

Magical Realism of the Stress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee and Diwakaruni

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Abstract: *This essay provides a succinct overview of magic realism and its topic in Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices. It demonstrates the use of magic realism as a literary method by Divakaruni in her book. The book has post-colonial and post-modern themes together with hybrid cultural traits. The mistress of spices with magical abilities, Tilo, is the main character in the book. She has magical abilities and utilizes spices to heal the inhabitants of her kingdom. Fantasy, myth, realism, imagination, beliefs, the past, and the present are all woven together in the book.*

Keywords: Magical realism, Spices as magical agents, Cultural symbolism

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant literary movements of the 20th century is magic realism. Franz Roh, a German art critic, coined the phrase "magic realism" in 1925. The latter three decades of the twentieth century saw the rise in popularity and derision of magic realism. It implies a dichotomy between reality and imagination, which is an oxymoron. In order to have a more profound comprehension of reality, this artistic approach incorporates mystical aspects into a realistic setting. With the use of folktales, fairy tales, fables, myths, and epics that may be taken from any culture in the globe, magic realism blends magic with reality.

Exaggerated subject matter, history, myth, time, unclear reality, and supernatural aspects are all part of this storytelling approach. Political, mythological, and epical treatment are all included. It is regarded as a genre of visual art as well as literature. It makes an effort to specify the historical background in order to comprehend the connection between postmodernism and magic realism. According to Roh, "Magic Realism is a way to uncover the mystery hidden in everyday reality, not a mixture of reality and fantasy."

Following World War I, a movement known as Magic Realism emerged in Europe in the 20th century. Franz Roh used the word to describe paintings in Germany (1890-1965). He described Magic Realism as a Post-Expressionist art form known as the New Objectivity. Latin America is the birthplace of the literary genre known as Magic Realism. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Gunter Grass, Ben Okri, Isabell Allende, Salman Rushdie, and others are among the most well-known Magic Realist authors worldwide.

The award-winning and best-selling Indian American author, poet, short story writer, novelist, and essayist is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Chitralekha Banerjee, born July 29, 1956). She is among the exceptional authors. Her birthplace is Calcutta, India. She teaches writing at the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program as a Betty and Gene MC David professor. In addition, she was a co-founder and past president of Maitri, a 1991 hotline for South Asian women who are victims of domestic violence. Among Divakaruni's most notable works are *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

The Mistress of Spices delves into the characters' everyday lives and the unfathomable realm of magic. The actual world and the fantastical are blended together by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni develops a new magical universe that transcends the boundaries of multidisciplinary studies. One of the main ways she projects the mystical aspects of her works is via dreams. The magic realism in her work unfolds and allows us to grasp the magical happening in one's life such as dream, telepathy and intuition which foreshadows the future events. With a stronger emphasis on myth and magic realism, the book explores the experience of immigrants.

A priestess of the hidden magical abilities of spices, Tilo (Tilotamma) is a mistress of spices. She is an immortal lady with unique talents who was ordained as a mistress after receiving training in the age-old craft of spices. She loves the spices. She may employ the unique and particular abilities that spices have to heal the illnesses of immigrants or the local Indian expatriate population in America. She is in control of the spices. They obey my orders from Amchur to Zafran, she states. They surrender their magical abilities and secret qualities at the sound of a whisper. Tilo has the ability to predict the future from birth. Her name is Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, which translates to "flower that grows by the dust road" and "star seer." She experiences loneliness and neglect from her parents, but eventually, her second sight draws everyone's attention. Because of her ability to foresee the future, she provides her family with prosperity. Her renown quickly spreads, and she is forcibly kidnapped by pirates. Although she is called Bhagyavati (Bringer of Luck), she quickly deposes their commander and ascends to the position of pirate queen. She eventually creates a storm to get away from the pirates, and the sea serpents come to her aid. The sea serpents inform her about an elderly lady who is in charge of the next island and want her to become the Sarpakanya. The elderly lady would teach the art of spices on the island, which is known as The Island of Spices.

She feels as if she has discovered a term for her need and longs to master the art of spices. Tilo travels to the island despite several obstacles to fulfill her dream, and she tells the elderly lady that she wants to become her mistress. One must give up their own wants in order to become a mistress. After accepting the terms, the mistresses are forced to undergo Shampathi's fire in order to be purified and transformed into elderly women. When Tilo says she wants to be called Tilo, the old one is hesitant since Tilottama, an apsara, is punished for her wish in Lord Indra's court.

