

THE PROTAGONIST'S STATE OF MIND IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES

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Abstract : Sigmund Freud believes that a hidden desire in the unconscious mind extends a great influence upon the behaviors of human beings. The same thing can be noticed in the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices*. This research paper presents the protagonist's conflicting and dilemmatic state of mind. Like other novels of Divakaruni, the protagonist of this novel is a woman, Tilo. She has chosen a profession of a mistress of spices, where there is no place for a feeling of love and pleasure. But when the protagonist meets the lonely American, her hidden desire for love and pleasure comes into prominence. She wants to have physical relation with him. For him, she wants to have physical beauty, which is prohibited to the mistress of spices. The id, pleasure principle, stimulates her to have love with the lonely American, but the supers-ego, moral principle, promotes her to follow the rules and code of conduct of the mistress of spices. These two motivational forces create an internal conflict in the protagonist. On the one hand, there is her feeling of love and pleasure and on the other hand, there is her duty as a mistress of spices. Violation of the code of conduct means to have punishment for the mistress. She fears for this punishment and her fear is exposed in her dream. Her fear and internal conflict influence her behaviors. At last, as Freud believes, her pleasure principle dominates her behaviors. She satisfies her desire for love and pleasure.

Key Words: Conscious, Unconscious, Dilemma, Dream, Internal Conflict, the Id, the Super-ego

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is "a sensitive woman, a consummate artist, a visionary endowed with exceptional human sensibility" (B. Agarwal 11). She is very skillful in depicting all round characters. She looks not only outside but inside of the characters. That is why she is able to portraits them psychologically. "Her writing shows deep insight into the female psyche and present a full range of feminine experience" (Bala 10). She entered into the realm of novels with the publication of her debut novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). This novel presents a dilemma, emotional storm, and internal and external conflict of the protagonist. The protagonist of this novel, as in most of the novels of Divakaruni, is a female. In this novel, the protagonist is known by various names like Nayan Tara (star-seer), Bhagyavati (bringer of luck), Tillottama, and Maya. One can notices that the protagonist always has a dilemma or internal conflict for love and power. In her life, she gives importance to love as well as to power. But most of the time she is compelled to choose either love or power. This conflict is most prominently seen when she becomes Tillottama and falls in love with a lonely American, Raven. She has chosen a life of a mistress of spices. In this life, she



doesn't have the freedom to live a life of love and sex. She even doesn't have the liberty to decorate her body with cosmetics and to wear fancy clothes. The First Mother, the mother of all mistresses, has warned her against such attractions. She has also disguised Tilo with old and loose skin. But internally she has a fascination for all these. Her unconscious mind instantly dominates her behaviors and thinking whenever she confronts such incidences. For an instant, when she sees bougainvillea girls and their fancy clothes and decorative figures, a desire of being beautiful enters her heart. In the following words she discloses her unconscious desire of being beautiful:

A desire leaps clawed like a tiger from its hidden place in me. I will boil petals 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. This disguise falling like old snakeskin around my feet, and I rising red and new and wet-gleaming. Draped in a veil of a diamond, Tilottama most beautiful, to whom these girls will be like mud scraped from the feet before one crosses the threshold.
(Divakaruni 49)

These lines show that she has a desire of being beautiful in her hidden place of the mind; the situation and need of being a mistress of spices have suppressed that desire in her unconscious mind. But when she saw those bougainvillea girls, her hidden desire came into prominence. She wants to take away her old skin like the skin of a snake. She desires to show that bougainvillea girls that she can surpass them in their beauty. But she also knows that this is not possible because she has chosen a life of a mistress. That is why she regrets her loose skin and ugliness. She says, "How I lifted my arm, so heavy in its loose-lapped skin and felt the scream taking shape like a dark hole in my chest" (Divakaruni 59). She would have not shown this regret had internally not desire to be beautiful. Her unconscious mind wants to have love and beauty but, being a mistress of spices, she cannot fulfill this desire. That is why it has been suppressed in her unconscious mind, and whenever a suitable atmosphere comes, that desire comes into the conscious.

