

Myths and Magical Realism In *Mistress Of Spices*: A Brief Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

*This paper is attempt to view literature as some reality linking things together with the use of English language as an essential means of communication to break away with all barriers with a focus on Indian Writing as a seed sown rather deep rooted during the British rule in India allowing it to blossom as an evergreen tree with fragrant flowers and fruits in such a way to give voice to the feelings of Indians in general and Indian authors in particular, who did significantly contribute a lot to Indian literature so as to take it on the map of world literature with a focus on the contribution of the Trio M.R.Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan and to show how myths and magical realism got nourished in Indian English fiction with particular reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*.*

Keywords: *Myths, Magic Realism, Literature, reality, feelings, Indian writing, blossom, seed, contribution, significance.*

Literature views reality critically. Literature presents the essence of reality linking together. With advancement of the British Empire and the expansion of English administration in India, Indians have been using the English language for reading, speaking and writing. They started learning English because they thought it was useful. People considered that English is a language of understanding with an important means of communication amongst various people.

Indian Writing in English was sown as a seed during the British rule in India, which was later, blossomed as an ever green tree with fragrant flowers and fruits. Indian Writing in English has turned out to be a new form of writing which started giving voice to the feelings of Indians. Indian writers as poets, novelists, essayists and dramatists started contributing their writing to World Literature.

The 20th century novels were influenced by the First World War which changed the belief and political ideas of the people. Instead of domestic and melodramatic themes novelists began to write on feminism, racism, colonialism, multiculturalism, etc. Novel was not a common form because the majority of women had less access to education than men.

The first form of literature that emerged at full length was poetry and it was followed by fiction. The contribution of Indian English Writers is the most significant in the field of the novel. The Indian English novel had begun its journey through Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K.Narayan. The Trio made an entry in the field of Indian English fiction in the Thirties, as the founders of true Indo-English novel. Through their works they tried to portray the village life and freedom movement. They nourished and cherished Gandhian philosophy either consciously or unconsciously in their literary outpourings.

The modern novel captured the realities of contemporary life both the pleasant and the unpleasant. Modern writer's characters are complex because of the inferiority complex. These characters present realistically the doubts, conflicts and frustration in the modern world which happened around them and the modern novel is influenced by psychological theories.

Indian Writing in English now has carved out a new track, a new vision which brings out the myths, magical realism, culture and tradition. Through the works of Indian stalwarts of English fiction; it is revealed that their works are not an imitation of English literary pattern but intensely of Indian theme, their culture, their life style. Through their writing style they have given a new shape and colour to literature.

It also paved way to women writers, who had always been undervalued due to patriarchal superiority. Women writers had mostly presented narrow themes like domestic issues, experience if in-law's place, difficulties in adjustment in post and pre-marital status, dejection and so on. Women strived hard to achieve their identity. The majority of novels by Indian women writers is found depicting the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers.

Indian writing in English gained its ground rapidly. It has earned many laurels both at home and aboard. Women writers in India started questioning about the prominent old patriarchal domination. They believe that, they are no longer puppets in the hands of men. They began to show their worth, knowledge and their writing style in the field of literature. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centred approach, which projects the experience from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. As Patricia Meyer Specks remarks:

“There seems to be something that we call a woman’s point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries”.

Many Indian novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. By last four decades in fiction the image of women has undergone a change. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayal of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, searching for self-identity, isolation in alien land. The present day women’s writing is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in the way of expressing their ideas than the women in the past.

Indian writing in English in the contemporary scenario enjoys equal status with the literatures of the other countries. Among all the Indian writers, women writers have made their voice heard around the world, by expressing it too artistically. Indian women writers through their works depict the themes around sociological, diasporic element, feminine subjects, science and technology, explorative writing and much more. They compete with other men writers for giving their best, as much as they can. “It would be no exaggeration to say that the best English fiction in the world was written by the Indian Women writers or those of Indian origin” (American Research Journal)

The witters of the new fiction have mostly been a part of the Indian diaspora. Living in the alien land by leaving their mother land, they have been exposed to modern Western literary Movements like Post-Modernism and use various narrative techniques like magic realism. Their skills are effectively reflected in Indian Woman’s fiction than in other forms like poetry and drama. There are many women writers both as novelists and poets, grounded in the USA and Britain. Some like Ruth PraverJhabvala and Anita Desai are late immigrants, others like JhumpaLahiri belong to the Second Generation of Indians abroad. The recent expatriate writers have a weak grasp about contemporary India, and they tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia. Sunithi Nam Joshi, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur are the oldest and naturally most prolific.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the diasporic Indian women caught up between two opposing worlds. She brings out how her characters find themselves in an in-between state, struggling to carve out identities of their own. As Diaspora has grown, it started to project the dilemma of women living in host land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such writer.