Tilo enters the shampathi's fire and assures the elderly woman that she will never fall. The ancient one offers her a dagger to keep her away from her wants before she enters the Shampathi's fire. To help her stay strong during her vows, the elderly one also offers her a piece of ginger root. She awakens in Oakland as the elderly Tilottama after entering the center of Shampathi's fire. When she tries to enforce the mistress's edict, the spices appear to have some influence over her and fight back.

Tilo locates and provides the appropriate spices for the individuals who seek her assistance according to their issues. Every spice had a designated day, and sometimes they would perform a song while holding her. She struggles to balance her empathy for those who seek her assistance with her mistress code of detachment. The tension between love and duty works as a catalyst in the narrative. The young woman who used to visit Ahuja's business once a week is her wife.

She was forced into marriage to Ahuja. As a watchman, her husband forbids her from working, claiming that it is the responsibility of males. It would give her hope if she took turmeric. After a long period, Ahuja's wife comes to her store and says she can no longer put up with her husband. In order to give them the fortitude to endure life's hardships, Tilo suggests that she take fennel and requests that they both consume it. Tilo assisted Haroun, a cab driver who was dissatisfied with his job. Tilo resolves to aid Haroun before the vision comes true.

Kalojire is the spice she chooses. "Kalojire, spice of the dark planet ketu, protector against the evil eye." A young Indian child named Jagjit struggles to fit in in the United States. His pals mock and bully him because of his words. Tilo conceals cinnamon in Jaggi's turban to assist him. The spice is the destroyer of adversaries, which provides vigor to body and mouth. He obtains the fortitude to make his voice heard against the cruelty of his fellow American comrades. Later, spices begin to work against Jagjit in order to punish Tilo for violating the mistresses' banned rule. In an attempt to heal him, Tilo gives him "manjistha" to chill and purify his blood.

An Indian girl named Geeta comes from a Bengali household. Everyone in the family disagreed with Geeta's declaration that she loved a guy, but Tilo brought them all back together. She grinds kesar and almond powder for him to boil in milk. "To remember the love hidden beneath the anger, to sweeten your thoughts and words." The spices turn against Tilo when she chooses to meet Geeta at her workplace. She offers "ada for the deeper courage" and "methi for healing breaks" along with mango pickle. In her dream that same night, Tilo converses with the First Mother across great distances in both time and space. In her business, she senses the presence of the Old One. She is transparent and undetectable. "Avoid being reduced to unimaginable disasters by America." Don't awaken the flavors of hatred while you're dreaming of love.

Tilo is unable to read Raven's thinking when he enters the shop. She can't seem to find him a spice. When the mistress is unable to locate a unique spice, mahamul, a root spice, is used to improve fate, provide prosperity, pleasure, and avert bad luck. Tilo adores the lonely American, Raven. Raven is enamored with her attractiveness at the same time. Raven is able to see behind Tilo's outward appearance and has a certain magical talent as well. Tilo offers him peppercorn, which might make him sweat out his secrets. Raven then shares his own tale with Tilo. He believes Tilo can assist him in releasing the hidden power that he was meant to acquire from his great-grandfather but was unable to do so. To bring Geeta's family together, Tilo presents Geeta's grandpa "kantak, the thorn herb with its hair thin black needles whose sting can be poison." In order to give him the golden tongue for an hour, she urges him to mix kantik into his rice for supper and eat it gently.

The spice that would transform Tilo into a beautiful woman is marakadwaj, the king of spices, which is located in the inner chamber. At last, Tilo violates the most revered of all the rules. The spice should be used with extreme caution as it might cause death or insanity. Tilo consumes everything at once. She notices changes in her physique. Tilo goes back to the shop after hanging out with Raven. She sets up a bonfire in the middle of the space with "spices, dals, sacs of atta and rice and bajra." Tilo prepares to enter the inferno of Shampati. She sits on the spice pyre in lotus pose after dipping her hands in turmeric. She has a startling sense of calm as she recalls all she has loved. "I say the invoking words while holding up the one chili I had left in the jar for this particular moment." However, nothing occurs. She sobs with words and attempts various chants. Tilo repents to the spices for all her actions. The earth shivers and twitches before she can think. Raven comes to Tilo's rescue. Only she can figure out the solution.

"Mistress who you were, it was sufficient when you quietly took our punishment without resisting it. Having trained your mind to suffer, you did not need to face that agony in body also." Tilo gives her a new name: "Maya." It may indicate a variety of things in the Old English language. Enchantment, illusion, and spells are the forces that sustain our flawed world on a daily basis.

