

WEAVING THE THREAD OF 'MAGICAL REALISM' AND THE SHROUDING 'MYSTICAL REALISM' IN THE 'TREATMENT' OF CHITRA BANERJEE'S 'MISTRESS OF SPICES' AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'TREATMENT OF BIBI HALDAR'-A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE.

¹V Meenakshi, ²S Premalatha

¹PHD Research Scholar, ² Asst. Professor, REVA University

¹ Arts and Humanities,

¹REVA University, Bangalore, India

Abstract : Diasporic literature has carved a niche in present times in Indian writings in English due to the rising migratory population to the West. Gaining popularity under the umbrella of post-colonial literature many writers have ventured to ventilate the varied vicissitudes of the immigrants from different perspectives. Women writers have delved deeply into the lives of those women who have difficulty in adapting to the western way of life. The present paper will take up an analysis of two reputed diasporic writers works Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and her successor, Jhumpa Lahiri from a diasporic perspective.

Key Words: niche, migratory, vicissitudes, diasporic perspective

I. INTRODUCTION

The fiction, 'Mistress of Spices' is set in Los Angeles, America abounds more in direct diasporic setting where the story is out and out based on the Indian spices and the entire theme revolves around the spice bazaar set up in the heart of the city. The short story of Jhumpa Lahiri spins around the native milieu, Calcutta with its local touch also bears a semblance of the diasporic elements. Whether it is the 'orient or the 'occident' the psychological and emotional trauma of the protagonists' 'Tilo' and 'Bibi' are one and the same Tilo, has special powers to heal people with her spices; Bibi awaits a treatment to cure her incurable disease. This paper will focus on the diasporic aspect of alienation and loneliness faced by Tilo and Bibi how this is handled by both the writers. A sincere attempt will be made to analyse from this perspective, compare and contrast their plight in the context of the west and East.

II. An introduction to Magic Realism

The term 'magic realism is a literary genre employed to juxtapose the fantastic and the real; the dream life with that of the mundane; the reality and the unreality to give it a heightened effect. While it has its source in Latin America it is widely used in different literary works. To give it post- colonial definition we can put in the following way: Magic Realism is "the adaptation of Western realist methods of literature in describing the imaginary life of indigenous cultures who experience the mythical, magical, and supernatural in a decidedly different fashion from Western ones. A weaving together elements we tend to associate with European realism and elements we associate with the fabulous, where these two worlds undergo a "closeness or near merging". Salman Rushdie in his novel, 'Midnight's children' tries to subvert the identities of the coloniser. "Fantasy is consciously used as a device or a method by many postmodernist novelists. He believed that fantasy could be used as a method for producing intensified images of reality. Rushdie has used fantasy ingenuously and admirably in 'Midnight's Children'. (Prof. K. V. Dominic). Rushdie uses the narrative style of magical realism in which myth and fantasy are blended with real life".

III. Donning the role of spice mistress

Tilo, an orphan at a young age possesses extra sensory perception easily acquires the special skill of identifying the Indian spices and with the help of a trained teacher gains knowledge of the healing powers of these amazing spices. Mastering the nuances of spices, severed from roots, she sets sail to Los Angeles to become a mistress of spices and help people get cured of their ailments. As a mentor, her teacher also sets some rules which if she disobeys her magical powers would vanish. The main rule being that she should have control over her desires and not to try these spices on herself at any cost lest she loses her powers. Another important rule was that she should never leave her store at any point of time. Tilo was successful for a period of time happily interacting with her spices; sometimes even talking to them for want of company. Her customers were varied, a taxi driver, Haroun, an Indian; an Afro-American who takes tips from Tilo to cook Indian dishes. Yet another was an old man who is shocked to see the liberal American culture and his grand-daughter, Geetha befriending an American boy moving around with him at nights in an inappropriate dress. Discussing about his family's distress and stress he collects the suitable spices from Tilo. She spins her 'spicy' magic this way:

Almonds and kesar give peace and calm,

Chandan helps as a soothing balm,

Mehndi for cooling the palm

Fennel improves digestion

While red chilies denote passion
 Cinnamon stands for friendly ties
 Kala Jeera wards off evil eyes
 And so, Tilo spins her magical spice.

