

<https://doi.org/10.33472/AFJBS.6.13.2024.4519-4525>



African Journal of Biological Sciences

Journal homepage: <http://www.afjbs.com>



Research Paper

Open Access

## MAGICAL REALISM AS MODERN FEMINIST FORM AND STYLE FOR WOMEN IN CHITRA BANERJEE'S NOVEL *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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### Article Info

Volume 6, Issue 13, July 2024

Received: 04 June 2024

Accepted: 05 July 2024

Published: 31 July 2024

[doi: 10.33472/AFJBS.6.13.2024.4519-4525](https://doi.org/10.33472/AFJBS.6.13.2024.4519-4525)

### ABSTRACT:

The research paper proposes the genre of magical realism as a modern feminist form and style through the novel *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a postcolonial diasporic and modernist American Author. The academic undertaking engages in a discourse on reality, realism, and magical realism subjected to a feminist point of view, highlighting the urgency of an alternative narrative against hegemonic patriarchal notions and women's empowerment. The idea of reality is explored and questioned both as a philosophical concept, artistic form, and style. Realism prioritizes objectivity over subjectivity, demanding conformity from minor voices to dominant structures, forms, and subject matter. Meanwhile, magical realism incorporates myth and imagination to subvert the practice and exploit subjectivity as a tool to explore diverse individual objective realities. Magical feminism as a sub-genre within magical realism is critically analyzed and established as few found the language of women to question and subvert the institution of marriage and address contemporary feminine identity in a globalized world order. The new feminine sisterhood is argued as an alternative with magical realism to the pitfalls of dilemma and dichotomy of cross-cultural intersectionality.

**Keywords:** - Realism, Magical Realism, Patriarchy, Spices, Sisterhood, Identity and Marriage.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1997 novel *The Mistress of Spices* accounts for the oriental narrative in an occidental setting perplexed by the dilemma and question of identity, autonomy within hegemonic structures, cross-cultural dysphoria, and a woman's desires. The novel has incorporated a unique combination of prosaic and poetic narrative style with a blend of magic and realist techniques. Tilo (Tilottoma), born Nayantara, is the titular and enthusiastic protagonist at the centre of the chronicle. Plucked from her ancestral setting in India by a group of pirates, she finds herself on magical islands. She is finally transported to the crooked corner of Esperanza in Oakland, California. A clairvoyant, she has been ordained with supernatural powers as Mistress of Spices and trained in their magical art, the very source of her enslavement and misery. Her job was to raise questions, find problems, and supply ingredients and spices that resolved their physical, psychological, and emotional issues and helped them fulfil their desires. On the surface, *The Mistress of Spices* is a narrative account of fortune, poverty, and an individual woman's supernatural abilities on a quest to find love, identity, and a sense of belonging, but it carries symbolic and thematic undercurrents of feminism. There is stark criticism of the patriarchal structures, oppressive norms, customs, and traditions that are baggage forced upon her by her parents and the people around her. She is constantly reminded to adhere to the boundaries created for her as a woman, and any misadventure would invite repercussions. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni introduces the new post-modernist women in a globalized world to address the challenges of gender, identity, socio-cultural space, migration, and personal trauma.

