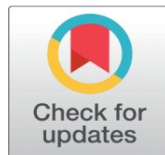
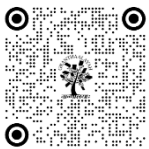


MAGICAL REALISM IN CHITHRA BANNERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explains magical realism and traces its origin in this paper. In Divakaruni's novels, the opposites co-exist but instead of contradicting, they only complement one another. Her vivid and engaging style strongly supports the character development of the protagonists. The coexistence of magical fantasy and the characteristics of hybrid culture with postcolonial or postmodern novelistic devices in her novels and short stories has often led the author to define her writing approach as magical realism.

In *Mistress of Spices*, Tilo plays many roles and keeps on changing her names to befit her roles. This universalizes the complex problem of identity crisis that the Indians try to cope up with, in a foreign land. She has been changing her name from NayanTara as a daughter to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates, then to Tilo, and finally Maya when she finds her love. The name Maya is very interesting to note since it means illusion. One can pause and ask whether Maya is real or another illusion created by the author to enhance the magical suspense in the novel or whether it is the newly found identity of Tilo. The name is noteworthy since the novel has magical elements. The name "Maya" reinforces the theme.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Identity Crisis, Hybrid Culture, Metamorphosis, Supernatural

1. INTRODUCTION

The Google defines Magical realism portrays fantastical events in an otherwise realistic tone it brings fables, folk tales, and myths into contemporary social relevance. Fantasy traits given to characters, such as levitation, telepathy, and telekinesis, help encompass modern political realities that can be phantasmagorical. Matthew Stretcher defines magic realism as something that happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. Magical realism is often associated with Latin American literature, particularly with the authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. It is a literary trend in postmodernism, in which magical elements are introduced into a realistic atmosphere with a view to have a deeper understanding of reality. These magical elements are explained and accepted like normal occurrences, and are presented in a straight forward and matter-of-fact manner. The term magical realism was first used in 1925 by the German art critic, Franz Roh to refer to a new style in painting known as

Neue Sachlichkeit or New Objectivity. The term magic realism was first applied to literature in the 1940s by the Cuban novelists. Magical realism portrays fantastical events in a realistic tone. It makes folk tales and myths of contemporary social relevance. Writers don't invent new worlds but reveal the magical elements existing in this world. In the binary world of magical realism, the supernatural realm blends with the natural, familiar world. The narrator is indifferent. He does not explain the fantastic events; the story proceeds with a logical precision as if nothing extraordinary took place. Magical events are presented as ordinary occurrences; therefore a reader accepts the marvelous as normal and common. The reader would also consequently disregard the supernatural as false testimony.

Magic realism defines as a technique portraying magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment. The plots in magical realistic novels characteristically employ hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in juxtaposed arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, western and indigenous, and so on. Overall, they establish a more profound and genuine reality than conventional realistic techniques. Many renowned writers have employed this technique in their works. Chitralekha Banerjee Divakaruni is one among them.

The Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a cofounder and the former President of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Divakaruni serves on its advisory board and on the advisory board of a similar organisation in Houston called Daya. She also serves on the emeritus board of Pratham Houston, a non-profit organization, working to bring literacy to the underprivileged Indian children. She volunteers for an Indo- American Charity Organization, a non-profit unit which raises money to assist various charities in the Houston area.

Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and fantasy. Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* is replete with magical realism. It was released as a film of the same name in 2005. It was directed by Paul Mayeda Berges. The film starred Aishwarya Rai who played the character of Tilo and Dylan McDermott who played the character of Raven.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself is a magician capable of keeping the readers under the spell of her words and the reader is transported to a world of her creation. Chitra Divakaruni's, literary genius and her importance for posterity is largely due to her love for the Indian heritage and the issues pertaining to (South Asian) women living in a new environment. She herself being an expatriate writer, draws upon incidents based on her own experiences. Divakaruni's literature represents a daring yet smooth and spontaneous interaction between the various worlds and the ways of existence. In Divakaruni's novels, the opposites co-exist but instead of contradicting, they only complement one another. Her vivid and engaging style strongly

supports the character development of the protagonists. The coexistence of "magical fantasy" and the characteristics of hybrid, postcolonial or postmodern novelistic devices in her novels and short stories have often led the author to define her approach as magical realism.

