

**MAGIC REALISM AND SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SPICES IN THE
MISTRESS OF SPICES BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S**

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a world-acclaimed author, born in Calcutta, who published literary works of various genres with poems, novels and short stories paving new ways for understanding of humanistic issues of the world. Divakaruni has attracted readers' attention with her poetry and fiction dealing with problems of Indian emigrants. The paper is a study on *The Mistress of Species*, a fantasy novel short-listed for the Orange Prize. This charming and compelling read won readership with its magical realism and omnipresent sensuality.

Keywords: Magic realism, spices, symbolism, Healing, cultural identity, Diaspora literature, and Desires.

'Diaspora' is a Greek word for 'Scattering' refers to the dispersion of people from their homeland. A simple and a very common definition of the term Diasporic Writing can be explained in a way that a group of people who come from a particular nation in order to establish their own identity and struggle to live in other parts of the world. Thus the word 'Diaspora' was presented by various women writers who have contributed to the progress of the English Literature and presented their own themes representing in the form of exile, migration, alienation and cultural identity and ethnicity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award winning author and poet. She is one of the dominant Indian American writers whose works regularly appear in many magazines and anthologies. She was born in 1957 in Calcutta, India. One of her first memories is that of her grandfather telling her stories from Ramayan and Mahabharat, ancient Indian epics. Divakaruni was raised as and still is a devout Hindu. She attended a convent school in India run by Irish nuns during her childhood. She went on to earn a Bachelor's degree from the University of Calcutta. In 1976, at the age of 19, Divakaruni immigrated to the United States. She continued her education in the U.S by earning a Master degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton,

Ohio, and a Ph. D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

Divakaruni's books, which are set in both India and America, "feature Indian-born women torn between old and new world values. She gives laser-like insight and skilled use of story, plot, and lyrical description to give readers a many-layered look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope and discovery" (21). Most of her work is partially autobiographical and based on the lives of Indian immigrants she has dealt with. She says that she writes to help unite people by breaking down old stereotypes.

Before she began her career in fiction-writing, Divakaruni was an acclaimed poet. She writes poems encompassing a wide variety of themes, and she once again directs much focus to the immigrant experience and to South Asian women. She shows the experiences and struggles involved in women trying to find their own identities. Her first works were books of poetry, *Dark like the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990) and *Black Candle* (1991). She still was not very well-known for these works. Divakaruni then decided she would like to write prose so she enrolled in a fiction writing class. In 1995 Divakaruni published *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories. In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni beautifully tells stories about immigrant brides who are "both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own" (Patel 16).

The Mistress of Spices is full of people negotiating the immigrant experience, and Divakaruni skillfully builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community (Merlin). The main character and narrator of the novel, Tilottama (Tilo) is originally born in India, then trained to be a mistress of spices by a mystical teacher who resides on a magical island, and eventually sent to look over a spice shop in Oakland, California.

In the book, *On the Outside Looking Indian: Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*, Phillipa Kafka credits Divakaruni as one of the diasporic authors who write eloquently on the issues that arise either for them or for their characters in the West. Kafka tracks the development of Tilo and observes that when the young Tilo meets with the sea serpents, they do not want her to leave them: "They predict that if she does not remain with them, everything she possesses – the ability to see, to speak, her name, even her identity will be lost" (158). Such exploration of identity persists

throughout the novel. Kafka recognizes those struggles and explores them on level of self, sexuality, and relationships with others. By superimposing the issues of individuals in diaspora onto a backdrop of a well-known Indian myth, Divakaruni succeeds in telling a beautifully rich, complex story that resonates.

In the article “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor’s *Mama Day*”, Susana Vega-González discusses the kind of magic realism to which Rajan was referring, but calls it instead ‘ethnic magic realism’ in order to specially qualify it as work done by diasporic women authors who “pay tribute to their ancestors and their childhood cultures”(10). Vega-González describes the novel as one which delves into a “world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence” (2). Those opposites along with the concept of boundaries are explored throughout the novel, Vega-González asserts, and are indicative of a “dual selfhood”. Vega-González discusses spices, and naming, and other elements of the novel as ways in which the ‘ethnic magic realism’ ultimately provides Tilo an opportunity for resolution.

Not everyone agrees that *The Mistress of Spices* actually contests exoticizing, however, in her book about “feminisms, diasporas, and neoliberalisms in a framework of social and cultural theory” Inderpal Grewal presents a chapter titled “Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora.” The chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the role of diasporic literature in cosmopolitan American society, and is focused on three Indian English novels: *An Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh; *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee; and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Early in the chapter, Grewal asserts that Divakaruni’s novel “participated in this transnational circulation of knowledge of Asian women, but it did so to exoticize and romanticize the notion of tradition” (39).