The enigmatic nature of reality as an entity that fundamentally shapes our cognitive schema had long been unsettled, engaging the greatest minds of its age. The Early thinkers, primarily realists, believed that what separated subjectivity from objectivity was the position of an object in these two distinct worldviews. Parham aptly states that "the objective canon exists outside the mind of the cognizant" (1966, *Realism and Anti-Realism*, 1966), arresting, extrapolating, and imposing. According to Popenoe, "As a social and psychological trait, gender is often associated with masculinity and femininity while the biological traits as male and female are determined by sex. Thus, gender is socially and culturally created whereas sex remains constant for the population as a biological trait (Popenoe)." Contemporary Naturalists, Symbolists, and Surrealists widely accepted this hegemonic philosophical interpretation within literary discourses. It firmly constrained the socio-political, cultural, and gender realities within existing oppressive structures and marginalized minor narratives to opt for solutions in dominant ones. Female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for women's rights. They challenged societal expectations in her seminal work "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," paving the way for a critical examination of gender roles. She exclaimed, "Women are degraded by the propensity to enjoy the present moment, and, at last, despise the freedom which they have not sufficient virtue to struggle to attain (Mary Wollstonecraft)." Thus, the early feminist movement of the 18th and 19th centuries after the publication of "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft and "A Room of One's Own" (1929) by Virginia Woolf had acquired meaningful social and political traction. By employing the established language and genre of artistic form, they induced radical changes like Women's Voting Rights and the Property Act for Married Women. They asked for more extensive representation in institutions of marriage, work, and sexual autonomy. Especially for colonized women who were doubly marginalized, first by colonial masters and second within their communities. With its non-aristocratic, non-idealist themes, characters, settings, and complex narratives, this realist form gained immense resonance among women writers who found little voice in poems and plays only as the subject and object but not as *littérateur*. Kristeva posits that "language is a symbolic system through which societal norms and expectations are

transmitted and enforced. This ultimately perpetuates and reinforces the binary construction of gender, leading to the marginalization and oppression of those who do not conform to these norms (Julia Kristeva)." Thus, the patriarchal language of rigid literary structure and dominant artistic expression form reduced their unique expressions into mere echos. Williamson admits that "earliest literary expression barring few seminal works largely served as propaganda to mould and shape the character of women in the patriarchal frame of ideology." (Alan Williamson, 2001). The readers can empathize with these diverse perspectives. As Chimamanda Adichie says,

"Gender is not an easy conversation to have. It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable. Both men and women are resistant to talk about gender or are quick to dismiss the problems of gender. Because thinking of changing the status quo is always uncomfortable ("Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi." African American Studies Center)." This is why women have struggled for a long time to create their niche within the existing corpus and canon of literary works on a borrowed consciousness and language, style, and form. Judith Kegan Gardiner states that "women's experience immensely differ from their male counterpart especially in a male-dominated society. Being a woman here would mean not acting like a man since gendered behaviours are expected." (Judith Kegan Gardiner, 1980). Massey (1994) suggests that "the spatial and social organization is constructed through the articulation of the 'public and private spaces and the characterization of experience in the figure of male (Massey, 1994)."

Grant opines that the "literary basis of identity in literature is the interaction between reality and imagination; hence, one reality cannot be isolated or extrapolated as the universal truth in itself but be an amalgamation of multiple facts and interplay of things that gives birth to them." (Grant, Realism, 2016). Hence, at the turn of the 20th century, magical realism broke forth as a radical movement on the literary landscape. Though coined by a German critic, Franz Roth, in a linguistic and ideological sense, it gained artistic currency with the publication of "*The Kingdom of Heaven*" by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier. As a form, Magical realism is composed of contradictory etymology and meanings that negotiate an obligatory and compulsory relationship against the backdrop of reality. It can be broadly understood in two ways: first, as a literary narrative technique, and second, as a non-traditional take upon truth. Magical realism does not renege itself to the conservative ideas of realism; instead, it weaves an intricate and highly complex web of real and imaginary to provide an alternative understanding of its fundamental nature. Mirsadeqi writes that "magical realism does not fully participate in the space of reality or to the space of imagination; instead, it has an independent feature." (Mirsadeqi, Glossary of Art of Story Writing, 1998)).