Circumstances are never very easy in any of Divakaruni's novels or stories. At Google talk in February 2010, as well as during an interview conducted in July 2010 she opined that at times of panic and disasters, we need to be aware that we are a community. Our concern for others and not just for ourselves should guide us, and she suggested "We want to survive, but not at the cost of losing our humanity" (At Google talk). Chitra Divakaruni has patiently constructed such a worldview through many years of observations, together with the remembrance of traditional ethics that she received from her Bengali community and family; she often mentions the influence of her grandfather's storytelling as the strongest stimulus for the reactivation of her own memories, through her own literature. She brings together her scholarship and high literary standards, in order to generously offer her own wisdom and compassion in her writings. In all her works, her understanding of the past is intrinsically connected to the future on this earth.

The Mistress of Spices ventures into the unfathomable world of magic and daily experiences of the characters. By blending the unreal world with the normal lives, Divakaruni is able to cross the boundary of reality. In India, it is natural for the people to believe in one's mothers or grandmothers' folklore and stories. The protagonist of the novel is Tilo, shortened form of Tilottama, named after the name of a spice called til. Originally she is called Nayantara, meaning star of the eye. Ironically, contrast to her name, she is not a darling to her parents. Instead, she is looked at as a burden. According to them, a girl child could only mean dowry debts for the family. Being an unwelcomed child, she is fed with the milk of white ass.

Nayantara also means a flower that grows by the dust road. Truly, the child is a treasure that is neglected and not brought up properly. Another meaning of the name Nayantara is the starseer. Symbolically, this indicates the prowess of the child to be able to predict future. As a child, she is able to foresee future and foretell the occurrence of natural calamities.

Tilo's blessing with her magical power becomes a curse in due course of time since she is abducted by the pirates. After being captured by the pirates, she ultimately becomes the Queen of pirates. She is then named as Baghyavathi, meaning the one who brings good fortune. This is one typical quality of Tilo, she always tries to transform the situation, however worse it may be to her own favor. She never gives up in life. After escaping from the pirates, she lands up in an island which was destined for her. There, she becomes the mistress of spices under the guidance of the Old One. One can see the transformation of Tilo from the beginning of the novel and it continues till the very end.

After being chosen as an apprentice by the Old One, the protagonist makes the request that she be addressed Tilo. She tries to justify her choice of the name Tilo by drawing a comparison to the Til or sesame seed which restores health, hope, and gives a new lease of life to people suffering from several incurable diseases. But the Old One also reminds her that Tilo is the short form for Tilottama who was the most elegant of the dancers in Lord Indra's court.

Indra is regarded as the King of gods in Hinduism. Tilottama was cautioned by Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe according to Hindu mythology, that she would be condemned to seven lives of illness, disfigurement and leprosy if she falls in love with a human being. Tilottama disregarded the words of caution of Brahma and fell to the earth for her misdeeds and had to suffer greatly for it. The Old One reminds Tilo to think about Tilottama's fate if ever she is led by her overconfidence and arrogance to go against the norms set for a Mistress of spices. Just as the mythical Tilottama broke the promise made to Lord Indra, Tilo breaks the promise made to the Old One. The Old One's gift of a knife to Tilo while leaving the island is an indication of the narrow and dangerous path she has to tread for being a Mistress of spices. It is an indication that her journey is not going to be an easy one.

Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. After the completion of training, each of the mistresses has to go through the Sampath fire and choose the country they want to go. Once they take over the "Mistress-body" [59] they transform into old lady. There are certain codes of rules to be followed by all the mistresses which Tilo ultimately breaks during the course of her transformation. For Tilo, breaking the rules is significant in order to define her identity.