Magical Realism

Magic and imaginary worlds are very important in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s fiction. Magic, myth and fantasy form an integral part of some of her works where she spins a web of magic with her words and imagination which lulls the readers into a realm of fantasy. Her writing collapses “the division between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic” in her “attempt to create a modern fable” (25).

Divakaruni’s magical –realist novel “*The Mistress of Spices*” combines

ancient Hindu mythology. Religious superstitions and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American socio-cultural concerns of the 1990s. The allegorical fable and fantasy depicts the magical powers of a clairvoyant woman of Indian ancestry. Tilottama named after sesame seeds, the ‘spice of nourishment’ runs an Indian grocery store, spice Bazaar. She has psychic abilities, which help her treat her multigenerational shopper’s physical, emotional, and even spiritual illnesses. Tilo is conscious of her own influence and even claims near- divine powers: “I who can make it all happen, green cards and promotions and girls with lotus eyes” (28). She is the architect of Indianimmigrant dream.

Magic realism unearths the magic present in reality. Magic is given a vestige of normality, while the real world is de-familiarized, expanded, and transformed to bring together elements which are mutually contradictory like life and death, walking and dreaming, civilized and wild, male and female, and mind and body. The boundaries of realism are extended in order to accommodate a fuller vision of reality. Magic realism is however set in the real world unlike the genre of fantasy which is set in an unreal imaginary or magical world brought to life by the creative genius of the writer. *The Mistress of Spices* belongs to a genre portraying the eternal struggle of a human mind to balance between individual desires and common good. It reminds us that magicalpowers come with regulations as to their usage and the violation of these rules might result in disasters. The penalty of breaking these rules is only one: the Mistress has to enter the fire to annihilate herself. The Sea Serpents that had saved her from the storm had anticipated what formher life would take after becoming Mistress of Spices. They foretell the following about her futurelife when they discover that she was determined to becomea Mistress. She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps self.

Nayan Tara is one of lucky few who is accepted by the Old One, a grand, ancient figurewho rules over the island, commands its victuals instructs her maidens, and regulates the influx of new apprentices. She also has mandate over the departure of these apprentices, who after fielding a vision, select a destination. They can pass through a cleansing, flame Shampati’s fire, to the location where they will set up a heaven, a store, from which they will bestow their learned yet magical gift of physical and spiritual healing both through the sale and complementary distribution of spices. However, before they depart, each apprentice must choose a name, one rich in meaning and apt in its appropriateness. This is not only symbolic of their new identity

as mistresses, but in case of the protagonist, a new identity in the new world. In choosing her new name Tilottama, Nayan Tara incites both upbraiding and gentle laughter in the Old One, “It is certainly not confidence you lack, girl. To take on the name of most beautiful apsara of Rain God Indra’s court” (42). Tilo herself is quite homely. The Old One is not without misgivings, even though she permits the name for her most prized pupil. The serpents, the island, the Old One, the fire of shampati create a surreal world, in which is born Tilottama, the Mistress of Spices who is able to solve the problems of her customers miraculously with the help of the spices which they come to buy from her shop.

In order to portray magic realism, Divakaruni created a character like Tilo who is born in India. She defeats the pirate captain to become a pirate queen and after that she lives on the spice island where she is educated in the art of controlling and listening to the spices. This remote island is a place of protection for these women, who call themselves the Mistress of Spices and are beneath the concern of the First Mother, the wisest and the eldest teacher. After receiving the skills of the art, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a small Indian spice shop Spice Bazaar where she must begin her task of curing the masses. The first rule is to survive a life of a bachelor and never to yield to carnal desires; secondly, not to leave her place, thirdly, if she does not pursue these rules there is no effect of spices on people. So, she is warned by the Old One not to fall in love with anyone. She should be virtuous, sincere, and pure while applying the magic of the spices or she will lose her power over all her spices.

Tilo believes that spices hold the secret power to grant us whatever we desire most in life. This is how she talks about her unique ability to interact with species: “I am a Mistress of Spices. I know their origins and what their colours signify, and their smells...At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magical powers” (3). Tilo says that most of us are unaware of the other side of these common spices used in cooking and other household activities. She claims that they have the power to revolutionize the life we live, but this can be accomplished only by a person who has the ability to tap their potential to the fullest. Tilo identifies herself as the Mistress of this secret power. She is a person with a number of identities.

Tilo reminisces her past life and ponders over whether the existence we lead is at all objective and real. She finds her past confusing and conflicting. Nayan Tara and Bhagyavati, an integral part of her own past, seem to be of some other life

time. Speaking about this quest for identity, she says, “sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all we encounter has already been changed by what we imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being” (16).

