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

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Abstract:

This paper presents a brief introduction to Magic Realism and the theme of magic realism in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. It shows how Divakaruni employed magic realism as a literary device in her novel. The novel has the characteristics of hybrid culture with post-colonial and post-modern themes. Tilo, the protagonist of the novel is the mistress of spices with supernatural qualities. Myth, reality, imagination, beliefs, the past and the present.

Key Words: Magic realism, Myth, Spices, Mistress.

Magic realism is one of the most important literary modes of the twentieth century. The term „magic realism“ was invented by a German art critic Franz Roh in 1925. Magic realism becomes highly fashionable and disparaging during the last three decades of twentieth century. It is an oxymoron which suggests a binary opposition between reality and fantasy. It is an aesthetic style in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality. Magic realism intermingles magic and reality with the use and aid of folk tales, fairy tales, fables, mythologies, epics which could be borrowed from any culture around the world. It is a narrative technique that holds subject exaggeration, history, myth, time, ambiguous reality and supernatural elements. It includes political, mythical and epical treatment. It is considered both as a literary and visual art genre. It attempts to define the historical context, thus to understand the relationship between the magic realism and post- modernism. According to Roh, “Magic Realism is not a mixture of reality and fantasy, but a way to uncover the mystery hidden in everyday reality.”

Magic Realism is a 20th century movement which was initiated in Europe after World War – I. The term is applied to paintings in Germany by Franz Roh (1890-1965). He referred Magic Realism as the New Objectivity- a Post-Expressionist art. The literary Magic Realism was originated in Latin America. The most prominent Magic Realist writers of the world are Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Gunter Grass, Ben Okri, Isabell Allende, Salman Rushdie etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Chitralakha Banerjee, July 29, 1956) is an award winning and bestselling IndianAmerican author, poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist. She is one of the remarkable writer. She was born in Calcutta, India. She is a Betty and Gene MC David professor of writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. She is also a Co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Divakaruni's major works are *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) etc.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* ventures into the unfathomable world of magic and daily experiences of the characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni blends the unreal world with the real world. Divakaruni crosses the boundary of interdisciplinary and creates a new magical world. She has used dream as a major technique to project the magical elements in her novels. The magic realism in her novel unfolds and helps us to understand the magical occurrence in one's life such as dream, telepathy and intuition which foreshadows the future events. The novel stands as an exploration of the immigrant experience heavier on myth and magic realism.

Tilo (Tilotamma) is a mistress of spices, a priestess of the secret magical powers of spices. She is an immortal woman trained in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress filled with special powers. The spices are her love. She has the ability to evoke distinguishing and specific powers ingrained in spices and use them to cure the maladies of immigrants or the local Indian expatriate community in America. She has command over the spices. As she says, “From amchur to zafran, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to their hidden properties, their magical powers.”



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Tilo is born with the supernatural powers of foreseeing. She is named as Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, which means the star seer and the flower that grows by the dust road. She is lonely and neglected by her parents but after sometime she gains everyone's attention because of her second sight. She is able to predict certain things and by her power she brings wealth to her family. Soon her fame spreads all over and the pirates abducted her forcefully. She is named Bhagyavati (Bringer of Luck) but soon she overthrows their leader and becomes the Queen of pirates. After sometime she raises a storm to escape from the pirates and she is rescued by the sea serpents. The sea serpents want her to become the Sarpakanya and they tell her about an old woman who rules the nearby island. The island is called The Island of Spices and it is the old woman who would teach the art of spices.

She craves to learn the art of spices and feels as if she has found a name for her wanting. Tilo, in order to fulfil her desire goes to the island facing many difficulties and she expresses her desire of becoming a mistress to the old woman. To become a mistress one must sacrifice their own desires. Once the mistresses agree to the conditions they are made to enter into Shampathi's fire to purify them and are made into an old woman. When Tilo expresses her desire to be named Tilo, the old one feels reluctant because there is an apsara named Tilottama in Lord Indra's court and is punished for her desire. Tilo promises the old one that she would never fall and goes into the shampathi's fire. Before entering into the Shampathi's fire, the old one gives her a knife to keep her off from her desires. The old one also gives her a slice of ginger-root to keep her strong in her vows. After stepping into the heart of shampathi's fire, she wakes up in Oakland as the aged Tilottama. The spices seem to have some power on her and oppose her doings whenever she seems to outlaw the mistresses' law.