The genre's roots trace its origin to colonial oppression, servitude, and dictatorship as an attempt for the sovereignty of the individual, culture, language, and nation. It's marred by the bloodshed and trauma that manifested historical atrocities, desires, and sufferings in mythical narratives rooted in the chasm of imagination and reality. Urvashi Butalia backs this up and writes that "the complexities of Indian societies in terms of the caste-class-gender milieu necessitates the conceptualization of spatial binaries through a different lens. Inequalities of gender and class indeed of location and caste are built into very concepts of public and private and therefore need to be problematized (Urvashi Butalia, 2012)." Thus, magical realism empowers minor voices like women and the oppressed to explore their distant relationships with colonial oppressors, patriarchal structures, and nation-states to voice their third-world narrative to subvert established hegemony. The myths and narratives are manifested by specific individual within religious, cultural, and regional settings that offer a fresh perspective on their apartheid state and connect them as global voices. Khan opines that "specific cultural and social milieu is arranged in domestic space of the novel domestic changing boundaries, the spatial structure of domesticity, psychology, and culture define society, community and the individual self (Khan 118)." Feminist authors like Virginia Woolf who urged "women to carve their niche

by establishing new vocabulary from the rhythmic pattern of their own experiences and literary forms suited to their bodies" (Virginia Woolf, 78) validates magical realism as a tool of formulating feminist language, gaining autonomy and exerting their individuality. They transcend the barriers and cut across caste, creed, religion, and geography to find themselves and consolidate their civil, political, and economic rights. Till now, they had a compromised and unsettled voice as O'Donhue states, "their reflection of the self through others perception had offered only distortions and illusions; the real identity had been reduced to nothing but blurred grotesque images." (John O'DonHue). Magical realism as a distinct and deterritorialized literary space, form, style, and language allowed authors, women in particular, to capture complex life narratives in figures of speeches, writing techniques like epistolary and picaresque in diverse settings, primarily through autobiographical and semi-autobiographical forms laced with imagination and reason to give voice and portray the marginalized communities. The novel floats "domestic fiction" as one of the core themes that serves as "the vehicular tool for stories of women and their life (Gopal 140)." Home emerges in the literary pieces as a "space where women's life becomes an arena for tradition and modernity seeking power (Nayar 130)."

Literary realism as a form and movement takes root from the word real, a point of view in which objectivity is preferred over subjectivity. However, magical realism turns the principle of realism on its head by making objectivity the tool to perpetuate and explore the subjectivity of an individual self in a realistic setting constructed of supernatural elements. Thus, the genre of magical realism amalgamates imagination and reality into a unified indistinguishable entity that creates real and natural plot lines for the readers to accept and allow the process of catharsis. Rajan opines that "realist novels' narrative structure and tradition work as imperialist instruments in Western construct and demand conformity from other locations. The form, language, and subject matter are highly dominated by patriarchal notions, with no room for women to negotiate their perspectives and concerns" (Rajan, 2002). Stephen Slemon suggests that "in a magical realist text, the language of narration is in a state of conflict between two opposing forces working towards the creation of alternate worlds. They are equal and incompatible and thus are suspended in continuous debate with the other, creating disjunctions, gaps, and silences." (Stephen Slemon, *Magical Realism as postcolonial discourse*). In these spaces, minor voices and narratives evoke themselves and overcome the hegemony of caste, creed, gender, and socio-political realities.

*The Mistress of Spices* evokes ambiguous narrative structure with images of magical spices, 'Shampati's fire,' 'Kala Pani,' and shapeshifting to integrate the natural and supernatural world. Her name Nayantara translates to star seer and connotes her magical ability to see the future. Her adopted name, Tilottoma, represents her new identity and alludes to the myth of a court dancer who dedicated her life to dancing and suffered when she broke the vow made to Brahma. Each chapter is named after spices such as turmeric, red chili, cinnamon, fenugreek, ginger, peppercorn, lotus root, etc., representing different emotions and their relation to solving human problems. They become the site of interaction for all bonds, prejudices, and culmination of different cultures and races. The characters in the story simultaneously, both as individuals and collective groups, engage with the natural and imagined world. Tilottoma, both as an individual and cooperative group of Indians, represents the apartheid state of a disempowered individual, Indian, and a woman in an American setting yet retaining her imaginative position of mistress of spices. All such individuals become archetypes of their culture, region, and circumstances, carrying a duality of persona. Nikoubakht; Ramin Nia proposes that "this dual characterization enables writers to introduce elaborate and imaginative sequences on the story subject to heighten its fiction state." (Niko Bakht N, Ramineya M, 2005). In magical realism, imaginary events acquire realistic assertions like the existence of a magical island and spices as a medium of magical healing of all other people's emotions, problems, and desires. The objectivity of

