



**MAGIC OF THE SPICES: ELEMENTS OF MAGIC REALISM IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES***

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ABSTRACT

In this present technologically superfast world, where the click of buttons is changing the way people think, plan and execute their works and live their lives, "virtual reality", "surrealism", "hyper reality" are the terms in vogue. They are so commonly used everywhere that they may not seem fanciful any more. However, the excitement in superstitions, magic and mysticism still prevails.

India has always caught the imagination of foreigners as the land of hidden secrets – it is viewed as a "hub of cosmic energy" and emerging super power. The secret of Ayurvedas, the variety and depth in art forms like dance and music are equally attractive as Kamasutra and Yoga. The co-existence of various religions, cultures, languages has always been a source of amazement. The festivities, the rituals and the mythological significances keep the attraction alive. Historically significant monuments, the architecture and the cuisine tops the ranking of our country across the globe.

In such a context the novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), is a delightful read which bombards the senses and tingles the appetite with its exotic use of spices. The spices are not used merely to enhance flavours to explode on the taste buds but play a crucial role in the development of the novel. They lend a magical quality and are a means through which magic realism is used in the novel. Divakaruni effectively deploys magic realism in her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) through her protagonist Tilottama - shortened as Tilo. Tilo is the Mistress of the spices who is endowed with supernatural qualities. She could squeeze out the powerful juices of the spices to cure people from her land- India, and who had migrated to the land of dreams - America.

Divakaruni's greatest asset is her style because she is bestowed with an innate sense of blending reality and imagination, the past and the present, fantasy and beliefs.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Reality and Fantasy, Magic, Mysticism

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, accomplished poet, short – story writer, novelist, teacher, is bracketed among the top ten twentieth century women writers who have a strong foot hold in the

contemporary literary scene. She is known for her strong opinions on issues like male-female discrimination, marginalisation, isolation, economic disparity, female infanticide, mysticism and also

generation conflict which are portrayed sensitively through her women characters especially who have migrated to foreign lands.

Basically a diasporic writer she touches poignantly on the mental trauma which her heroines undergo especially in an alien land. She is a prominent Asian American whose roots were firmly gripped on the Bengali soil till her school days. She slowly branched towards the American soil for her education and it was there that she attained the flowering of her creative genius through sheer hard work, sacrifice and commitment. Some of her experiences and episodes of her struggle are super imposed on her characters which lend authenticity and a touch of reality to the stories. The journey of her characters, their process of evolution is intricately traced- from disillusionment, redundancy and worthlessness. They grapple for their identity and emerge victorious with the attainment of "realisation of their self". Divakaruni's greatest asset is her style because she is bestowed with an innate sense of blending reality and imagination, the past and the present, fantasy and beliefs.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses the character of Tilo to intermingle myth, fantasy and reality. The heightened experience of a mortal (Tilo) attaining the status of a God through the ability to heal and resolve the problems relating to homesickness, disillusionment, culture shock provides the magical quality. The ability to foresee the sufferings and to have the potential to transform the miseries into happiness creates a feeling of awe though with a touch of exaggeration.

The richness and authentic knowledge of Ayurveda comes handy to Divakaruni's rescue. She utilises her know-how on spices and their therapeutic benefits. She offers an insight into the treasure of the India's ancient practise of using herbs, spices and condiments which provide relief from common cold or ward off evil and even resolve complex issues based on relationships, jobs and other securities. Divakaruni through Tilo epitomises such a dimension of that female psyche which showcases that women have an inherent power and potential to heal, to cure, to nurture and to protect. According to *A Handbook of Literary Terms* by M.H.Abrams.

"The term magic realism, originally applied in the 1920s was applied to a school of surrealist German painters, was later used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as the work of writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Isabel Allende in Chile, Gunter Grass in Germany, Italo Calvino in Italy, and John Fowles and Salman Rushdie in England. These writers weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched *realism* in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales." (pg.200)

The latest addition to the list is the Indian Diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni's style and technique sets her a cut above the rest. Her narrative skill provides the readers an opportunity to get into the mind of the character and experience the emotions and feelings. It was Divakaruni's style that took the literary world by storm as she made her debut as a novelist in 1997 with the publication of *The Mistress of Spices* (although she had started writing poems and short stories before her entry into the genre of novel writing and also had an avid readership.)

The use of magic realism can be regarded as one of the greatest elements for her success in this genre of novel writing. Her novel received rave reviews as she fantastically created a world of mystery and reality and transported the readers into the land of mysticism and magic; which is very synonymous with India.

Magic realism, which now is commonly understood as a literary genre (though had its roots in painting) also applied to film and visual arts is an off shoot of Post Modernism. As the name denotes, Magic realism is the intermingling of magic and reality with the use and aid of folk tales, fairytales, fables, mythologies, legends, epics which could belong to one's culture or that which is borrowed from around the world.

A simple example of the use of magic realism is the presence of one character living his/her life beyond a normal life span and is one who lives throughout many generations and

importantly plays a crucial role in the development of the story. In such a situation magic realism is employed through such a character. Another example could be the use of a real event or episode as a backdrop and punctuated with elements of magic and fantasy as employed by Salman Rushdie in his mega successful novel, *Midnight's Children* which earned him Booker of Bookers. Rushdie blends history with mythology with an important political milestone (India's Independence) and some episodes of his personal lives to concoct the magical world which is imaginative yet seemingly real and true, which can be explained as truly the essence of magic realism.

