



## THE MISTRESS OF SPICES: DIVAKARUNI'S ATTEMPT AT MAGICAL REALISM

MONIKA MAAL,

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR,

GOVERNMENT GIRLS COLLEGE, LAWAN, RAJASTHAN

### ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent Indian diasporic writer. Her works throw light on the themes of myth, the condition of women, cultural differences, fantasy, the psychology of the immigrants, etc. This paper presents a brief introduction to magical realism and how it acts as a tool for postmodern and postcolonial writers in their writings to present the fragmented realities, especially the realities of the marginalized section of society. Magical realism mixes reality with legendary elements and dreamlike and imaginative events, as well as myths or folklore. It can be called magic in the cover of reality. This paper focuses on the use of magical realism by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her work *The Mistress of Spices*. In the novel, Banerjee tries to combine myth and fantasy with reality by using various techniques like dreams, telepathy, and intuitions which foreshadow future events. The novel tells the story of Tilotamma, the mistress of spices who is a priestess of the secret magical powers of spices. The writer explores the theme of myth and reality through the life of Tilo. Divakaruni focuses on how through the life and actions of her protagonist, Tilo the elements of reality and magic are merged or fused together in such a style that the reader does not question the fictionality of the story. The novel is a magical realistic text wherein hybridity of culture is shown. Therefore, the novel becomes a postcolonial as well as a postmodern text.

**Keywords-** magic, myth, fantasy, dream, postmodern, postcolonial, diaspora, reality, magical realism.

Postmodernism as a literary era focuses on blending or merging two genres of literature. Fragmentation, experimentation, and diverging from the conventional are some of the features of postmodernism. Various literary genres which contain elements such as metafiction, historiographic metafiction, irony, black humor, fabulation, pastiche, intertextuality, etc. fall

under the category of postmodernism. One such literary genre is magical realism, popularized by writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Franz Kafka, Toni Morrison, and various others.

Magical realism is a blend of magic and reality. It can be seen as a postmodern moment in which the old systems of religion, myth, and legend are tweaked, blended, and fragmented through the lens of contemporary society, destroying the previous sense of unity in the extant cultural metanarratives. It is a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality. There are two discourses at work in magic realism, the magical and the real. The real and the magic are synthesized in such a way that the element of magic organically emerges out of the reality portrayed.

Magical realism can be also seen from a different perspective as being connected with postcolonial thought. Realism is considered a hegemonic representation of the colonizer by postcolonial writers while magical realism becomes a tool in presenting powerful decolonizing alternative histories. It gives voice to the marginalized and visibility to non-canonical texts. The suppressed who have long been on the margins are brought to the forefront to tell their stories to the world. While rational and logic are the characteristics of Eurocentric realism, magical realism moves away from them through the elements of mystery and fantasy.

Diaspora is a widely known concept in postcolonial theory. The word 'Diaspora' has become multi-dimensional in its meaning over time. The term has its origin in the Greek verb 'diaspeiro' which means 'I scatter' and is hence, used to refer to the movement of a population from its original locality, whether under some force or of its own sweet will. The term is now used to denote all exiles, immigrants, and writers living away from their home country. In the beginning, the diaspora was more related to 'migration as colonialism' rather than with uprooting or deterritorialization. Presently it is related to movement from the homeland, as well as, grounding in the host society. Various writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipaul, and Bharati Mukherjee have voiced out the thoughts of the diaspora. One such writer amongst them is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India. She immigrated to the US at the age of 19 after completing her graduation. She got her Master's degree from Wright States University in Dayton and her Ph.D. in English from the University of California. At present, she is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing in the internationally acclaimed Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston and lives in Houston with her husband Murthy. Her works focus on the plight of people away from their homeland. She said in an interview,

"It struck me that as I was living in the United States, I was losing important things and important people in my life and I realized I really needed to start writing about these special people, places, and events so that I could keep them alive in my heart"

She began her career as a poet and later moved on to the genre of prose writing. Her first short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, depicted the lives of Indian women in the US. She has also explored the theme of myth in her novels like *Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantment*, both of which are the retellings of Indian epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively. Her most popular work *Mistress of Spices* which was published in 1997 is an amalgamation of both diasporic writings and mythical elements. It is her experimentation with magical realism. Laura Merlin in a review in *World Literature Today* says:

“In this exuberant first novel, the award-winning writer Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community. Addressing the immigrant experience in particular, she asks how to negotiate between the needs of each under the earth-moving stress of desire.”