The tale illustrates the images of numerous realms rich with magic, myth and history associated to spices. It assesses the significance of spices from a sociocultural standpoint in the protagonist's life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a magic realism author, redefines reality in her book *The Mistress of Spices* by fusing the scientific with the mystical. In order to include myth, magic, and other unusual phenomena in nature or experience, magic realism broadens and classifies the real. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses her own cultural and psychological perspective to depict a world that her readers are acquainted with. She uses Magic Realism as a literary form to illustrate the issues that arise between different cultural groups. The book is a magic realism story that blends the paranormal with everyday occurrences. The author uses magic realism to bridge the gap of the past that has been forgotten. In this case, mythological, historical, political, and social factors are more important.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MAGICAL REALISM IN DIVAKARUNI'S NARRATIVE

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives, particularly *The Mistress of Spices*, demonstrate a profound engagement with cultural identity through the lens of magical realism, revealing the intricate ways in which personal and collective identities are negotiated in diasporic contexts. In her works, magical realism is not merely a stylistic or fantastical embellishment; it functions as a narrative strategy that reflects the hybrid and often contradictory nature of cultural identity among immigrants.

By blending the supernatural with the ordinary, Divakaruni creates a world in which cultural memories, myths, and traditions coexist with contemporary realities, allowing her characters to navigate the complexities of displacement, belonging, and selfhood (Bhatia, 2008). In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist Tilo embodies this synthesis of cultural heritage and magical intervention, using her mystical knowledge of spices to address the emotional and spiritual needs of the Indian diaspora. Each spice represents not only a magical agent but also a cultural signifier, connecting characters to ancestral knowledge, rituals, and values that risk being lost in the process of migration (Rajan, 2010). This fusion of magical realism and cultural symbolism highlights the enduring influence of Indian traditions even within diasporic settings, emphasizing how magical elements can serve as a conduit for preserving and asserting cultural identity.

Divakaruni's use of magical realism also foregrounds the tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation. Her characters often struggle with dual identities, negotiating between the expectations of their adopted societies and the imperatives of their cultural heritage. Magical realism provides a narrative mechanism through which these tensions are rendered visible and interpretable. For instance, Tilo's powers enable her to intervene in the lives of her customers in ways that reconcile their present struggles with their cultural and emotional pasts, thereby bridging the gap between two worlds (Sharma, 2012).

The fantastical dimension of the narrative does not merely entertain; it performs a critical cultural function by foregrounding the significance of tradition, memory, and ancestral wisdom in the construction of diasporic identity. Furthermore, the interplay between magic and reality allows Divakaruni to interrogate social norms and gender expectations, situating her female characters in positions of agency where they can negotiate authority, desire, and morality in culturally resonant ways (Mehta, 2015).

Through magical realism, Divakaruni also explores the transformative potential of cultural identity. By situating Indian myths, rituals, and cosmologies within contemporary diasporic experiences, she demonstrates that identity is not static but fluid, capable of adaptation and reinvention. The magical interventions in her narratives symbolize the latent power of cultural knowledge to heal, empower, and guide individuals in complex social environments. In essence, magical realism in Divakaruni's narrative functions as both a literary strategy and a cultural discourse, enabling a nuanced exploration of the diasporic condition while affirming the resilience and adaptability of Indian cultural identity (Nayar, 2014).

Divakaruni's integration of magical realism with cultural identity not only enriches the narrative texture of her works but also foregrounds the intricate, evolving, and often contested nature of diasporic existence. By interweaving the magical with the real, she illuminates the ways in which cultural memory, tradition, and identity are preserved, transformed, and celebrated in the contemporary diasporic experience. Her narratives, therefore, offer a profound commentary on the interplay between culture, migration, and imagination, establishing her as a key figure in contemporary diasporic literature.

SPICES AS SYMBOLS OF MAGIC AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE NOVEL

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni employs spices not merely as culinary or cultural motifs but as potent symbols of magic and empowerment, intricately linked to the protagonist Tilo's identity and agency. Tilo, a mystical shopkeeper trained in the ancient arts of the spice world, uses these spices as tools to influence the lives of her customers, blending the ordinary with the extraordinary in a quintessentially magical realist narrative (Divakaruni, 1997). Each spice possesses unique attributes and magical properties, reflecting both traditional Indian knowledge systems and metaphysical dimensions of power. For instance, turmeric is associated with purification and protection, while cinnamon symbolizes warmth and attraction, illustrating the way Divakaruni imbues everyday substances with transformative potential. Through Tilo's interactions with these spices, the novel conveys the idea that empowerment is not only physical or social but also spiritual and emotional, anchored in an intimate knowledge of cultural heritage (Desai, 2006).