Chitra Banerjee the Bengali born writer is said to have immigrated to the U.S. She is considered as one of the foremost writers of the Diasporic literature. Her novels often reveal, how the character is struggling to maintain a balance in two worlds, i.e. Indian immigrants struggle for a peaceful life in America. She beautifully portrays how her protagonists uproot themselves from the cultural conflict, migration, by living a comfortable life in the host culture. Divakaruni at one point states that:

“My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibilities and individual happiness which is in away, at the centre of conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, nurture and sacrificing herself for the good of the family and the western concept of self happiness”(The Sunday Statesman).

Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet and teacher. Her works have been published in over 50 magazines, including the Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker, her writing has been included in 50 anthologies. Her works have been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese. She has to her credit such notable works as 1).*Arranged Marriage: Stories*. (1995), 2) *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), 3)*Sister of My Heart* (1999), 4)*The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), 5)*The Vine of Desire* (2002), 6)*Queen of Dreams* (2004), 7)*The Lives of Strangers* (2005), 8)*The Palace of Illusion: A Novel* (2008), 9) *One Amazing Thing* (2010), 10)*Oleander Girl* (2013).

The major themes picturized in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are Magic Realism, Myth and Culture. She effectively brings out the themes through her characters in the novel. Through this Divakaruni tries to bring out the problems of immigrants who suffer a lot and at one point of time, they become bold enough to face any obstacles in their way. In an interview, Divakaruni confessed:

“I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate” (The Sunday Statesman).

Divakaruni has used dream as a technique to project the magical elements in her novels. She restores the long forgotten Indian myth, belief, tradition, Culture. Through the mythological references in her novels it is evident that she has a sound knowledge in myth. According to Divakaruni, myth symbolizes the feminine world where women rescue other women without expecting support from men. She uses myth in her novels not only as a hold to associate herself with India but also re-evaluate sacrificing Indian women.

Magic realism helps to enrich the ideas of what is ‘real’ through imagination as expressed in magic, myth and religion. Magic realism capacitiesDivakaruni to confront reality and tries to untangle it, to discover

what is mysterious in things, in life and in human acts. The magical elements in her novel bring out the fact that it has a link with psychology. According to Wendy Faris:

“Magic Realism often gives voice in the thematic domain to indigenous or ancient myth, legends and cultural practice and the domain of narrative technique to the literary tradition that express them with the use of non-realistic events and images; it can be seen as a kind of narrative primitivism” (P.103)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s first novel, *The Mistresses of Spices* (1997) is unique; it is written with a blend of prose and poetry, by employing Magic Realism. In the novel, the protagonist, Tilo provides spices not only for cooking but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. *The Mistresses of Spices* is the story of Tilo, a young woman who is born in another time, in a faraway place, who is trained in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress charged with special powers. She is born with supernatural powers of foreseeing future. She all the way travels to Oakland, California, where she opens a shop from which she administers spices as curatives to her customers. *The Mistress of Spices* is a tale of joy, sorrow and one special woman’s magical powers.

As a mistress of spices, Tilo should not leave the store, she should never use the powers for herself but she should use it only for others, and the last and most important thing which she should follow is she should not make any physical contact with anyone. But as the novel moves on she starts to break the forbidden rules laid for her. Not only breaks rules but she also allows herself to fall in love with a lonely American. D.B.Gavani comments:

“Divakaruni is writing the script of woman’s rebellion against the pressure to suppress their desire and their bodies. The order of Mistress clearly replicates patriarchal struggle and Tilo must be made to break free of them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with Native American man, whom she calls, Raven. She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about herself indulging, but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face” (P. 80)

Magical Realism in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* is explicitly revealed when Tilo, the mistress of spices, speaks about her physique as an oxymoron of young lady in old woman’s form. Even her own customers don’t know about her youth and her ability of having magical power. “They do not know, of course. That I am not old, that this seeming body I took on in Shampathi’s fire when I vowed to become a Mistress is not mine... The eyes which alone are my own” (Mistress of Spices 5).

