

A Critical Study of Magic Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

Magic realism refers to a literary style or narrative technique that incorporates magical and supernatural elements into a realistic framework, presenting them as ordinary occurrences without questioning their improbability. It is also sometimes described as *fabulism*, as it draws upon conventions associated with fables, myths, and allegories. The term “magic realism” was first introduced in 1925 in Germany by the art critic Franz Roh to describe a post-expressionist visual style known as New Objectivity. Later, in the 1940s, the concept was applied to literature by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, who used it to interpret the unique characteristics of Latin American writing.

The movement initially flourished among Latin American authors, who blended reality with extraordinary elements to portray the richness and complexity of their cultural experiences. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams defines magical realism as a narrative mode in which writers combine detailed realism with fantastical and dreamlike elements, often drawing from myths and fairy tales. Prominent practitioners of magical realism include Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Isabel Allende. Although these writers differ in historical context, nationality, and socio-political background, each has contributed uniquely to the genre. A quintessential example is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Márquez narrates the rise and decline of the Buendía family across generations, blending historical events with fantastical occurrences in the fictional town of Macondo.

Keywords: magical realism, supernatural elements, identity, migration, moral conflict.

Content:

In the English literary context, Salman Rushdie popularised magical realism through works such as *Midnight's Children*, where India's independence is symbolically represented through surreal and exaggerated imagery. The paper explores *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from the perspective of magical realism. Divakaruni is a highly regarded author known for works such as *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Conch Bearer* trilogy (2003–2009), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

The Mistress of Spices narrates the story of a girl born into poverty, initially perceived as a burden due to dowry expectations. However, she possesses supernatural abilities, including the power to foresee the future. As her reputation grows, she is abducted by pirates but eventually overpowers their leader and becomes their queen. Despite her authority, she remains dissatisfied and sets out in search of inner peace, eventually arriving on a mystical island:

We had known it would be hard to leave this island where on our skin the warm rain fell like pomegranate seeds, where we woke to birdcall and slept to the First Mother's singing, where we swam naked without shame in lakes of blue lotus. To exchange it for the human world whose harshness we remembered. But this? (16)

On the island, she is rescued by serpents that communicate with her—an example of magical realism where extraordinary events are accepted as normal. The serpents explain the timeless existence of the island, blending mythological imagery with narrative realism. Such interactions reflect the seamless integration of fantasy into everyday experience. Scholars like Mantri Raguram and Sujit Kumar Rath (in *The Criterion*, 2012) observe that Divakaruni personifies spices, transforming them into characters with voices and magical properties. In the novel, spices such as turmeric, cinnamon, and tulsi are endowed with human-like qualities and serve as agents of healing and transformation.

Under the guidance of the First Mother, the protagonist learns the secrets of spices and is later sent to Oakland disguised as an old woman named Tilo, where she runs a grocery store for Indian immigrants. She must follow strict rules: she cannot leave the store, cannot use spices for personal gain, and must avoid physical contact with others.

Tilo's ability to foresee events—such as an impending accident involving Haroun, a taxi driver—demonstrates another key feature of magical realism: the blending of prophetic vision with actual occurrences. Similarly, the spices communicate with her, sing, and guide her actions, reinforcing the mystical dimension of the narrative:

Tilo, my daughter,” said the Old One, and by her face I knew she felt my struggle in her own heart, “most gifted, most troublesome, most loved, Tilo travelling to America eager as an arrow, I have here something for you.” And from the folds of her clothing, she removed it and placed it on my tongue, a slice of gingerroot, wild island adda to give my heart steadfastness, to keep me strong in my vows. (34)

The novel also portrays invisible serpents inhabiting the store, unseen by others but real to Tilo. Her attempts to help individuals like Jagjit, an immigrant child facing discrimination, involve the use of spices in symbolic and magical ways. These acts illustrate how the supernatural is interwoven with social realities such as migration and cultural identity:

American, I too am looking. I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices, but then I saw you, and now I no longer know. I want to tell him this. I want to believe he'll understand. In my head, an echo like a song of stone. A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves (72).

Tilo's emotional conflict intensifies when she develops feelings for an American man, violating the rules imposed upon her. The spices, which had once guided her, begin to admonish her. Her struggle reflects the tension between duty and desire, a recurring theme in magical realist narratives. Her transformation—both physical and emotional—serves as a significant instance of magical realism. She shifts between identities, from a young woman to an old one, symbolising the fluidity of self. The spices themselves act as moral agents, rewarding or punishing her based on her actions.

Finally, the novel presents multiple elements of magical realism: the presence of supernatural beings, the transformation of identity, the personification of objects, and the coexistence of reality and fantasy. Themes such as love, identity, migration, and moral conflict are explored through this narrative technique. In conclusion, *The Mistress of Spices* exemplifies the core features of magical realism. Divakaruni successfully blends myth, magic, and reality to create a narrative that reflects both personal and cultural complexities. Like other magical realist writers, she questions conventional notions of reality while offering a rich, symbolic portrayal of human experience.

References:

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