

COMBINING THE MAGIC AND MYTH IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a poet, a diasporic writer and a social worker is the author of fifteen books. She pictures strong women characters in her novels, as she has experienced the sufferings of immigrant women. This study is about this woman writer employing the techniques of magical realism, myth, alienation, identity crisis in her novels. Her first novel The Mistress of Spices was published in 1997. In the novel she tries to combine the extraordinary magic with the past myth in Indian context with Indian spices as important characters. The novel takes place in ancient times and then in present day California, US. Time to time, the author transports the readers to ancient times and the present day. The tale tells the story of a mistress of spices and her efforts to remain loyal to her spices despite the breaking of rules. The whole story is simply magical.

Key Words: *Mistress, Culture, Spices, Myths, Preservation.*

India is a land of culture and myths. Its exotic variety binds the people together. It is known as a land of cosmic energy and many people visit the land for relishing and trying its cuisine, learning its culture, curing through Ayurveda and Yoga. Being a land of variety, the country has been a subject in literature. Many diasporic writers remember their home-land through their writings. In that context Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among the diasporic writers to explore her home land through its rich tradition and culture. Living in US for nineteen years teaches her to look into the two cultures more closely. Rather than coloring her novels with culture and tradition, Divakaruni dwells deeper and portrays strong women characters through myth and magic. If T.S. Eliot uses 'Tradition and Individual talent', Matthew Arnold uses 'touchstone method', Virginia Woolf uses 'stream of consciousness', Divakaruni uses myth and magic as her literary vehicle. She was inspired by the old Bengali tales and epics told by her grandmother when she was a child. She uses those in her novels and weaves the story as if a child has dreamt it. Thus, Divakaruni's novels catch the attention of the readers at once and hence their widespread appeal.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* was published in 1997 and it was Divakaruni's first novel. Her abrupt turning from a poet to a novelist to use magical realism shocks the literary canon of those days. Till then men were known for using magical realism in novels. In the backdrop of ancient India and the present-day California, US, the tale tells the story of the protagonist and her transformation from Nayanthara to Bhagyavathi to Tilo and to Maya. The spices are used as important characters in the novel. Tilo is the mistress of spices. She runs a store in Oakland in California. Tilo dispenses the spices not only for curries but also to relieve the people from their pains.

To be a mistress, a person should follow certain rules. But when a lonely American visit her store Tilo could not abandon the unknown desires that aroused in her. Throughout the novel Tilo continues to break the rules despite the spices' warnings. Her final act of sacrificing herself in the Shampati's fire shows

her loyalty towards the spices. She was spared from death and was allowed to live with her American friend.

This study intends to explore magical realism and myth that are employed by Divakaruni in the novel. The two themes say a lot about the Indian spices and their curing powers. Divakaruni has set her mind into the details of the spices and develops her novel into the extraordinary. The novel is an eye opener to Indian myth. Magical realism is something that fuses magic and real. There is nothing strange in combining reality and fantasy. Though the term magical realism is a postmodern one the technique has been there since the development of the novel. The term has now become a standard theme in contemporary fiction that stretches from Latin American works like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred years of Solitude* (1967) to North American novels like Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* (1983) and Asian works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981). In all these writings magical realism refers to the tendency of the writers to mix magic and mundane life experiences in a realistic narration in contemporary fiction. Latin America is the land where magical realism grows into its full potential. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is marked as the representative work of magical realism. He used it as a representation of Columbian culture which strongly influences the culture of the people living in the mystical village of Macondo. In India the trendsetter is Salman Rushdie. The other writers are Arundati Roy, Raj Kamal Jha, Megha Rao etc.

In the novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, magical realism is explained through the intervention of spices in the customer's life giving them hope, relieving their pain, restoring their health. The magic is evident when Tilo speaks about her physique as an oxymoron. When a mistress enters into Shampati's fire they leave their beautiful body and desires behind and enters into a new land where they are destined to serve the spices. The act of entering into Shampati's fire is wholly magical. The mistresses neither get burnt nor feel the pain. When they open their eyes, they will be in a new land. The calling thought is one of the components of magic realism which is effectively used. Whenever Tilo was in trouble, she would talk to the Old One from whom she learnt the power of spices. The Old One told about the calling thought: "The calling thought can draw to you whoever you desire a lover to your side, an enemy to our feet (18)".