Tilo, the mistress of spices, is the novel's protagonist, but the role of spices in the novel is a major one, thereby giving them the status of the protagonist as well. Tilo is the owner of a spice store in the city of Oakland, California. The history of Tilo is unique, yet sad. Before reaching the status of the mistress of spices she has had various names that reveal her multiple identities and disguises. The events colliding with her birth give a feeling that something is just not right with this girl. The dry season, steel blue thunder, splitting of banyan trees, midwife crying out after seeing the child's face, and disappointed look on the fortune teller's face, this was the scenario when Tilo was born. They named her Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but tried to kill her at birth. The result was a fire in the marketplace, her mother lying fevered, cows running dry and Nayan Tara screaming until they fed her milk from a white ass. She believes maybe that is the reason words came to her soon and *the sight*.

“I knew who stole Banku the water carrier's buffalo, and which servant girl was sleeping with her master. I sensed where under the earth gold lay buried, and why the weaver's daughter has stopped talking since the last full moon. I warned the village headman of the floods before they came.”

Chitra Banerjee drew her protagonist as psychic, holding magical powers and all-powerful from birth. She has made her powers believable to the audience. The power of dreaming and believing can be observed when the pirates come to her village. She says,

“Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all that we encounter has already been changed by what we had imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being.”

One characteristic of magic realism is that what we are told as bedtime stories or are made to believe to be made up or true become realities. They are so merged with reality that it becomes highly unlikely for the readers to question their existence. The arrival of pirates in the village of Tilo is one such story. Pirates which earlier were just characters of bedtime stories came, raided and pillaged, and burned the village. This instance also shows the power of belief, pirates which were unheard of until now were face to face with them because Tilo believed in them. She used the ‘calling thought’ and made them come to her. The pirates took her with them and gave her the name, Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, and bringer of luck and death. She leads the pirates to fame and glory. The sight, pirates, and then came the snakes, they were everywhere and invisible, making them visible to anyone only when they wanted to. Being the queen of pirates, Bhagyavati(Tilo) encountered the snakes. They shielded her when she was tired from playing. The sea serpents saved her life from the typhoon that she called.

They were the ones who told her about the island, the island of spices. They explained to her how the spices and the island were always present even before the mountains grew. The snakes warned her about the island, telling her how no one escaped from that island. They even made her an offer to come with them and be the Sarpa Kanya, snake maiden and see the Samundra Puri. But she refused, the call of the spices coursed up her veins, unstoppable. The snakes said,

“She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps even self. We should never have spoken to her. But the oldest of them said, ‘She would have learned some other way. See the spice glow under her skin, a sign of her destiny.’”

The island is the centre of magic and power. Women are educated in the art of controlling and listening to the spices on this island. It is a place of protection for these women, who call themselves the ‘Mistresses of Spices’ and are under the guidance of the First Mother, the wisest and oldest teacher. The mistresses have to go under the ‘Shampati's fire’ before going out to their respective allotted places for work. The fire, a symbol of the mystic and magic transforms the bodies of young mistresses into old women. The mistresses leave behind their old body, and their old names, never to step out of the places they are set down, never to love anyone but the spices. The art of changing appearances is an element commonly visible in magical realistic works. The act of jumping into the ‘Shampati's fire’ indeed takes the readers to a different world. After receiving her skills of arts, Tilo is sent to Oakland to a small Indian spice shop ‘Spice Bazaar’ where she must begin her task of curing the masses. This is where the novel begins, with Tilo announcing herself as, “I am a Mistress of Spices.” Even in the prologue, the writer warns the readers about the spices and how they should be taken only under the supervision of a qualified mistress. Chitra Banerjee has infused the elements of fantasy from the very beginning of the novel. The spices are described as having mystic and magical qualities, they are dangerous and only a qualified mistress can supervise their intake.

In the novel, the spices are given importance as humans. They are treated as characters. The chapters are named after the spices. It is believed that the spices originated from the earth splitting up and offering to the sky. The spices bow to the mistresses' command, the mistress yields their power, their hidden properties. All the spices have powers that are used to cure various problems, even days are allotted to each spice. For instance, vanilla soaked soft in goat's milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against the evil eye; pepper at the foot of the bed shaped into a crescent cures you of a nightmare. The importance of spices is frequently told to the mistresses by the Old one, the First Mother.

“You are not important. No mistress is. What is important is the store. And the spices.”

The power of the spices is invoked by spells. “The spell is greater than the spell maker; once unleashed, it cannot be countered.” The hands of mistresses play a vital role in invoking the power of the spices. The hands make the mistress choose the remedial spice for any problem. “Phosphorus fingers, coral fingers, I wait for you to tell me what I must do.” If the spices have the power to heal, they also have the power to destroy and the readers can observe this many times when Tilo does something which is prohibited for her to do as a mistress.