One of her special customers, Doug meets her incidentally when he gets hurt, befriends her. She falls a prey to his charms and fights hard to erase his thoughts from her memory. She administers the 'holy basil' to Doug to drink it with tea quite aware that it improves memory. Leading a lonely existence, she craves for company and love; but fearing her teacher's warning she ends up in a conflict. Her 'virginity' is the key to her successful treatment on her customers. Driven by passion, she is torn between her emotions and her profession. Doug finds a confidante 'in Tilo when he shares his grief over his mother's loss and this strengthens their ties as friends. Doug's constant insistence to have a date with Tilo tempts her to step out of her shop. She violates the rules and to her dismay her powers of healing go awry. Dissatisfied customers step in to show their disappointment and her spices were mixed with 'worms', a symbol of her loss of powers. Doug plays on her emotions and Tilo succumbs to his charms against her conscience. Her loneliness is the main cause for her action and she regrets the same. The irony is that Doug also suffers from loneliness in his homeland, America. His ambiguity in his origin infuriates him and this gives him a chance to seek the help of Tilo. Displacement from India adds to her woes but she doesn't have a choice. Chitra Banerjee puts it this way: Tilo, The Mistress of Spices, is kidnapped by the dacoits which eventually makes her land in America. In spite of the repeated attacks of the dacoits, her family never left their ancestral land and chose to die instead. In the words of Tilo- "I am telling father Abbajan we must leave now but grandfather said, "*Toba, toba*, where will we go, this is the land of our ancestors"" (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 27). There is a constant itch to get back to her roots which accentuates her alienation.

In the end, she decides to get back to her roots leaving her spice trade in America thinking she has lost her powers. But the author brings a twist and gives spaces to strike a balance between her passion and her profession by 'empowering' Tilo regain her power of healing. Of course, this time with Doug who backs her in 'rebuilding' her lost confidence. Tilo accepts America as her new home where with renewed strength and is ready to face new challenges.

IV. Magic Realism in the novel 'Mistress of Spices'

The novelist Chitra Banerjee has employed this narrative technique to juxtapose the 'orient and the 'occident' in a unique way. The character, Tilo here undergoes multiple consciousness through the novel and the spices stand as her magical powers which she uses to heal her patrons visiting her 'spice bazaar'. to collect her spices. This either for cooking or even for other diasporic problems like alienation or loneliness as per their requirement. Before she gives them the spices she chants the magical powers unique in their own way to heal her patrons.

We find a lot of magic realism through the novel starting from the first mother of the spice island who imparts the knowledge of various spices to the girls who are getting prepared to disseminate their magical powers all over the world to cure people of their illness. The first mother an elderly woman represents the traditional and conventional world but ready to send her girls to the outside world and progress. Another element of magic realism is that of the spices talking to Tilo in her solitude; a sense of surrealism created in the novel. Yet another characteristic of magic realism is that the spices take different forms to suit to their needs.

V. Introduction to Mystical Realism

In general terms the term 'mystical realism' means something to do with the metaphysical. "In philosophy, mystical realism is a view concerning the nature. The metaphysical component rests on a distinction between the concepts "real" and "exist". Something exists if it occupies space; has matter; is in time; is affected by causation."

VI. Awaiting a new dawn

Jhumpa Lahiri in one her short stories from 'Interpreter of Maladies' has delineated one such character similar to Tilo in 'Mistress of Spices', a victim of alienation and loneliness in the native milieu. The author goes on to say that the diasporic element is found not only in the immigrants' lives but also in their own native also. Bibi Haldar suffers from an incurable disease and all sorts of treatments like allopathy, homeopathy, Ayurveda and other types were of no avail. Having given up hope she leads a miserable and lonely existence with her cousin and his wife. Unable to decipher her disease she pulls on with her daily chores of recording inventory of the cosmetic shop owned by her cousin to occupy her lonely existence and in turn get something in kind to survive. 'Confined' to her small room a pity to describe just gave enough space to sit. Her disease 'confined her world to the unpainted four -storeyed building 'and her sudden bouts of fainting left the neighbours aghast. In one such instance the doctors declared that she would be cured if she gets married.

