnew, 2005, p.256).

In India, 'Ayurveda' is labelled as the formal scientific culture of healing. The word 'Ayurveda' literally means "The Science of Life" (e-pathshala). Ayurveda is a broad ancient Hindu medical system which obviously mentions about major energies than can injure a human mind or body ('dosha' in Sanskrit). The trishoda or three energies affecting a human body are Vata (Space or air, equated with the nervous System), Pitta (fire, equated with enzymes), and Kapha (earth and water, equated with mucus). The list of agents that injure a human mind includes Satogun, Rajogun and Tamogun.

Ayurveda treats the patient and not the disease by observing the daily activities which is referred to as Dinacharya of the Patients. As a consequence of this, the balance is brought within the body and outside.

Ayurveda utilizes umpteen number of herbs, plants and edibles for healing purposes. In Indian culinary culture, 'Spices' play a pivotal role. Spices include roots, leaves, fruits, bark and seeds. According to Indian philosophy, Food plays a vital role in the psychological healing of a human mind.

The aforementioned statement could be explained further with Bhṛigu's doctrine of Pancha Kosha (Rao, 2002). According to this doctrine, Brahman (a liberated being) is enclosed within five distinctive sheaths. The first is Annamaya Kosha or the food Sheath, followed by pranamaya kosha or the vital energy or breath sheath, further followed by manomaya kosha or the mind Sheath, vijñanamaya Kosha or the intellect sheath, finally leading to Anandamaya Kosha or the bliss sheath. Therefore, food, in Indian culture, is given paramount importance.

Discussion

In *The Mistress of Spices*; Chitra Banerjee celebrates Ayurvedic medicinal practices which includes magic and masala (Spices, derived from plants) to heal human mind. Tilo the protagonist is a healer from India. In ancient India, the healers were popularly known as Vaidya-s. According to vedic practitioners, human beings are divinely spirits and their ailments are the result of an imbalance in their divine internal constitution. Therefore, the utilization of medico-religious practices like Ayurveda remains the only possible ultimate care solution.

The first chapter of the novel 'The Mistress of Spices' is titled as 'Tilo' which literally means Til and the further thirteen chapters are named as Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalojire, Neem, Redchilli, Makardwaj, Lotus Root, and Sesame. Regarding the importance of spices, Divakaruni told UCTV in an interview;

"The spices are very important in this book, as characters they have personalities of their own, different sections of novels are named after them, these are the sections where they play an important part, and they develop a relationship with Tilo and speak to her show their love and anger." (Divakaruni)

Tilo, the protagonist of the novel, has 'every Indian Spice' (03) at the shelves of her Store.

"The Spices are my love... They are the ones I work with... every Indian Spice that ever was-even the lost one's-gathered here upon the shelves of my store. I say there is no other place in the world quite like this." (04) Tilo hails from the 'land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers'. (03). She knows the implication of every spice and how to use it.

"I know their origins, and what their colors signify and their smells. I can call each by their true-name it was given at the first when earth splits like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood, they

bow to my command. at a whisper they yield upto me their hidden properties, their magic powers... you have forgotten the old secrets...(03)”

The Sanskrit name for turmeric is ‘Haridhara’ (the golden one) which is highly valued for its preservation characteristics, healing properties and spiritual qualities. Turmeric is the ‘Colour of daybreak’ and ‘it is placed on the heads of a newborn for luck, rubbed into the borders of new and even wedding saris and sprinkled over coconuts at the Puja’. Turmeric is rich in properties which even cures Cancer. Tilo uses turmeric in order to heal the wound of her customers. She keeps turmeric powder in the bas of Lalitha with some praying words.

Cinnamon or Dalchini is a wonderful drug plant and obtained from the inner bark of Cinnamomum tree. Cinnamon improves Serum glucose, lower fasting blood glucose and reduces Triglycerides which ultimately reduces diabetics problem. Tilo tucks Cinnamon stick into Jagjit’s turban to aid him make Friends in his school.

Fenugreek consists of three Small oblong leaflets and its leaves and Seeds are utilized as aromatic Spice and a healer too. Fenugreek contains antioxidants and powerful nutrients which tastes bitter but renders the body Sweet again, ready for love. Tilo used this Spice to cure Binita’s breast cancer and Ratna’s suffering from poison in her womb. Fennel which is a mild flavored, Sweet aromatic seed provides relief from anemia, indigestion, respiratory disorder etc. After every meal, if a pinch is taken it freshens the breath and helps indigestion. It provides mental strength and cools the temper. It also improves the function of the brain. Tilo gives this spice to Ahuja’s young wife who is in dire need of mental strength.

