

Magical Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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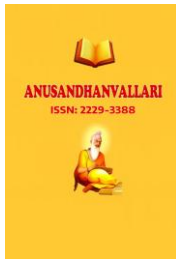
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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is an Indian novelist, who is settled in America. She is a Co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian Women dealing with domestic abuse. Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is distinct in that it blends prose and poetry. Most of Divakaruni's works are autobiographical. Set in the background of Bay area of California, her novel deals with the immigrant experience which is an important theme in today's world. In *The Mistress of Spices* also, she focuses on the problems of the immigrants. Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, is an experiment in magical realism which combines Hindu myths, fables and superstitions with contemporary American social problems including inter-racial tension, ethnic identity, immigrant assimilation, spiritual emptiness in the lives of rich Indian, teenage rebellion, and angst, forbidden inter-racial romances and abusive and broken marriages. The term "Magical realism" was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism as an art category. To him, it was a way of responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In *The Mistress of Spices*, there is the mingling of the reality and fantasy and then the time shifts now and then between distant past of Tilo in a far away distant world and the present modern America where she leads her life as a mistress. Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically magical realism is illustrated in an inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and western and indigenous. It is also seen in *The Mistress of Spices* because Tilo who is born in a remote village in India then lives in Oakland, California. Thus, western and indigenous also come along with that. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing and change. In the novel also, one can see the mixing of the past and the present, and reality and fantasy. One can also see a change in the life of Tilo from the world of fantasy to the world of reality.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Assimilation, Fantasy, Hybridity, Reality

The Mistress of Spices is a splendid novel. It is a beautifully crafted story of dreams, desires, hopes and expectations. It is also a tide of joy and sorrow and one special woman's magical powers. Tilo alias Tilottama a magical figure, is born ugly and unwanted in a small village in India, and is named as Nayan Tara but she is discarded by her family for the sin of being born female. Shortly after birth, it becomes apparent that girl is a special, the girl gifted with extreme supernatural powers. She can see into the distant future with uncanny clarity. True to her name, as she has super-natural powers, she begins to foretell what would happen. Her parents consider her as the burden but she has the power to predict the future and her magical powers and fame begins to spread and bring wealth to her and to parents. Nayantara finds herself swept up in a life of roughish wandering. She has no real home in India, nor does she have one at sea. After a short period with pirates, Nayantara throws herself in after hearing of a magical island of spices. Before that, the old woman gives her warning about the duty of mistress



that she should not feel pity or fall in love with anyone who comes on her way. If she falls in love, then the power will leave her. Tilo in her present life now remembers the rules the Old One who has prescribed her to be the young mistress. First they should not see their faces in the mirror. The store and spices are more important than mistress. They should not touch anyone. They should not go out of the store. They should use the spices for immigrants from India and also not for their own gain. They should remain detached and should not become overly involved with anyone.

After the training in the island, she becomes a mistress of spices and changes her name as Tilo. She decides to use her magical power through the spice shop in Oakland, California as she encounters the various people who come to her for help. Laura Merlin in a review in *World Literature Today* remarks, "Her difficulties arise when she realizes that she must abandon her own wants to maintain the magical power that she craves". (207) Tilo cannot forget Raven as she falls in love with him. So she prefers to be with Raven abandoning the spices without minding the spices' wrath but they forgive her as she has accepted punishment in her heart without batting it. Her body also changes into a normal woman. Thus the entire book is a movement from the world of magic to the world of reality.

The Mistress of Spices is the story of Tilo and how she incorporates her enchanted world into the mundane lives of those who need her help around her. It is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and bent creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, and hungry with desires. It is a modern day fairy tale that throws mysterious elements into an ordinary California town and Divakaruni writes it so magnificently that the magical world seems believable. Just as in fairy tales, the moral of this story is do good and good will come to you. The novel deals with two themes- magical power and immigrant experience.

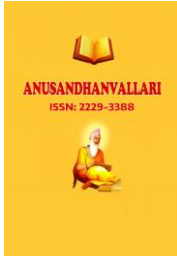
The novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a juxtaposition of the past and the present life of Tilo alias Tilottama. The past life of Tilo reveals the fact that how she was ordained as a mistress of spices by the old one, the first mother who trained her on the island to be a mistress of spices. She says, "Remember, said the Old One, the first mother, when she trained us on the island" you are not important. No mistress is what is important is the store. And the spices" (MS 5).

Her past life is dominated by fantasy and magic. The present life of Tilo is related to her service as a mistress in a spice store in the crooked corner of Esperanza, where Oakland buses stop. There are elements of fantasy and magical power in her present life too but it is dominated by reality as Tilo touches the lives of many people, who come to her shop and for whom, she has to give remedy for their sufferings and sorrows with her chanted spices.

Divakaruni mixes reality and fantasy and the result is enchanting. The novel is cloaked in fantasy and the prologue with its strong poetic overtone convinces us that this is a literature of fantasy. However a strong undercurrent of realism runs at the very beginning of the novel and as the novel progresses, the fantasy element diminishes and the realistic element becomes dominant.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* follows Tilo, a magical figure who runs a grocery store and uses spices to help the customers overcome difficulties. Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. In the process, she develops dilemmas of her own. When she falls in love with a non-Indian, it creates great conflicts as she has to choose whether to serve her people or to follow the path leading to her own happiness. Tilo has to decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will choose to abandon.