In the chapter "Turmeric", Tilo dispenses the spice to Lalita, wife of Ahuja. She is a victim of an abusive marriage and has no voice to express her feelings to her husband. She feels lonely and longs for a baby. Tilo gives turmeric to Lalita to make her wish becomes successful. Later she gives fennel for perseverance. As a result Lalita flees away from a life of marital rape and violence. After that Tilo receives a letter of gratitude from Lalita and Tilo says "I 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 (273)". The use of wind to dispense the power of spices is magical.

Haroun's father and grandfather were merchants of silk and boatmen on Dal Lake in Kashmir. When a fight came between the rebels and the people Haroun migrated to America. He does many odd jobs and becomes a taxi driver and asks Tilo to bless his taxi. It is for him Tilo first breaks one of her rules. When she touches the taxi, she foresees an accident to Haroun. In order to protect him she takes the spice kalojire that protect people from evil eyes, to cover what fate has written for Haroun. The reference to the snakes heightens the magical element of the narrative. Snakes were her friends and guardians. It was the snakes who told her about the island of spices. The magical thinking is portrayed by snakes talking to Tilo and her replying to them. This is one of the features of magical realism. The snakes warned her about the island and asked to stay with them saying that they would turn her into their Sarpa Kanya or snake maiden. But Tilo's destiny was already written. She never seen the snakes after that in fact snakes were the first among all that spices had taken from her.

Revenge is shown as a magical element in the spices. The interesting aspect of the novel is the revenge taken by the spices against Tilo. Despite the spices' warning Tilo continues to break rules. That's

when they took revenge on her by failing her customers. But all her violations are meant for the safety of her customers expect the last one that is sexual union with Raven. Tilo could not stop herself from stepping out of the store for Haroun when he asks her to bless his taxi. Tilo expresses her concern after returning to the shop: "In the store the spices displeasure waits for me. I must beg pardon (30)". When Raven asked for his spice, Tilo could not find one and the spices showed asafetida, an antidote for love. But Tilo gives him Tulsi to remember her. In her dreams of being with Raven, she forgets to cut the kalojire for Haroun and in a hurry while cutting the jire she accidentally cuts her finger. Raven touched her with love that made spices to rage and they burnt red chillies as a warning. That was the first warning of spices to its mistress.

Tilo went out of the store many times to visit Geeta, to telephone Haroun, to visit Haroun, Geeta and Raven. In all these acts, she pleads with the spices to forgive her and help her customers. But the spices fail her customers to the disappointment of Tilo. Time to time the spices also allured Tilo to use them. "Come Tilo, use us; we give ourselves gladly to you who have tended us so faithfully... Use us for love for beauty for your joy, because that is why we are made" (189-190). When Tilo finally used the spices to meet Raven the transformation was heavenly. Divakaruni has used magical realism at its best in this section. Raven could not believe his eyes and only said "I had not dared to dream such beauty. I do not dare to touch it (280)".

The art of storytelling has been there in human life since evolution. Man colored his imagination with fantasy and created a world of magic for his children. Those stories which he told his children became myths when time passed. Since then myths acquired a great place in people's life. A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myth is included in the genre of folklore and they are generally associated with gods, demi-gods and supernatural humans. They are linked with legends and histories because many societies consider them as the true accounts of their remote past. Through these myths and the mankind find strength and cure for their tired soul and renew their energy. Myths have been used in T.S Eliot's *The Waste land*. The protagonist Tiresias, the Fire sermon by Buddha, the search for the Holy Grail, the conclusive images of Upanishads, birth, death and the waste land are the manifestations of the myth.

