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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(4), 2955-2959; 2021

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

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APA Citation:

Rani Revathi, R., & Sivakumar, K. (2021). Rudiments of Magical Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 2955-2959

Submission Date: 11/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 25/12/2021

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the components of magical realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). The work is a fusion of magical realism and old Indian legend, evocative of Latin and South American greats. She creates a link between the purely practical and the magical worlds. The realistic section of her story captures the ambiance of current metropolitan American life, providing a glimpse into the multicultural world of immigrants who suffer and struggle in the diasporic society. The ancient myths are transformed and reframed in the new culture, but the host society's current myths are both seductive and troublesome. Divakaruni succeeds in delivering a powerful feminist message owing to her novel's approach of magical realism, which appears to be her novel's defining trait, challenging conventional conceptions of reality.

Keywords: *Magic Realism, Culture, Fantasy, Myth, History.*

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

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is unanimously regarded as one of South Asia's most profound writers. Her nearly two-decade literary career has been marked by persistent exploration with various literary styles. Her works are a masterful synthesis of realism, fantasy, and magical realism that sheds new light on how stereotypical portrayals of the East have been modified and habituated over time, both in literature and in daily life. She admits to utilising magical realism as a means of 'bridging boundaries' and empowering oppressed voices within the global context of diaspora and the Indian community in America.

Divakaruni's most acclaimed novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, examines how the ordinary reality of existence, which is comprised of magic and myth, the holy and profane, might be ameliorated and changed into an alternate reality in order to effect constructive societal change. Similarly, Brenda Cooper demonstrates in *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* that the concept of hybridity is a "fundamental aspect of magical realist writing" (32), connected to the concepts of transition, change, crossing and dissolving borders, and ambiguity prevalent in her fiction. As Gita Rajan, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*: Deploying Mystical Realism," puts it.

In fact, by subtly modifying the genre, by not obeying the rules in their entirety, Divakaruni does precisely what magic realism was intended to do - challenge imperial structures of order, even if they belong to the very genre she is using. (217)

Divakaruni embodies Hindu mysticism through the character of Tilo, who metaphorically connects the spices to Hindu ideas of cyclic creation, preservation, and destruction. Tilo, the fabled heroine and mistress of spices, is taught in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress endowed with a magical and secret power of spices. She employs them as a treatment to treat the illnesses of her clientele, the majority of whom are first- and second-generation immigrants. Each client is a displaced immigrant who is attempting to integrate into the societies in which he or she is currently residing.

Divakaruni handles the psychological demands and everyday concerns of her disempowered characters by bringing the mystical power of spices into action, enabling them to live happily in their new home. Tilo's struggle is emblematic of those other difficulties, and the metaphor's development through the use of magical realism demonstrates the 'different' of a female writer. Tilo is to run a Spice Store in Oakland once she acquires the special powers, which on the one hand represents the locus of femininity, a liminal space where new identities are nurtured and reconstructed through a process of learning magic, while on the other hand enfeebling women through the creation of new personas, implying that the past has been entrusted to memory, or that it should be forgotten in order to homogenise the new self in a new place. Ironically, "Spice Bazaar" is a site where a few everyday goals and expectations are met, yet daily failures frequently result in pessimism and despair. This inequitable juxtaposition of the possible and the real provides the novel's ultimate meaning. She firmly declares in the shop that she "will be Tilottama, the essence of til, the life giver, restorer of health and hope" (42) thereby endowing herself with the authority to engineer immigrant fantasies.

Even as she romanticises the past and exoticizes the present through the involvement of female South Asian sensibility and mythology, Divakaruni deftly combines the pleasant aspects of magical realism with the feminist politics required for female emancipation from patriarchy. In this regard, she is successful in manipulating the stream of consciousness approach through the use of various language phrases, such as question tags, punctuation marks, and sayings. Thus, Divakaruni attempts to illustrate in *The Mistress of Spices*, using the technique of stream of consciousness, that a person who works for the welfare of others and attempts to resolve their issues selflessly would always be blessed.