The author brings the aspect of social taboo and the attitudes of Bibi's cousin related to her marriage and tries to evade getting her married listing many a reason. The plot thickens when her cousin and his wife ostracize her to the cosmetics room saying that she was the cause for their baby's illness. Her existence becomes much more pitiable when they abandon her secretly leaving a few hundreds for her survival. Bibi's dreams of getting married remains a dream.

The story takes a turn when Bibi is found pregnant by the neighbours not knowing the man responsible for this. This remained a mystery but she delivers a normal child, a son. Her cousin's cosmetics shop to support herself and her son. Her incurable disease got 'cured' ultimately and her loneliness is wiped out finding a meaning through her child.

"Through her protagonist, she highlights that the women are the victims of gender discrimination as a girl child, wife and mother from male as well as from their female counterpart. They are trapped between tradition and modernity "Says Vinitha and Dr. Usha Rani in their article on women characters.

VII. Mystical Realism in Bibi Haldar

While 'magic realism is employed by Chitra Banerjee in 'Mistress of Spices 'effectively by comingling the real and the fantastic; Jhumpa Lahiri has brought a spiritual allusion together with the aspect of the diasporic characteristic of alienation with a special reference to the social construct which leans on 'patriarchy' and 'gender discrimination'. She draws out the irony of this condition prevalent in the native milieu where in the protagonist Bibi is left in the lurch by her kith and kin and the indifferent attitudes of the society at large.

Jhumpa is a social critique in this narrative bringing into picture the harsh realities existing in the native scenario. Though she writes with an American mind she feels like an Indian at heart empathizing the character, Bibi. She even tries to give a solution to Bibi's problems both in

the physical and psychological aspects by drawing a spiritual element in the end. Thus, makes it appear mystical and supernatural in a unique way putting an end to Bibi's pain and suffering existentially.

VIII. Similarities and differences between Tilo and Bibi

First and foremost, Tilo and Bibi are lonely souls; the former due to her professional commitment leads a lonely existence talking to her spices befriending them while Bibi due to her ailment is condemned to lead a lonely life in spite of living in her cousin's home. Tilo is confined to her 'spice Bazaar' and Bibi to her cosmetic room upstairs. There is a deep longing for company from both sides especially a man. So, alienation is the common thread found in Tilo and Bibi who suffers more due to her physical set back. Both Tilo and Bibi undergo emotional trauma at a subtle level. They are victims of social alienation which deprives them of a normal living.

Tilo heals her multiple customers visiting her store whereas Bibi awaits cure for her incurable disease. Chastity is important to Tilo whereas the doctors recommend a married life to Bibi.

At a physical level, Tilo looks charming but Bibi is plain and uncouth in her appearance. Tilo earns money through her profession while Bibi is not skilled in anything to earn her living. Doug, Tilo's boyfriend is willing to accept but Bibi has no clue as to who is responsible for her motherhood, there is an anonymity and shrouding mystery encompassing her motherhood.

IX. Conclusion

Both the authors, Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri have attempted to bring out the aspect of alienation and loneliness in their works, 'Mistress of Spices' and 'Treatment of Bibi Haldar'. Spices stand as a symbol to Tilo's 'virginity' and in the case of Bibi it is her incurable disease which is symbolic of her miserable condition. Both the narratives advocate company and speak volumes about the yearning of the protagonists to get married and gain relationship. Tilo gains her relationship with Doug and Bibi her son who brings a meaning to her lonely being. Whether in the native milieu or America human emotions are similar and thus it is universal in nature. Speaking about the psychological trauma of her female protagonists Jhumpa says that it is 'attributed to Indian patriarchal notion of marriage'. Their individuality is snatched by neglecting their emotions'. she says: "When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life".

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