There, Tilo finds and gives the apt spices for the people who come to her according to their problems. Each spice has a special day attached to it and sometimes they would sing a song in her hands. She is torn between her mistress code of detachment and her empathy with the people who turn to her for help. The conflict between love and duty acts as a catalyst in the novel. Ahuja's wife is a young lady who used to visit her shop every week.

She was married to Ahuja unwillingly. Her husband is a watchman and he prevents her from working saying that it is men's duty. Tilo gives her turmeric which would give hope. Ahuja's wife visits her shop after a long time and tells that she can no longer endure her husband. Tilo advises her to take Fennel and asks both of them to eat it which will give them the strength to bear the sufferings of life. Tilo helped a man named Haroun, a taxi driver who is not happy with his profession. Tilo decides to help Haroun before the vision comes true.

She selects a spice named Kalojire. "Kalojire, spice of the dark planet ketu, protector against the evil eye." Jagjit, an Indian young boy who is not able to find acceptance in the land of America. He is bullied and teased by his friends for his language. To help him, Tilo tucks cinnamon unseen in Jaggi's turban. The spice is the destroyer of enemies, which gives strength to body and mouth. He gets the strength to make his voice audible against the atrocity of his fellow American friends. Later spices starts working against Jagjit, to punish Tilo, who breaks the forbidden rule of the mistresses. Tilo tries her best to restore him by giving him „manjistha“ to cool the blood and make it pure. Geeta is an Indian girl belongs to a Bengali family. When Geeta says that she loves a man everyone in the family disagreed and Tilo reunites the family. She pounds him a powder of almond and kesar to boil in milk. "To sweeten your words and thoughts, to remember the love buried under the anger." When Tilo decides to meet Geeta in her office, the spices turn against her. She gives „methi for healing breaks“ mixed in mango pickle and „ada for the deeper courage.“ On the same night, Tilo has conversation with the First Mother across the expanses of space and time in her dream. She feels the Old One's presence in her store. She is invisible and translucent. "Don't let America reduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate."

When Raven comes into the store, Tilo cannot read his mind. She is not able to find a spice for him. Mahamul, the root spice is used to enhance fortune, to bring success, joy and to prevent ill luck when the mistress cannot find a special spice. Tilo loves Raven, the lonely American. Simultaneously, Raven is enamoured by her beauty. Raven too has some mystical quality and is able to look Tilo beyond her physical appearance. Tilo gives peppercorn which has the ability to sweat the



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secrets out of him. Then, Raven tells his own story to Tilo. He feels that Tilo can help him in unleashing the secret power which he was supposed to inherit from his great-grandfather, but failed. To unite the family of Geeta, Tilo gives “kantak the thorn herb with its hair thin black needles whose sting can be poison” to Geeta’s grandfather. She asks him to mix kantak into his rice at dinnertime and eat it slowly which would give him the golden tongue for one hour.

In the inner room sits marakadwaj, king among spices and it is the spice which will make Tilo into a beautiful maiden. Finally Tilo breaks the most sacred rule of all. The spice should be handled with most respect otherwise it can bring madness or death. Tilo drinks it all at once. She feels difference in her body. After spending time with Raven, Tilo returns to the store. She brings “spices, dals, sacs of atta and rice and bajra – and make a pyre in the centre of the room.” Tilo gets ready to enter into the Shampati’s fire. She dips her hands in turmeric and sits in lotus asana on the pyre of spices. She draws her mind back from all that she has loved and feels a surprising peace. “I hold up the single chilli I had left in the jar for this moment, and speak the invoking words.” But nothing happens. She sobs with words and tries other chants. Tilo repents to the spices for all her activities. Before she thinks, the ground jerks and shudders. Tilo is saved by Raven. The answer floats down only to her.

“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.” (305) Tilo finds a new name for her „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)

The novel depicts the representations of different worlds filled with magic, myth and history related to spices. It evaluates the importance of spices in socio-cultural perspective in the life of protagonist. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the magic realist writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives reality a new definition in her novel – the reality mixes together the supernatural and the science. Magic realism expands and categorizes the real so as to encompass myth, magic and the other extraordinary phenomenon in nature or experience. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a world which is familiar to her readers with her own cultural and psychological point of view. She chooses Magic Realism as a literary mode to convey the problems that exists between disparate cultures. The novel is the magic realist narrative which interweaves the supernatural with ordinary daily events. The novelist fills the gap of the forgotten history through magic realism. Here mythical, historical, political and social elements play a greater role.

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