Tilo is the voice of today's generation exploring one's inner desire and trying to break the boundary that divides the world into different segments. The SPICE BAZAAR, where Tilo sells the spices covers the whole Indian community, of Oakland. One sees myriad faces belonging to different sections of the society and various parts of India as well as other minorities. She bridges the gap between these communities and acts as a synthesizer in the new environment. Tilo's preoccupation with the spices is soon replaced by Raven, the Native American. Her love is not platonic any more. She keeps on waiting for him in the store. She gets engrossed in his thoughts. Making love with Raven brings in Tilo a symbolic change making her more human rather than supernatural.

The fantasy and the reality in the novel complement each other rather than separating them. The Old One is a conjure woman and can study the innermost mind of people. In the island, she trains the young women to become the Mistress of Spices and helps the Indians, living away from their homeland. Tilo tries to bridge the gap between two different cultures and she is the only one to help the immigrants to come in term with their lives. The Indians living in America have to assimilate themselves with the new environment in order to survive. Divakaruni represents the women characters, who evolve their identities many a time in order to arrive at a final identity, which redefines their self. The physical and the psychological changes are explored and are well presented. She makes her characters assume different dimensions to assert their individual identity with a sense of freedom and confidence. Tilo tries to assert her newly found identity through the name she has given to herself. She is happy with the name and her new identity.

Tilo plays many roles and keeps on changing her names to befit her roles. This universalises the complex problem of identity crisis that the Indians try to cope up with, in a foreign land. She has been changing her name from NayanTara as a daughter to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates, then to Tilo, and finally Maya when she finds her love. The name Maya is very interesting to note since it means illusion. One can pause and ask whether Maya is real or another illusion created by the author to enhance the magical suspense in the novel or whether it is the newly found identity of Tilo. The name is noteworthy since the novel has magical elements. The name "Maya" reinforces the theme.

In this novel *Mistress of Spices*, Tilo as a mistress is not free to fall in love. She is caught between the two worlds; duty as a mistress and her personal needs as a human being. The strong emotion of love compels her to act against her duty at various levels. In spite of her personal conflict, she performs her duty as a mistress sincerely. Tilo tries to change herself for the man she loves. As a mistress, she is forbidden to love herself and to look attractive in order not to be loved by anyone. After mating with Raven, she too goes beyond the forbidden territory and transforms into a beautiful woman. The chapter

"Makaradwaj" elaborately deals with Tilo beautifying herself. It is a kind of beauty that even scares her. She is stricken by her own beauty and thus feels a new kind of fascination. Tilo taking over the beautiful body is significant and her transformation ends with her realization that she is able to help others without the spices. For example, she helps Jagjit by giving him money since she hopes one day he will use the money properly and become somebody in life.

While Tilo lives in America, she is incapable of pure self-perception, and can only see herself through the eyes of those around her, leaving her own self-seeing as a secondary and almost marginal perspective. Tilo views herself through the lens of her surrounding society, thereby leading to various and often conflicting visions of her identity. At first, Tilo allows these perceptions of herself as created by others to dominate her thinking, yet as she assimilates herself to American culture throughout the course of the text, Tilo comes to claim her own self-perception. The result of this knowledge is Tilo's recognition of her multiple consciousness.

The strict prohibition of mirrors is a metaphor for Tilo's inability to perceive herself through her own eyes. Instead, she formulates her identity upon the vision of others, based on the differing perceptions of herself as seen by friends, patrons and lovers. Tilo, at first confronts conflicting perceptions of herself through her experiences with race and Tilo's shift in consciousness is further suggested by the change in pronouns- moving from a narrative "I" to a third-person "she" when describing herself through the lens of an American. She describes this process of understanding in rather surreal terms: "I move as through deep water, I who have waited all my life- though I see it only now- for this brief moment blossoming like fireworks in a midnight sky. My whole body trembles, the desire and fear...." (TMOS, 298) The novel closes with Tilo renaming herself Maya, which "can mean many things-- The

Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day." (TMOS, 338)

Tilo manages to define herself at the very end of the novel as "Maya", a Hindu term that defines the everyday world of desire, pain and joy. "Maya" represents the illusionary power of the world. Maya is not anymore the mistress of spices but a woman who has accepted her life and a woman who loves a man named Raven. Love has settled within her mind and body. She closes her shop and eventually frees herself from the enclosed room of SPICE BAAZAR, thus symbolically breaking herself free from the fetters of the promise made to the Old One. *The Mistress of Spices* is cloaked in fantasy and the prologue with its strong poetic overtone convinces that this is a literature of fantasy. However, a strong undercurrent of realism runs from the very beginning of the novel and becomes manifest later on.

The old woman in the island who imparts knowledge about spices to Tilo is an example of magic realism. Tilo's metamorphosis from one figure to another is an instance of magical realism. The qualities of the spice and their human forms are also indications of magic realism.

What is astounding is that this dichotomy of fantasy and reality never jars on the understanding of the readers. The word "mistress" also denotes an individual's quest for identity. At the outset she is Tilo and by the end of the novel she is Maya. The sensitive mistress reaches out and touches the lives of many people at the cost of incurring the spices' wrath. She is willing to accept the punishment, but the spices set this compassionate being free so that she can become a mortal woman again.

The Mistress of Spices is a typical post modern novel. The writer uses the nonlinear narration. There is a constant shift in narration happening in the novel which sometimes confuses the readers. The constant shifts also bring forth the idea that one's mind cannot be linear all the time.

Secondly, the magic realism elements in the novel like Tilo hearing the voices of the spices and knowing their origin enthralls the readers. She is able to converse with the spices. The Spices are also one of the characters in the novel. The Old One or the First Mother is a mythical character. Hyperreality is another prominent technique used in the novel. Folklore myth and legends are essential components of magic realist fiction and *The Mistress of Spices* is embedded with these.

The novel presents a heterogeneous picture of the Indian and the American cultures. This blending of Indian culture and American culture leads to a new amalgamation culture which enriches and diversifies the existing culture in various

parts of the world. The immigrants have a different perception of their own native country in the new environment. The acute problems of characters are the issues of survival and identity.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* also tries to find an answer regarding love and duty. A close reading of the novel unfolds various interpretations. It addresses far more important issues of identity crisis in today's world like the transformation of old world to new and the fragmentation of one's identity. The novel deals with the deeper issue of women in defining their unique space in the contemporary world. It also serves as a means to revive their ancestral cuisine which they preserve in the alien land.

The role and significance of the spices cannot be overlooked. In ancient times, it was the spices that lured the West to the East. Actually the whole colonial mission started on account of the spices. Thus the spices symbolize Orientalism. In India, spices form an integral part of cooking. Spicy food suggests an immigrant's indispensable connection with his homeland and also symbolizes the blending of cultures and progress towards advancement. Thus one can connect the importance of preserving one's foremother's recipes in order to connect with one's immediate past. It is a natural phenomenon in multiculturalism to seek means to preserve cultural heritage.

Today man lives in a world of hybrid culture. Tilo falling in love with Raven and creating a new world of their own, shows in the end of the novel, her positive outlook in accepting a new identity. It paves a space for link between the two cultures. Raven and Tilo are able to associate with each other mentally and are able to easily build up their earthly paradise. The earthquake towards the end of the novel is symbolic. It shows the destruction of the established order and a crumbling of the segmented cultures of the world. This interracial relation can be seen as an instrument to fight against racism and discrimination in America.

The Mistress of Spices is a beautiful piece of art presenting a kaleidoscopic insight into the lives of immigrants in America. By blending myth, fantasy and realism, Divakaruni is able to break the stereotype of defining one's identity only from the socio and political levels. Reading *The Mistress of Spices* depicts the farce and absurdity of life. Goodreads stated *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a tale of joy, sorrow and one special woman's magical power.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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