Tilo's internal conflict and dilemma are noticeable when one observes her relation with her lonely American, Raven. "Conflict serves as an indispensable part of the narrative structure where the protagonist struggles against it to grow his/ her own consciousness" (Panda and Mohanty 1). Being a mistress of spices, she is not allowed to have affection and love for a particular person. She is not allowed to have domestic or sexual life with anyone. These are rules and regulations laid down by the First Mother or the Old One. But Tilo breaks these rules many times. When she sees the lonely American in her shop, she has a lurching inside her heart. Before him, she never felt such a sudden movement in her heart. Though he is not an ordinary person, yet such lurching in mind is not allowed to a mistress of spices. When he looks straight into her eyes, she feels the danger of being fall in love. Her unconscious mind warns her in the following words: "A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves" (Divakaruni 69). But she doesn't hear this warning and behaves like a girl who is in love. When he touches her she says, "This touch that goes through me like a blade of fire, yet so sweet that I want the hurting to never stop" (Divakaruni 70). All these words reveal her suppressed desire which is hidden in the unconscious mind. She is hungry for a particular



love and affection. This also reveals that her desire for love might have been suppressed, because the responsibilities of the mistress did not allow her to have this feeling. That is why her behaviors and feelings are governed by her unconscious mind. On one occasion she wanted to say good-bye to Raven because it was too late to enter the shop, but instead of that, she offered a packet of coriander to him. And when he was leaving her shop without taking any item, she felt something twisted inside her, telling her that she was losing him. Her conscious mind knows that love, affection, and libido are restricted feelings for a mistress of spices, but when the lonely American Raven sees into her eyes, she doesn't act according to her conscious mind and behaves as if she is a young girl in love. This happened because of the suppressed desire for love in her unconscious mind.

Sigmund Freud believes that interpretation of dreams is a strong source of disclosing the unconscious mind. In his famous book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud states, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (604). Freud believes that dream fulfills hidden desires of human beings. The dream also gives way to those desires which cannot be fulfilled in actual life. Sometimes our fears take an imaginary image in a dream. Divakaruni also uses dreams to reveal the internal conflict, hidden desires, and fears of characters. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist sees a dream of the island. For her, it is not new to see a dream of an island, but what is new is an embodiment of her hidden fear and punishment for violating the code of conduct and persuading the act of pleasure. In the dream, she sees that the Old One asks various questions to novice mistresses. The protagonist raises her hand to answer those questions, but the Old One consciously ignores her. At last, she asks her a question, "what happens when a Mistress grows disobedient when she seeks her own pleasure?" (Divakaruni 93). This is an expression of her fear because in her unconscious mind there is a hidden desire for pleasure and love. She feels attracted towards the lonely American. Though she consciously knows that love is not permitted to her but unconsciously she behaves like a young girl in love. In that dream, the First Mother tries to explain the punishment for disobedience but Tilo doesn't hear her voice. The face of the First Mother fades away and what she hears is just an echo of her voice without any meaning. Then she hears the roaring of the volcano which is spewing ash and lava. This dream throws light on the unconscious mind of the protagonist. The protagonist, Tilo, has a fear that what will happen if she disobeys the Old One and follows her desire for pleasure. After meeting with the lonely American, her hidden desire for love and pleasure is aroused. But she also knows that such desire is not a part of the mistress's life. That is why she has this fear in her mind. This internal conflict takes a form of a dream image. Thus her dream is an embodiment of her unconscious mind.

"In this novel, set in sacred, mythical frame, the conflict is between desire and duty in the life of the protagonist, Tilo" (Agarwal and Kapil 25). Yes! The conflict is created because on the one hand there is her internal desire for love and pleasure and on the other hand there is her duty as a mistress of spices. It is a rule of the mistress that no one is allowed to touch her. But Tilo violates this rule and allows the lonely American to touch her. When she is busy cutting kalojira, her lonely American comes into the shop. The presence of him in the shop losses her concentration in cutting the seeds and she cuts her finger. The lonely American sees this and holds her finger into his mouth. Tilo's reaction to this act is "His body my body becoming one" (Divakaruni 108). Her conscious mind is aware of the rule of the mistress.