Divakaruni succeeds in imparting a strong feminist tone mostly because to her novels' approach of magical realism, which challenges conventional notions of reality. The central figure on the isolated island in *The Mistress of Spices* is referred to as The First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher, an elderly woman who suggests that women should be confined to a domestic sphere, silencing "her mistresses" by confining them in a semi-domestic space rather than empowering them to be self-sufficient and self-determined. Tilo, along with other island girls, is taught by the First Mother about the Spices, which are later to be used to cure other people's ailments when delivered with magical chants. Although the island is gendered female, it disempowers women by barring them from crossing the pre-drawn line without risking harsh punishment. Ironically, Tilo does not oppose a phallogocentric order, as does The First Mother, who upholds the ancient concept in "Indianhood" and the notion that women should serve their husbands and families.

Divakaruni situates her novel inside the framework of magical realism in order to signify new houses and the metamorphosis of fractured gendered identities. Her magical role as a mistress serves as a motif through which contradictory worlds, ideas, people, and emotions collide. She uses magical locations, such as the store and the island, to reassert and reinterpret human capabilities and communication within a third space that allows for the renegotiation of individual hybrid and migratory identities. Divakaruni employs magical realism to endow her female protagonist with toughness, strength, and power, but also depicting how individuals may be exploited and how the diversity of realities can become perplexing. As a result of this multiplicity, Tilo is compelled to

oscillate between her own life and the lives of her customers. Ultimately, she positions herself as an immigrant in a foreign society who does not need to fully integrate but rather reinvents herself.

By employing magical realism, Divakaruni delves into the significance of fantasy, mythology, and language, as well as the capacity of storytelling to negotiate the feminine autonomy, identity, and cultural boundaries inherent in the politics of representation itself, in what André Brink refers to as "stories of history" ("Interrogating Silence," 21), a total reimagining of the human experience that does not stem from an attempt to solve a mystery, but rather serves to dissent. The narrative introduces readers to a diverse cast of individuals that interact with Tilo, the Mistress of Spices. Tilo and the other female characters challenge the pre-established and constrained sexual boundaries that define the role of Indian women specifically. Through the image of Tilo, Divakaruni attempts to highlight the entwined oppressive repercussions of gender, race, and social class expressed by neo-colonial influences such as globalisation and transnationalism. The work eloquently demonstrates the difficulties faced by first- and second-generation Indian migrants in America by providing details about their daily lives.

There is a continuous criticism levelled against wealthy Indians, for example: "the rich Indians rarely speak, as if too much money has clogged their throats" (75). They appear to undervalue the shop as a connection to their homeland, purchasing mainly pricey products that contrast with their everyday lives and troubles, which Tilo readily acknowledges as soon as they enter the shop, "rich woman I thank you for reminding me. Beneath the shiniest armour, gold-plated or diamond, the beat of the vulnerable flesh" (77).

Divakaruni employs magical realism to illuminate racism in America, and the mystique of spices, which are predominantly connected with India, acts as a motif for the country's colonial past. Thus, the magical properties of the spices become forms of alternate realism that Tilo weaves together with her personal experiences and the spices' medical virtues, implying that she, too, requires their assistance in reconciling with her past. The everyday event or object endowed with magic that plays a critical role in magical realism narratives.

When Tilo addresses spices in the shop's secret section, she manipulates them within the domain of magic. The narrative manipulates both the mystical and real registers concurrently. In the opening pages, she asserts, "I am a Mistress of Spices ... I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at first when the earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky" (11). Tilo's mystical instinct stems from her feeling that her spices are magnificent, endowed with remarkable abilities. Tilo first believes that Mrs. Ahuja can be rescued if she offers her freshly ground turmeric, which acts as a shield against heartache, anoints against death, and provides hope for rebirth. Later, she hands her a tightly wrapped packet of fennel to help with digestion and to give her mental stamina for the task at hand, along with a copy of India Currents magazine, which has the phone number for a shelter for abused women.

