

THE MAGICAL REALISM IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES"

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a world-acclaimed author, born in Calcutta, who published literary works of various genres with poems, novels and short stories paving new ways for understanding of humanistic issues of the world. Divakaruni has attracted readers' attention with her poetry and fiction dealing with problems of Indian emigrants. The paper is a study on *The Mistress of Species*, a fantasy novel short-listed for the Orange Prize. This charming and compelling read won readership with its magical realism and omnipresent sensuality. The characters of Divakaruni's work cross the boundaries between dream and reality and question their own understanding of life and reason. The article focuses how the novel realism is morphed into magical realism.

Keywords: fantasy, myth, realism, magical reality, postmodernism, stream of consciousness.

Magic and imaginary worlds are very important in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction. Magic, myth and fantasy form an integral part of some of her works where she spins a web of magic with her words and imagination which lulls the readers into a realm of fantasy. Her writing collapses "the division between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic" in her "attempt to create a modern fable".

Divakaruni's magical-realist novel "The Mistress of Spices" combines ancient Hindu mythology, religious superstitions and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American socio-cultural concerns of the 1990s. The allegorical fable and fantasy depicts the magical powers of a clairvoyant woman of Indian ancestry. Tilottama named after sesame seeds, the 'spice of nourishment' runs an Indian grocery store, "Spice Bazaar". She has psychic abilities, which help her treat her multigenerational shopper's physical, emotional, and even spiritual illnesses. Tilo is conscious of her own influence and even claims near-divine powers: "I who can make it all happen, green cards and promotions and girls with lotus eyes." (28) She is the architect of Indian immigrant dream.

Divakaruni's originality and talent lie in her technique of narration. She has used various techniques in writing, such as alternative narrative, first person narrative, stream of consciousness, letter and diary writing, myth and magic realism particularly to express discarded and tragic condition of Indian immigrants while establishing themselves in the new civilization. Her stories take both the young as well as the adult to a world of enchantment and innocence. The magic world that she manages to weave with her vivid imagination and lyrical prose is something that one has to experience first-hand. In her enchanted world, nature and its forces were rightly understood and used for immense power. Her literature represents a daring yet also smooth and spontaneous interaction between various world and ways of existence, those consider as 'real' and those consider as 'supernatural' or 'imaginary'. In this intersection of possible existences, of way of being that does not contradict one another but appear to be particularly complementary, her vivid, engaging style strongly supports the literary personae that fully lead their complex novelistic life.

The co-existence of 'magical fantasy' and the characteristics of hybrid, postcolonial or postmodernism, novelistic devices in this prose have often led the author to define her writing approach has magical realism. Magic has always been an integral part of different genres like epics, fairytales adventure stories handed over orally from generation to generation, in drama and poetry. While myths may contain magical happenings and events, they are regarded to the authentic and true by the recipients of that culture while literary text which contain magic are categorized under fantasy genre of literature.

Magic realism unearths the magic present in reality. Magic is given a vestige of normality, while the real world is de-familiarized, expanded, and transformed to bring together elements which are mutually contradictory like life and death, waking and dreaming, civilized and wild, male and female, and mind and body. The boundaries of realism are extended in order to accommodate a fuller vision of reality. Magic realism is however set in the real world unlike the genre of fantasy which is set in an unreal imaginary or magical world brought to life by the creative genius of the writer.

"The Mistress of Spices" belongs to a genre portraying the eternal struggle of a human mind to balance between individual desires and common good .It reminds us that magical powers come with regulations as to their usage and the violation of these rules might result in disasters .The penalty of breaking these rules is only one: the Mistress has to enter the fire to annihilate herself .The Sea Serpents that had saved her from the storm had anticipated what form her life would take after becoming Mistress of spices .They foretell the following about her future life when they discover that she was determined to become a Mistress,". She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps self".

Nayan Tara is one of lucky few who is accepted by the Old One, a grand, ancient figure who rules over the island, commands its victuals, instructs her maidens, and regulates the influx of new apprentices. She also has mandate over the departure of these apprentices, who after fielding a vision, select a destination. They can pass through a cleansing, flame Shampati's fire, to the location where they will set up a heaven, a store, from which they will bestow their learned yet magical gift of physical and spiritual healing both through the sale and complementary distribution of spices. However, before they depart, each apprentice must choose a name, one rich in meaning and apt in its appropriateness. This is not only symbolic of their new identity as mistresses, but in case of the protagonist, a new identity in the new world. In choosing her new name Tilottama, Nayan Tara incites both upbraiding and gentle laughter in the Old One, "It is certainly not confidence you lack, girl. To take on the name of most beautiful apsara of Rain God Indra's court."(42)Tilo herself is quite homely. The Old One is not without misgivings, even though she permits the name for her most prized pupil. The serpents, the island, the Old One, the Fire of Shampati create a surreal world, in which is born Tilottama, the Mistress of Spices who is able to solve the problems of her customers miraculously with the help of the spices which they come to buy from her shop. The entire novel is based on the premise that the spices we use everyday possess magical powers which yield themselves in the hands of a trained mistress of spices.