Tilo is a woman of wisdom and passion, who knows the origin of spices, their colours and their smells. While working in her spices shop in America, she tries to help each customer by supplying them with the exact



spices that will help them find a way through whatever difficulties they face. Through, those who visit and revisit her shop, she catches glimpses of the life of the local Indian expatriate community. To each, Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice for the restoration of sight. She uses fennel to cool tempers, fenugreek to render the body sweet and kalojare to reduce pain and suffering. But only when a lonely American comes to her store, she is unable to find the correct spice for he arouses in her a forbidden desire. This creates great conflicts as she has to choose whether to serve her people or to follow the path leading to her own happiness. Her powers are unconditional before she falls in love. Tilo asks the spices again and again. She says “spices, trust me, give me a chance in spite of America, in spite of love your Tilo will not let you down”. (MS 152). When she falls in love with a man, the spices vanish from her.

As she encounters various people who come to her for help, she begins to cross the rules and limits of her permitted boundaries. She has a great concern for the welfare of the people. At first Ahuja’s wife, Lalitha, comes to her store with the problem. She is childless. Her longing for child is a deepest desire than any other desire. Tilo thinks that some goodness will be brought to her by the spice Turmeric. So she wraps the turmeric in old newspaper and puts it in Lalitha’s grocery sack. But she does not like her husband as she is married to an abusive, tyrannical man. She also casts inside her dream of setting up her own tailor’s shop because of her husband. So, she decides to leave her home. She writes a letter to Tilo that she is not in her home but in another city with six women in a room. Then Jagjit comes to her store, who is an immigrant boy from Punjab. He knows only Punjabi. The shy, frightened boy transformed to Jag by endless hostility and abuse, he has to bear for his accent and turban. For him, Tilo gives Cinnamon a friend maker.

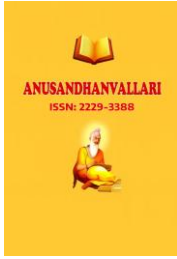
Haroun is a drug addict. He calls Tilo ‘Ladyjaan’. He often comes to her store and is very friendly with her. She gives Chandan to him to apply it in the palm of his hands to relieve the pain of remembering as he is frightened on remembering a war in Srinagar, which he saw in his boyhood. After three months, he comes as a taxi driver. He wants a magic packet to keep in his taxi. Before she gives it to him, the spices leave her and as a result, she knows that something dangerous will happen to him. So after some days, she wants to see him and save him from danger. When she goes there to see him. She remarks:

The vision explodes against my eyelids like fireworks gone wrong. Dark of evening, the car doors swinging crazily open and the glove compartment also, and someone slumped against the steering wheel, is it man or woman? And the curls are they black and sweet shiny as fear, is it a once sunshine mouth, and the skin is it broken, bruised, or only a shadow falling? (MS 31)

Haroun comes bleeding. The doctor comes to his place and saves him. Then she gives a sachet of lotus root in his hand.

The story of Geetha reveals the typical conflict between Indian born parents and their westernized daughter. It is a clash of values and it shows generational conflict. Her grandfather always comes to her shop. Geeta’s parents try to arrange a match for her in India but she wants to marry a Chicagoman, Juan Cordero, Geeta moves out and the family’s conflict is only resolved when Tilo, like a medicine woman, steps in and performs her miracle with the spices. At last, she comes to her father and her grandfather, who love her very much. Like many other characters, Raven also enters into her life. He is an American, who comes to visit her shop. At first she experiences a blade of fire, goes through her, yet she considers it so sweet. She first feels sad and pitiful about the life of Raven. Then she falls in love with him. She begins to call Raven ‘My American’ who is reshaping her because of love, which she did not get from her parents, mistress or the old one. She calls:

My Raven, I think and like any woman in love. I lay my cheek where his hand e rested on the paper Yes. I whisper, yes. Tomorrow will be our pleasure day. Already I can smell the bracing salt air of city, long imagined, feel under my feet the roll of its hills. (MS 197)



She makes use of the spice Makardwaj to make her beautiful for one day. Tilo has sex with Raven on that day. Thus, she breaks the rules of the mistress totally. At last she thinks about all people and makes arrangement to arouse Shampati's fire. She calls Shampati but nothing happens. After that the spices leave her and also her magical power begins to vanish. So, she lies down in the centre of the store and feels unconscious. When her power goes away from her body, her body changes into normal woman. Raven still loves her and calls her 'Maya'. She says, "In the old language it can mean many things illusion, Spell-enchantment the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (MS 338). She thinks about the spices which doesn't punish her. She hears an answer floating down in her ear: "Mistress who was when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also" (325). Thus, she loves Raven and she transfers herself totally from the world of fantasy to the world of reality. Though, Tilo has supernatural powers and is in the magical world, all the other characters like Geetha, Jaggit, Lalitha, etc are portrayed very realistically with heart throbs and pulsating passions. *The Mistress of Spices* is an embodiment of magical realism as it is the mixture of fantasy and reality. Tilo is the mediator of these two polarities as she passes from the world of fantasy to the world of reality.

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