At the conclusion of the novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, we come across a letter sent by Lalita to Tilo after she has walked out of the terrifying marriage with a firm belief in herself: "I tell myself; I deserve dignity. I deserve happiness" (272).

Divakaruni creates ambiguity by using spices as a double metaphor: on the one hand, they represent India and the ability of Tilo to assist people, a sort of mystic power associated with the Orient; on the other hand, they operate as static mythological spices. The spices are too stubborn to change themselves; instead, they obstruct her path with impediments, forcing her to transform herself. Her submissiveness leads her to imagine that spices perform a similar role mythically when doing therapy on troubled people. In a way, they serve as a mentor, obliging her to adhere to The First Mother's ethical and spiritual guidelines. The narrative expresses the fundamental theme of the need to dissolve the barriers between worlds through the metaphor of spices, with the goal of demonstrating that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about.

The Mistress of Spices demonstrates an uncommon interest in the subjects of taste, flavour, spices, and sensuality in order to create opposing locations and identities that may provide complementary insights on Indianness in the context of Western ideals and traditions. As a result, there is a strong connection between food, particularly spices, gender, novel ethnicity, cultural identities, and the ability of food to form alternate networks across disparate realities. The spices play a critical role in the telling of the events, as they are used to bring people's history to light and to convey their concepts of homeland and magical powers with the reader.

Divakaruni describes her characters as preoccupied individuals who demonstrate their originality by accepting American life without jeopardising their Indian background and negotiating their identities between cultures, histories, and traditions. Tilo encapsulates the concept of a new Indian woman in a postcolonial setting, a created identity that seeks to integrate the traditional and modern in a diasporic sphere and, to some extent, transcend the actual problems experienced by women in current countries. Her transformation from a sexless and mythic old woman to a mortal woman contrast with the idea of women as timekeepers and responsible for the observance of rituals that have conferred a sense of religiosity on women's bodies in culturally specific ways, as evidenced by the First Mother, who embodies this concept of a sacred female figure.

Tilo became the quintessential boundary-breaker, travelling between eras and worlds and the societies who inhabit them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and lastly a trial by earth-burial, emerging transformed each time with a new name and identity. Thus, the writer creates the hypnotic magical realist effect by drawing on fables, folktales, and myth while firmly anchoring the work in current culture. Thus, Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a replete with supernatural allusions that build magical realist labyrinths just to usher in the clear light of alternate, alternative worlds.

At this juncture, it is worth noting what Divakaruni accomplished in critically shaping the gender-determined ethos through magical realism. By compulsorily resorting to magical realism in creating her protagonist as a metaphor, she shatters stereotyped portrayals of women. Wendy Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* offers a key contribution to recognising women writers' proclivity for magical realism - both as a narrative technique and as a literary genre - in this context. Because women "have felt like a colony" (176), they naturally identify with postcolonial writers in their shared effort to use magical realism in order to fashion a way out of their colonised situation. Faris argues that for both women and postcolonial writers, magic realism serves as a vehicle for challenging realism's hegemony over representation. Faris continues by identifying narrative defocalization as a hallmark of magical realism that contributes to the dissolution of the authority of "strictly mimetic realism" (177). Faris contends that the female-subaltern voice demonstrates a desire for community over individuality, polyvocality, and a proclivity to conflate distinct domains. Eventually, Faris finds a "female strain of magical realism that is grounded in domestic and curative magic" (196). Notably, all of the characteristics listed above are present in *The Mistress of Spices*.

2. Conclusion

To sum-up, Divakaruni expanded her subject matter beyond the Indian-American community to include three other ethnic groups living in the inner city - Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans - and, finally, she attempted to combine poetry and prose to create a lyrical idiom appropriate to the genre of magical realism. Her approaches aid in the dispersal of borders, demonstrate polyvocality, effect societal transformation, and offer an ear to the earth mother's voice or characterise the dynamic feminine spirit in magical realism.

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