The paper here focuses on the use of magic realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Magic realism is intermingling of reality with fantasy or imagination with the use of folk lore, fables, and mythological stories in such a way which captures the sensation of the audience in spite of knowing the truth. It is done to generate either a feeling of awe or wonder or merely to escape from reality and find some freshness from monotony. The central character Tilottama (shortened as Tilo) born as Nayan Tara, (star of the eye) also means Star-seer was Destiny's child who could foresee the future of her people in some remote village in India. She attracted attention of the pirates who re-christened as Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck and took her away from her parents to use her powers for their glory and fame. They plundered and looted and amassed riches with the powers of Bhagyavati, the sorceress-the pirate queen. She is frustrated when her powers are exploited by the pirates. The sea snakes come to her rescue when she calls on one of the five elements-Water. Then magically they appear and take her away.

She lives with the snakes and it is through them she is comes to know of the "Island of the Spices" (in the Indian Ocean). She longs to reach the forbidden island. The snakes urge her to live with them and become their "Sarp Kanya" (snake maiden) but as destined she goes to the island and becomes the "Mistress of Spices".

The first sentence the novel begins with, strikes the note with the readers

"I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work with the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone.....but the spices are my love" (MOS,3)

A clear indication of the intention of the author to transport the readers to a different world is clearly evident through the character who introduces herself as Tilo, named after the spice of nourishment "Til" - Sesame seed. It is important to note here that the contents of the novel is divided into 15 chapters and each chapter of the novel is named after a spice. The common spices that are used in everyday Indian cooking like "Turmeric", "Cinnamon", "Fenugreek", "Asafoetida", "Fennel", "Ginger", "Peppercorn", "Kalo Jire", "Neem", "Red Chilli", "Makaradwaj", "Lotus Root", "Sesame". The first and the last chapter are named after the character-the first chapter is "Tilo" and the last chapter reads as "Maya". The entire novel is based on the transformation of Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilo to Maya....with the spices acting as the catalysts.

The novel on the superficial front might seem a cuisine book being divided into names of spices, but the magic lies in their use. The mistress of spices (Tilo) controls all the spices, talks to them, manipulates them to heal, to protect, to nourish. She undergoes a purification process at the "island of the spices" under the vigil of a strict "First Mother" who trains her and makes her undergo severe austerity and a life of hardship devoid of basic comforts. She is made to take the vow of celibacy, sacrifice the pleasures of body and ordered to don a body of a haggard, old lady .When she completes her purification process as mentioned in her act of jumping into the "Shampati fire", she indeed takes the readers to a different world. Indians who are aware of mythological stories would know that "Shampati" is the "bird of myth and memory". This is a symbolic reference from mythology to add realism to the magical transformation. Tilo is transported to a Spice Store in Oakland, California selling Indian Spices. With her telepathic powers she gets an insight into the lives of people especially the ethnic minority from her homeland who confront issues of homesickness, belonging, cultural conflict and other feelings relating to the expatriate community. Some of the

important lives she transforms with the power of her spices are in the form of the characters Haroun (the taxi driver) and the young boy Jaggi (Jagjit-conqueror of the world) who unlike his name, ironically is unable to find acceptance in their land of survival/dreams-America. He is considered a misfit and grapples to find a foothold. Tilo tucks the cinnamon stick in Jaggi's turban (which is mandatory for a Punjabi). Cinnamon – "Friend Maker", "Destroyer of enemies", "to give strength" – strength not only to the body, but to the mouth. Jaggit gets the strength needed to make his voice audible against atrocity and bullying against his fellow friends in America. How magical the feeling is created – the expatriates all around the world would want to use Cinnamon!

The woman character whose plight stands out in the novel is Lalita, referred as Ahuja's wife is a representative of majority of those who are helpless in an abusive marriage. Tilo uses the spice "Fennel" as a result she flees from a life of marital rape and violence. At the end of the novel when Tilo receives a letter of gratitude from her she says, ...

"Meanwhile, I will pound almond and *chyavanprash* for mental strength and physical and set it outside the door for the wind to carry to the woman-house where you wait." (pg.273)

Here, the use of one of the five elements of the Earth – Wind energy, again highlights magic realism.

The turning point of the novel is when Tilo instantly takes a liking for Raven whom she calls as "My American". Raven is also simultaneously enamoured by her beauty, is able to look beyond her physical appearance and seem to understand her magical powers instantly. He confides his own story to Tilo and feels that she could help him unleash the secret power which he was supposed to inherit but failed to do so. This fact adds a mystical quality to Raven's characterisation as well. Tilo is torn between desire and duty for the mistress should live only for others and not indulge in any worldly pleasures.

Tilo is so overpowered by her attraction for Raven that she uses the spice "Makaradwaj" - "The King of Spices", "The Conquer of Time", to transform herself into a beautiful maiden, to experience her

hidden desire which ultimately is the sexual union of two lovelorn souls. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has best utilised magic realism here when like Cinderella, Tilo transforms herself for a night from an old haggard woman into a voluptuous, mystical, heavenly "apsara" in a white foam like dress (which the American had gifted her), fluidly flowing her waist line emitting floral fragrance and Raven could not believe his eyes and could only say, "I had not dared to dream such beauty. I do not dare to touch it." (pg.280).

The effect of the transformation was heavenly and magical!

Another dramatic turn of event which can be mentioned is when Tilo tries to jump into the Shampati's Fire after her supposedly defilement of her body (similar to the idea of Sita in Ramayana, who undergoes purification through "Agni Pariksha") she finds herself in Raven's lap. The Spices seem to have forgiven her and allowed her to live a life of her own. She finally finds herself a name "Maya" which is suggested by Raven. "Maya" itself means illusion, spell, and enchantment. Maya is magic and magic realism personified!

The magic, the mysticism and the mystery of the spices finally found its audience in the world of cinema. *The Mistress of Spices* was made into a movie of the same name in 2005. Directed by Paul Mayeda Berges with Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai Bacchan and Hollywood actor Dylan McDermott in the lead, the movie did not receive much audience. The novel on the other hand received rave reviews due to the sheer poetry and beauty of words.

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