Ginger spice is obtained from the underground. It is an Asian Spice which has a unique ability to relieve nausea and pain. Hence, it is taken by the healer Tilo herself as a hot concoction Ginger also enhances the strength of the bones and improves immune system.

Asafetida is a Sulfurous, onion-Smelling, hard resinous gum spices obtained from the erudite of root-stock of Ferule asafetida plant. Asafetida is used in hysteria, loss of appetite, ulcers, flatulence, respiratory disorders, anti-helminthic activity probably because of its nasty pungent smell. In ‘The Mistress of Spices’, it is referred to as ‘an antidote of love’ (74, MOS).

Black Pepper / Peppercorn is a flowering vine. The fruits of Black pepper are usually dried and used for medicinal purposes. It aids to improve digestion by stimulation the Secretion of digestive, juices and enzymes and relieves peptic ulcers. It also relieves cold and cough fights infections and ultimately enhances Perspiration. It has anti-oxidant properties too. In the Mistress of Spices’ it is used to comprehend the hidden desire of Native American. Tilo gives this Spice to Daksha and tells her to boil it and drink and learn to say ‘No’.

KaloJire or Black Cumin Seeds are wonderfully beneficial in protecting our body against a wide variety of ailments. It keeps our heart healthy by controlling high blood pressure and also aids in reducing weight. Tilo Sprinkle the seeds “for all who have suffered from America” (173), and particularly to Haroun for his Safety.

Neem, a tree native to Indian Subcontinent is known worldwide for its medicinal properties. All the parts of Neem are used as medicine the leaves have been demonstrated to exhibit immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, antiulcer, antihyperglycemic, anti-malarial, and antibacterial properties. Tilo utilizes the paste of neem leaves for her skin to cleanse, disinfect and to beautify.

Redi chilli is a fruit of capsicum plant that belongs to the potato family. It is a rich source of vitamin A and C. Excessive utilization of this spice cause burning Sensation. Divakaruni has utilized this spice as a very potent powerful medicine. Born from Agni (God of fire), it is the cleanser of evil.

Makarodwaj is an ayurvedic medicine with herbal and mineral ingredients also referred to as sulphide of mercury. This medicine can be taken only under strict medical supervision because self-medication can cause harm. This wonderful drug is used in the treatment of anti-aging and aphrodisiac. This drug enhances the strength of heart and immunity Divakaruni refers Makardhwaj as the conqueror of time. Tilo uses this spice to beautify herself.

Dhania or coriander seed is used for clearing sight. Lotus root helps in long passionate love life. Amchur is used to heal the taste buds and bring back the love life. Mahamul is the root spice which is used to enhance fortune and brings the success of joy and averts ill luck.

Tulsi is the basil plant of humility and the curer of ego. It slakes the longing for power, turns the thoughts inwards and away from worldliness. Hartuki is shrivelled seed in the shape of a womb-aids mothers to tolerate the pain associated with birthing.

A stringent leaf dried dark on the stem is utilized to reduce mistrust and avarice. Powder of almond and kesar boiled with milk sweetens one's words and thoughts. Sandalwood is known for its colling properties and is used to soothe one's mind. It is good for skin also.

Divakaruni has done a lot of research on Ayurveda. She incorporates all that information in her novel, 'The Mistress of Spices'. Regarding this, she says that;

"I have been interested in the traditional ancient Hindu system of medicine for a long time so I did a lot of ayurvedic research as well. At Berkeley and in the Bay area, there are a lot of ayurvedic practitioners and you can get a lot of books as well. So, I did do a lot of Ayurvedic research. Some of it came out of again, the folklore of Bengal, the ways in which spices were used in my home when I was growing up, not for cooking but for medicinal purposes. There are some good luck spices. You have certain ceremonies where you would use certain Spices to bring good luck and avert the evil eye-the mustard seed to avert the evil eye and the haladi, which is auspicious". (Seshachari, Neila, 2001).

Conclusion

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 not only provides solution to soothe one's mind the body but vindicates the application of Ayurvedic System in modern era also. She Strongly supports Indian medical system called 'Ayurveda' through her novel 'The mistress of Spices'. Indian Medical System 'Ayurveda' is part and parcel of Indian knowledge system (IKS). 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 novel 'The Mistress of Spices'. The central character of the novel Tilo works like a healer, reformer and advocate for ancient Indian Medical System 'Ayurveda'. Through the depiction of Tilo, Divakaruni appears 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 for us to escape into another world. Deep meditation is deep thinking about society" (Karunyakara 153) Divakaruni has delineated the character of Tilo with an intent desire of serving the entire humanity without the consideration of their race, religion and nationality. Tilo is the embodiment of humanitarianism who practices Indian Knowledge System Ayurveda to cure the ailments of both mind and body.

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