Divakaruni, brings home the point that the spices have some magical power to speak to Tilo. ‘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. She tells about the power of calling thought. 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 your feet. Which can lift a soul out of a human body and place it raw and pulsing in your palm? Which used imperfectly and without control can bring destruction beyond imagining” (Mistress of Spices 18).

Snakes were her friends. Tilo was saved from the hands of the pirates by the snakes of an island. The magical thinking is portrayed by snakes talking to Tilo. The talking of snakes was accepted as normal and Tilo too replied to it. This is one of the features in magical realism. As Tilo has a power of foreseeing the future. She had foreseen an accident to Haroun in her vision. Thus foreseeing the future through vision and the real occurrence of the incident in future is another special feature in magic realism. As Tilo foreseen the incident she decided to help him. She took the spice that is blue and black and glistening like the forces of the sun where it was first found. “*Kalajire*, a spice shaped like a teardrop, smelling raw and wild like tigers, to cover over what fate has written for Haroun” (Mistress of Spices 32).

Chitra Banerjee not only uses magical realism in her work but she is fond of using myth too. When Tilo mentioned about the spice, *Kalajire* it was referred with Hindu mythology as ‘Ketu is one of the nine planets in astrology’. She mentions that:

“*Kalajire*, I think, just before the vision comes upon me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like rod thread strangling the night. I must get *Kalajire*, a spice of the dark planet Ketu and protector against the evil eye” (Mistress of Spices 32).

The mythological character, Agni, God of fire and the place Lanka which had its own etymological significance in the novel. Chilli spoke and sang in the voice of a hawk circling sun bleached hills where nothing grows. ‘I Lanka was born of Agni, God of fire. I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth’ (P. 39).

Even the name of the protagonist has some connection to myth. Her name 'Tilottama' in which 'Til' means the sesame seed which ground into paste with sandalwood, helps to cure the diseases of heart and liver. She also added that she is life-giver, restorer of health and hope.

At one point of time, Tilo wished to change her old body into a youth to fulfill the desire of Raven who was her lover. She decided to call on the others like *abhrak, laki* to remove wrinkles and blacken hair and firm the sagging flesh and *makaradwaj*, the king of all spices which was described: "rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers" (P. 85).

Tilo got astonished feeling at her beauty. She was dazzled by her young look. Divakaruni described Tilo's "forehead was flawless like a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the til flower, mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips colour of there are no other words for this crushed red chilies" (P.297).

When Tilo starts to get out from the life of spices, Tilo felt that she was doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom she could turn. She spent her whole life for the welfare of others. At one point of time she got the desire to live for her.

But Tilo's happiness is soon dimmish, when she has a dream of the First Mother who reminds her that she has only three more days in America, and on the third day she will have to enter once again into Shampati's Fire and return to island. When the time arrives for the fire to consume her, she transformed back into the body of the old woman, wrinkled with age and bereft of her youthful beauty.

Tilo returns to the body with which she experienced the different perceptions of race and sexuality. The novel ends with Tilo renaming herself Maya, which can mean things. "The Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (P. 338). The novel ends with a positive note the familiar immigrants' tale of dreams; pain and struggle end with hope. So, *The Mistress of Spices* is a universal immigrant story told through magical realism. It blends the spices with the characters and their emotions. Turmeric, the hope for rebirth; chili, the cleanser of evil; fennel to cool tempers; fenugreek, to render the body sweet and Kalojire to reduce pain and suffering.

Thus Magic Realism is often extremely serious in Divakaruni's works and it contains about art, culture and human nature. As myth and culture is clothed in magic realism, it has some traditional values. Hence myth, superstition and archetypes play a great role in magicrealist writing creating new dimension of reality. In Literature, Magic Realism is a fusion between physical reality and psychological reality. It incorporates thoughts, emotions, dreams, cultural mythologies and imaginations.

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