The symbolism of spices extends beyond individual empowerment to encompass broader themes of cultural continuity and diasporic identity. As Tilo navigates her life in the immigrant community of Oakland, California, the spices serve as a bridge between her Indian roots and the multicultural landscape around her. This bridging is an act of empowerment in itself, highlighting how cultural knowledge and ancestral wisdom can be a source of strength in an alien environment (Prasad, 2003). Moreover, the magical qualities of spices in the narrative often act as catalysts for change, enabling Tilo to subtly guide, heal, or challenge the characters she encounters. This reflects a form of empowerment that is relational rather than overtly authoritative, emphasizing the ethical responsibility that comes with power (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Divakaruni's use of spices as magical instruments also intersects with gendered empowerment. Tilo, as a female protagonist, exercises agency in a world where her authority is derived not from traditional patriarchal structures but from knowledge, intuition, and the mystical qualities of her craft. This inversion challenges conventional gender dynamics, presenting a form of feminine power that is nurturing yet assertive, spiritual yet practical (Lahiri, 2000). The

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spices, therefore, function as extensions of Tilo's will, embodying her capacity to influence outcomes and assert her presence in both mundane and mystical spheres.

Furthermore, the narrative situates the magic of spices within everyday life, making empowerment accessible and grounded in lived experience. Divakaruni's lyrical descriptions render the spices' effects tangible, allowing readers to perceive their symbolic potency while also appreciating their cultural and aesthetic significance. In doing so, the novel celebrates the enduring relevance of traditional knowledge systems while exploring the complexities of identity, agency, and empowerment in the diasporic context (Chakraborty, 2010). Ultimately, *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates that magic, embodied in spices, is inseparable from empowerment, linking the personal, the cultural, and the supernatural in a seamless narrative of transformation and resilience.

II. CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* exemplifies the power of magic realism to merge the fantastical with the ordinary, creating a narrative that reflects both personal and cultural realities. Through the lens of magical realism, Divakaruni transcends the boundaries of conventional storytelling, blending the supernatural with the mundane to reveal deeper truths about human experience, identity, and migration. The protagonist, Tilo, embodies this duality; her magical abilities as a mistress of spices not only serve as a literal representation of mystical powers but also function metaphorically to explore themes of healing, empowerment, and cultural continuity.

The novel situates magic realism not merely as a stylistic device but as an instrument through which complex emotional and social realities, such as alienation, cultural displacement, and the immigrant experience, are articulated (Bhatia, 2008). The spices themselves operate as symbolic conduits that link memory, desire, and identity, embodying the magical in the everyday and illustrating how cultural heritage persists even in diaspora (Rajan, 2010).

Divakaruni's narrative strategy demonstrates that magic realism allows for a layered storytelling approach, where magical interventions illuminate psychological and emotional truths that realistic narratives might fail to capture. Tilo's interactions with customers highlight the interconnectedness of human desires, fears, and cultural obligations, reinforcing the notion that magic realism enables a dialogue between the real and the imagined, the physical and the spiritual (Sharma, 2012). Furthermore, the novel's portrayal of female agency through magical realism is particularly significant; it situates Tilo as a figure who negotiates power within restrictive societal norms, illustrating how magical elements can challenge traditional structures and offer alternative modes of empowerment (Mehta, 2015).

The cultural dimension of magic realism in the novel underscores Divakaruni's commitment to exploring the Indian diasporic experience. By embedding magical elements in the immigrant context, the narrative captures the tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation, highlighting how traditions, beliefs, and myths travel with individuals across geographies (Nayar, 2014). This synthesis of the magical and the real not only enriches the narrative texture but also invites readers to reconsider the possibilities of storytelling, where the fantastical serves as a lens to examine moral, social, and emotional landscapes.

The Mistress of Spices stands as a testament to the efficacy of magic realism in articulating complex intersections of identity, culture, and human experience. Divakaruni's innovative use of magical elements creates a narrative that resonates on multiple levels, offering both aesthetic pleasure and profound insight into the immigrant psyche, gender dynamics, and cultural continuity. Magic realism, in this context, is not merely an ornamental device but a central mechanism through which the novel negotiates reality, myth, and memory, establishing Divakaruni as a significant voice in contemporary diasporic literature (Bhatia, 2008; Rajan, 2010; Sharma, 2012; Mehta, 2015; Nayar, 2014).

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