In order to portray magic realism, Divakaruni created a character like Tilo who is born in India. She defeats the pirate captain to become a pirate queen and after that she lives on the spice island where she is educated in the art of controlling and listening to the spices. This remote island is a place of protection for these women, who call themselves the "Mistresses of Spices" and are beneath the concern of the First Mother, the wisest and the eldest teacher. After receiving the skills of the art, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a small Indian spice shop "Spice Bazaar" where she must begin her task of curing the masses. The first rule is to survive a life of a bachelor and never to yield to carnal desires; secondly, not to leave her place, thirdly, if she doesn't pursue these rules there is no effect of spices on people. So, she is warned by the Old One not to fall in love with anyone. She should be virtuous, sincere, and pure while applying the magic of the spices or she will lose her power over all her spices.

Tilo believes that spices hold the secret power to grant us whatever we desire most in life. This is how she talks about her unique ability to interact with species: “I am a Mistress of Spices. I know their origins and what their colours signify, and their smells... At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magical powers.”(3) Tilo says that most of us are unaware of the other side of these common spices used in cooking and other household activities. She claims that they have the power to revolutionize the life we live, but this can be accomplished only by a person who has the ability to tap their potential to the fullest. Tilo identifies herself as the Mistress of this secret power. She is a person with a number of identities.

Tilo reminisces her past life and ponders over whether the existence we lead is at all objective and real. She finds her past confusing and conflicting. Nayan Tara and Bhagyavati, an integral part of her own past, seem to be of some other life time. Speaking about this quest for identity, she says, “sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all we encounter has already been changed by what we imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being.”(16)

Divakaruni’s magic realism is to bridge the gap between present and past state of affairs. Tilo with her magical powers becomes the owner of the spice shop where she is a master of all spices and speaks to them as characters to resolve the troubles of the people of the real world with the assistance of magic: “I am turmeric who rose out of ocean of milk when devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between. Yes, I whisper, swaying to its rhythm. Yes. You are turmeric, shield for heart’s sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth. Together we sing this song, as we have many times.”(13). She has creatively applied magic on Indian immigrants, particularly to impart them their heart’s desires and to help them to overcome their sufferings. Spices, legends and myth are beautifully put together by her for relaxation of people and their psychological, mental, physical problems.

Imagination plays a very important role in the novel in creating parallel worlds, like the magic island of the Mistress of Spices, or the order of the Conch Bearers. Divakaruni has attributed magical powers to natural objects such as spirits speaking to Tilo about how to treat her customers, punishing her when she goes against their wishes.

Tilo’s customers include people from all casts and creed; A man comes in her life, an American who always look at her old frame and frail body, as if looking for someone he knows to be inside her but can’t see. And Tilo falls in love with him, against reason and warnings of her mind. Raven is lonely and occasionally comes to the spice shop. Tilo is unable to read or solve his problem as he arouses in her the forbidden desire for love. He is the only person in America to whom she reveals her true name. As the novel progresses, Tilo starts falling in love with him. Raven is also drawn towards her for her oriental, antique and mysterious appearance. He figures out that neither the body, nor the person whom he sees are the real Tilo. He confides in her how his own grandfather wanted to give him a very powerful legacy of magic which took the form of a raven. He had ardently believed that it would lead him to the earthly paradise of which he had dreamt of, but his mother had prevented him from accepting the legacy. Tilo’s proximity gives him the hope that one day he would finally discover the whereabouts of the earthly paradise of which he had always dreamt of. Tilo goes out on a pleasure trip for one day with Raven thought it would condemn her for a life time suffering.

Tilo can’t help breaking the rules .The old one comes to warn her that she must return to the island now and take her penalty .But ,Tilo breaks the final rule .She takes on a beautiful body like the ‘Apsaras’ or the celestial damsels with the help of spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her body and soul at least once in her lifetime, “By tomorrow night Tilo ,you will be at the beauty’s summit .Enjoy well .For by next morning it will be gone ”(263).She uses the spices to become a young and exotically beautiful woman to spend one night with Raven .When driven by the intense emotions of her heart she is not able to restrain herself within the bounds ,so much so, that when she ultimately finds love, she is ready to walk through fire

for it .She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven's love. A terrible earthquake strikes as she is waiting for the fire of Shampati to blaze and take her back to the island of spices. Amidst the huge destruction, Raven manages to trace her and take her with him .Tilo wonders why the spices had not punished her. She dismisses Raven`s offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. She argues that we as human beings have the power of recreating earthly paradise in our lives through our constructive actions. The novel ends with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She gives herself the name Maya which has a number of connotations like illusion, spell and enchantment.

The aim of the paper is to shed some light on mythologization of the reality and creation of magical realism in "The Mistress of Spices". The protagonists of both novels dwell in magical time, which flows in circle. Magical realm of Divakaruni's is swarming with myths and ideas of paranormal provenience. Therefore "The Mistress of Spices" is an interesting example of a novel belonging to ontological strand of magical realism. The narration leads from a reality of Indian Diaspora to surreal and paranormal, finally uniting the realms with a classic love story.

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