Divakaruni’s magic realism is to bridge the gap between present and past state of affairs. Tilo with her magical powers becomes the owner of the spice shop where she is a master of all spices and speaks to them as characters to resolve the troubles of the people of the real world with the assistance of magic: I am turmeric who rose out of ocean of milk when devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between. Yes, I whisper, swaying to its rhythm. Yes. You are turmeric, shield for heart’s sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth. Together we sing this song, as we have many times (13).

Tilo’s customers include people from all casts and creed; A man comes in her life, an American who always look at her old frame and frail body, as if looking for someone he knows to be inside her but cannot see. And Tilo falls in love with him, against reason and warnings of her mind. Raven is lonely and occasionally comes to the spice shop. Tilo is unable to read or solve his problem as he arouses in her the forbidden desire for love. As the novel progresses, Tilo starts falling in love with him. Raven is also drawn towards her for her oriental, antique and mysterious appearance. He figures out that neither the body, nor the person whom he sees are the real Tilo. He confides in her, about how his own grandfather wanted to give him a very powerful legacy of magic which took the form of a raven. He had ardently believed that it would lead him to the earthly paradise of which he had dreamt of, but his mother had prevented him from accepting the legacy. Tilo’s proximity gives him the hope that one day he would finally discover the whereabouts of the earthly paradise of which he had always dreamt of. Tilo goes out on a pleasure trip for one day with Raven thought it would condemn her for a life time suffering. Tilo can’t help breaking the rules. The old one comes to warn her that she must return to the island now and take her penalty. But, Tilo breaks the final rule. She takes on a beautiful body like the ‘Apsaras’ or the celestial damsels with the help of spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her body and soul at least once in her lifetime, “By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at the beauty’s summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone” (263). She uses the spices to become a young and exotically beautiful woman to spend one night with

Raven. When driven by the intense emotions of her heart she is not able to restrain herself within the bounds, so much so, that when she ultimately finds love, she is ready to walk through fire for it. She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven's love.

A terrible earthquake strikes as she is waiting for the fire of shampati to blaze and take her back to the island of spices. Amidst the huge destruction, Raven manages to trace her and take her with him. Tilo wonders why the spices had not punished her. She dismisses Raven's offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. She argues that we as human beings have the power of recreating earthly paradise in our lives through our constructive actions. The novel ends with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She gives herself the name Maya which has a number of connotations like illusion, spell and enchantment.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-born American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene Mc David Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, won an American Book Award in 1996. Two of her novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, as well as a short story "The Word Love" were adapted into films.

The novel is mainly all about describing the healing power of the spices with regard to magic. In the beginning of the story Tilo describes silky yellow powder turmeric. One of the world's oldest holistic healing systems is Ayurveda. It is based on the belief that health and wellness depend on a delicate balance between the mind, body, and spirit. Tilo three basic rules: help her clients to accomplish their desires with the spices, but never hers; never leave the store; and never be touched in the skin. Tilo breaks the rule of the mistress and used the spice for her own benefit, She ate it, and it makes her look younger.

When she falls in love with Raven she was no more aware of the consequences. She used the spices another time for herself and this time requests the king of spices Makaradwaj to make her the most beautiful woman in the world. But the spice remains silent because she ignored and humiliate the island rules. Then it laughs and warns her as: "Do you desire it more than you desired us on the island, that

day when you would have thrown yourself off the granite cliffs had the First Mother said no” (261).

Unfortunately the most important law of the spice island is when the mistress committee any forbidden act the spices act against the beneficial persons. As a result all the visitors of the spice store get into trouble. Jagit the school boy, Lalitha typical Indian women and Geetha and other people facing the problem because of Tilo's magic failure. When Lalita wrote a letter to Tilo about her problems, Tilo requests all the spices to help her. She said, “will pound almond and chyavanprash for mental strength and physical and set it outside the door for the wind to carry to the women house where you wait” (273). Finally, after consoling the spices and First mother, she got a new life and named herself as Maya. “In the old language it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day” (317).

Doug comes searching for her, and finds the store devastated. But Tilo has not been burned after all; she is still there, alive and barely conscious. There is no sign of a fire, but there has been an earthquake. We see a vision of the First Mother sitting at the beach, telling her that because she demonstrated her willingness to give up everything for the Spices, now she can have everything she desires and the Spices will never desert her again. Doug agrees to help her rebuild the store, and she happily reunites with him as they walk along the beach holding hands; their blossoming romantic relationship as strong and pure as ever.

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