The novel is an amalgamation of myth and fantasy in a world of diaspora. The mistresses are Indian, and the powerful spices are Indian but they are sent all over the world to help their kind. Their kinds here represent the Indian diaspora. The problems faced by the immigrants in America like abuse, bullying, and a physical threat both outside and inside their homes, the mistress comforts and protects the people from these problems. The spices are angered when the mistress interacts with the Americans. She is sent to help the Indians who live in Oakland and given strict instructions to not be personally attached to the ones she helps. Tilo, being the rebel she is, gets

deeply connected with her clients, be it Ahuja's wife who is stuck in an abusive marriage or Haroun who is a taxi driver who faces racial hate and attacks, Jagjit with similar issues as Haroun and Geeta, and her family. The spices are always watching everything and it can be observed how they get angered when Tilo crosses a line. The mistress can feel the disapproval of the spices. They even make themselves disappear when they are needed, their effect is also sometimes unexpected and negative.

The portrayal of magical realism by the writer has been through the life of Tilo herself, the island, the spices, and the mistress. The mistress is imbued with magical qualities wherein she has control and power over minerals, spices, metal, earth, sand, and stone. She has psychic qualities. She can sense the danger of people who come to her, the brown people displaced in new lands. She can sense their desires, their fears. She has the 'calling thought', through which she can call anyone or anything with whom she truly desires to have an encounter. She has visions that are based on realities. She can foresee the danger which can come to the people who visit her store. She can hear the thoughts of the people she is dreaming about. Divakaruni through Tilo epitomizes such a dimension of the female psyche which showcases that women have an inherent power and potential to heal, cure, nurture and protect.

The myths related to the native Americans are also brought to the forefront by Divakaruni through the story of the native American, Raven. The mystery associated with the lonely American comes out in the open when he tells his story to Tilo. The man is named Raven by himself, he similarly as Tilo has changed his name by himself thereby changing identities. The similarity between the myths of Indians and the Red Indians has been shown through the life of Tilo and Raven. Raven can see Tilo beyond her physical appearance and believes she can help him unleash the secret power he was supposed to inherit but failed to do so. This fact adds a mystical quality to Raven's characterization as well. His quest for the 'Earthly paradise' whose vision comes to him in his sleep adds up to the magical realistic quality of the novel.

Tilo not only used the spices to help others in need but uses them for herself as well. Torn between duty and desire she is overpowered by her attraction for Raven. She uses 'Makardwaj- The king of spices' to transform herself into a beautiful maiden. This transformation of the old body into a flawless, mystic, and heavenly *apsara-like* young girl is the penultimate portrayal of magical realism. It can be said that Divakaruni has best utilized magic realism here when like Cinderella, Tilo transforms herself from rags to riches (appearance-wise).

The fire of Shampati plays an important role in bringing together the mystical, mythical and magical into reality. According to the Indian mythological stories Shampati is the bird of myth and memory who divides into the conflagration and rises new from the ashes. Similarly, the mistresses on the island had to undergo the fire of Shampati and rise as new from the ashes. The first time a mistress undergoes the fire her body and identity change, the second time only occurs when a mistress is disobedient. In such a situation the fire of Shampati calls back the mistress, this happened to Tilo as well. A piece of alum, *phitkari*, lying on the floor of the store when Tilo returns from her rendezvous with Raven is the sign that the fire is calling Tilo back. When at the end Tilo arranges everything for the fire and starts chanting, nothing happens, but after she awakes from a nap a very destructive earthquake has hit the city and there is no sign of the store as its building has collapsed. Tilo is saved by Raven and it seems the spices have forgiven her. The anger of the spices is thus transferred and causes massive destruction to the city of Oakland. Fissures in the roads, collapsed buildings, and fire everywhere, this is the scene from which Tilo and Raven flee. But Tilo refuses to join Raven on his quest to the earthly paradise and stays back to help the people of Oakland. She is joined by Raven soon. As the identity of Tilo as a mistress of spices comes to an end, she asks Raven to give her a new name, a new identity. He names her Maya. "Maya" itself means illusion, spell, and enchantment. Maya is magic and magical realism personified.

The entire novel is based on the transformation of Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilo to Maya with the spices acting as the catalysts. Divakaruni brings various mystical, mythical, and magical elements to reality. A psychic girl, pirates, snakes, the mystic island, the spices, the native American, all these add up to build an environment of magic in the realistic city of Oakland, California. Magic realism as portrayed in the novel turns out to be a reasonable artistic mode to convey the strains that exist between divergent societies and distinctive views of reality. The author weaves the otherworldly with the common day events. Therefore, *The Mistress of Spices* is an interesting example of a novel belonging to the ontological strand of magical realism. The narration leads from a reality of the Indian Diaspora to surreal and paranormal, finally uniting the realms with a classic love story.

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