In India, myth has become a powerful instrument of preservation of both history and culture. Invariably every Indian writer knowingly or unknowingly refers to the great epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. With Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan the mythological motifs flourished in Indian literature. Today the true essence of the myth has lost. What remains are the dos and don'ts that most families observe. Thanks to the writers of the modern world like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Pattanaik, the myths have acquired its lost grandeur through their works like *The Immortals of Meluha*, *Jaya*, *The Secret of the Nagas*. People now desire to explore their own cultures through myths and legends. The works are all well written in everyday language and easy to grasp that at once strikes the chord with the readers and hence their popularity.

Talking about the use of myths in *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says:

With *The Mistress of Spices*, I wanted to bring in another facet of what I was growing up with the elements of the folktales, the tales of magic and mythical tales. They contain important and powerful women figures, usually older wise women, who have learned the secrets of the natural world and can use those secrets to help others. In the process they become very powerful. They become leaders of their community. Such stories from my culture relate to those from many other traditions with wise women in other Eastern contexts or maybe in Eastern Europe considered as witches. (academia.edu.com)

In the novel the spices are given importance as the humans. They are treated as characters. In Indian culture food has a great place and there are many myths behind it. A spice is a seed, fruit, root, bark or other plant substance primarily used for flavor, color or to preserve food. Its leaves, flowers or stem is used to garnish or to add an aroma in food. Spices are sometimes used in medicine, religious rituals, cosmetics or perfume

production or as a vegetable. In the novel the author views the spices in a unique way. There is a special day for every spice like Sunday for turmeric, Thursday for chilly, Tuesday for fenugreek etc and each one has its special power. Chandan has the power that relieves the pain of remembering, saffron for lonely nights, coriander leaves to feed the passion through nights, cinnamon for friend maker, kalojire will protect from evil eyes, fennel for perseverance, asafetida, an antidote for love, tulsi for remembering, almond with kesar to sweeten words and remember the love in anger, pepper, the king of spices, helps to tell our deepest secrets, black chilly for making bond together etc.

The myths of spices are astonishing to hear. The chapter which is dedicated to turmeric says “I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the 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 between” (13). Turmeric is an auspicious one and is also called as halud. It preserves the food and it is kept on the heads of the new borns for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at pujas, rubbed into the borders of wedding saris and it has the power to erase wrinkles. Fennel is an equalizer; it can take the power from one and give it to another when two people eat it at the same time and it also cools temper. When the great sage Vashista swallows the demon Illwal, he eats fennel so that he would not come back. Kalojire is referred in Hindu mythology as Ketu, one of the nine planets in astrology. Hence it protects from evil eyes.

Makaradwaj who is called as rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers. Tilo used these spices for Lalita, Haroun, Jagjit, and for herself to restore hope, to protect from ill fate, to make good friends and for beauty.

The use of spices in the novel lends a magical touch to the entire story. Divakaruni tries to combine ancient myth with the postmodern magical realism and she was successful in her endeavour. The magical quality of the spices is represented through their intervention in Tilo's life. Her every movement, emotions, thoughts and actions are constantly checked by the spices. They keep intervening in her affairs ethically, emotionally and traditionally. They check her efforts of self-enhancing in a foreign land. The spices respond to the mistress' call till they remain loyal to them. They decide her punishment if she turns against the rules. Myth is an additional theme that is used in magical realism. The mythic systems of Divakaruni's novels add to the formation of female universe. There is an endeavor to make demystification that is to remove mythical characteristics from an individual. The new myth symbolizes the feminine reality where women safeguard other women without the support of men. Demystification is a principle subject in magical realism. In the novel, Tilo supports and protects her customers only with the help of spices not by other humans.

By using the themes like magical realism and myth, the writer stands up to the real world and attempt to unwind it, to find what is strange in life, things, in human acts. As a writer, she gives a feeling of reality with the mixing of magic. Magic realism as manipulated in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel turns out to be reasonable artistic mode to convey the strains that exist between divergent societies and distinctive view of reality. The magical realist weaves the otherworldly with common every day events. It additionally reflects in the language of portrayal in the encounter of two societies and two restricting impression of reality. The novel *The Mistress of Spices* concludes with a blend of culture on the protagonist's terms.

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