That is why she pulls away her hand from him but she also accepts that it took her all willpower to withdraw her hand from him. This shows that her inner mind was enjoying that pleasure but her duty was demanding withdrawal from that pleasure.

According to Sigmund Freud, human personality can be divided into three categories: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id stands for the pleasure principle of the personality. The ego stands for reality and the superego stands for the moral principle of the personality. He believes that the id and the superego are always in conflict. "The id contains our basic psychic energy, or libido" (Duane and Sydney 310), whereas the superego contains our moral or idealized energy. And they always clash with each other. In this novel, the same kind of conflict can be noticed in the protagonist. Her id wants to have experience of pleasure with her lonely American. But her superego wants to have her faithful with her duty of mistress. Thus these two energies create an internal conflict in her. Her one mind says her to go with her lonely American, whereas her other mind pressurizes her to perform the duty of mistress. Her superego acts as an alarming voice in her. Under the influence of the id, the protagonist decides: "Yes," I whisper, 'yes. Tomorrow will be our pleasure day" (Divakaruni 186). This decision or desire is opposed by her alarming voice: "What of Haroun says the thorn-voice" (Divakaruni 186). Her voice of superego reminds her about Haroun, her customer. Because it is her duty to help him. She cannot run away from her duty. At last her ego interferes between her id and superego. It is her ego who takes decision in this conflict. Therefore, she says, "Do I not know my duty as well as I do my pleasure?" (Divakaruni 186). Domination of the pleasure principle is seen in her when her lonely American comes close to her. When he comes close to her, she forgets her duty. She even doesn't care about the warning of the superego or The First Mother. The forbidden desire for pleasure is so strong in her that she feels it starts melting her bones: "My bones are melting in this desire to be always held" (Divakaruni 192). There is no doubt that the protagonist has a suppressed desire for pleasure in her mind, but when bougainvillea girls laugh at her old and ugly body, she decides to become beautiful also. She realizes that her lonely American gets attracted to those beautiful girls. To fulfill her internal desire for pleasure, she asks makaradwaj, the king among spices, to make her the most beautiful. Her conscious mind knows that it is the most sacred rule of mistress which she is breaking now. She also knows that after breaking this rule, she will have to go through Shampati's fire. But for the satisfaction of her pleasure principle, she is ready to break it. She says, "Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine" (Divakaruni 261)

The spice fulfills her internal desire and makes her the most beautiful woman. After becoming the most beautiful woman, one can think, she might have become the happiest woman. But this does not happen because her superego creates a conflict in her mind. When the lonely American comes to take her away, she undergoes internal conflict. She feels that there is a voice inside her that asks her, "Tilo do you know what you are doing" (Divakaruni 281). This voice is raised by her superego. It constantly tries to stop her from listening to the id. But at last, the id dominates her behavior and she sets her teeth against the voice of the superego. Tilo and her lover go out of her shop and have a long breath-stopping kiss. She also goes to his house where their two bodies become one. He pulls her hips into his again and again until she feels hot release. Thus, she fulfilled her hidden desire for pleasure in his



house. She enjoys her earthly paradise. Just as Freud considers that the id is dominating factor in the behaviors of human beings, the same thing can be noticed in the case of Tilo.

Conclusion :

It appears that Divakaruni is able to depict the internal conflict of the protagonist in the novel. Internally the protagonist had a desire for love and pleasure, but her duty as a mistress of spices did not allow her to fulfill her desire. Besides this, her mentor, the First Mother, warned her against any kind of fulfillment of her physical desire. Her conscious mind knew all these but her unconscious mind was revolting against these restrictions. As Freud believes, the id dominates the behaviors of a person; the same thing happened in the case of the protagonist. Her pleasure principle dominated her behaviors. She revolted against the First Mother and spices. Under the influence of the id, she fulfilled her physical desire. Though her decision of fulfilling the physical desire created an internal conflict in her, she surrendered herself to the id. Her decision of fulfilling the physical desire, once again validates the finding of Freud that the id dominates the behaviors of human beings.

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