Tilo's ability to foresee the future and inner dilemmas exists with the subjectivity that she cannot identify or view her own. Her reality of attraction towards Raven contrasted against her imagination of the spice mistress as an obstacle that exists simultaneously and convincingly to propel the novel's plot. This imagination or its origin is never explored. Instead, they are deliberately left unanswered for interpretation, separating them from the realist undertaking of the narrative. Chitra Banerjee convincingly makes her readers believe in the character of Tilo and empathize with her circumstances that, despite being entirely fictional, are relatable and render catharsis of our own. The readers are forced to reflect on their social, political, and cultural settings and reassess their interaction and comprehension of their pre-existing knowledge. Divakaruni's work "incorporates the feminist standpoint that refers not simply to identity locations (e.g., being a woman, Indian American, poor, etc.), but to the critical understanding of these locations shaped through reflection and struggle (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006)." "Additionally, the journey to the Island of Spices can be analyzed using Joseph Campbell's monomyth or the hero's journey framework, where the hero undergoes a transformative journey, achieving self-knowledge and fulfilment (Joseph Campbell)."

The reality of migration and globalization amplifies this oppressive regime and suppresses women, depriving them of their individual choices as sentient creatures. They are caricatured as torchbearers of customs and traditions but otherwise relegated to marginalized and lesser positions. Luce Irigaray thus opines "that women are defined by their transactional value: in all patriarchal modalities, societies, and organisations where productive work is organised, valued and rewarded and are domains of men's authority such as daughters, sisters, wives who serve as a token of beneficial transactions and immense opportunities of realisation in social status and fortunes for men." (Luce Irigaray, 800). Their gender becomes their curse, and though migration changes their socio-cultural and political reality, their mobility is largely restricted in all these aspects, including economics. Adopted identity in a patriarchal environment disempowers and alienates body and consciousness. The complexity of rigidities tears the individual identity in a constant struggle that again and again succumbs to the pitfalls of patriarchy in a multitude of varied illusions. Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers an alternative in magical realism to frame narrative rather than subjugate themselves by conforming to a pre-existing one.

The institution of marriage is subjected to the lens of magical realism through Geeta and Lalita in Chitra Banerjee's work, highlighting the fault lines of deeply rooted inequality and biases. The institution of marriage, ideally evoked as the holy union of two souls, comes to be heavily biased towards women in the social, political, and economic arena. Veena Selvam, in "Mistress and Sister: Creating a Female Universe," opines that "When Tilo lands in America in her spice store, she can emphasize with her women customers better than her male counterparts (Veena Selvam, 15)". De Beauvoir states that the reality of marriage is that "no doubt marriage offers material and sexual conveniences and dispels loneliness, but it fulfils only the patriarch's desire of home as space, children as purpose and meaning of existence." (De Beauvoir, second sex). Zajackowska states that "quality, quantity, and skills along with the gender gap is responsible for lack of women participation. They are often provided with low-quality education and skills. It is because of socio-cultural stereotyping of boys and girls from early childhood (Zajackowska, 2008)." Thus, Lalita receives marital rape imprisonment and economic disability as her share, Geeta, in her contrast, despite being more literate and conscious of her surroundings, is tied down by the patriarchal orthodoxy of her parents. Tilottoma surrenders her autonomy to the power of patriarchy, thus enslaved to the sorrows of others unable to soothe her own; all three women stand juxtaposed to one another as victims of their inability to find their narrative and voice. As a postcolonial immigrant engages with a Master in a pre-established narrative, women subjugate themselves into patriarchal structures. Thus, the identity of immigrant women is not a by-product of their own free will but rather an adjustment,

accommodation, and distortion of the self, a constant experimentation of acceptance and want an illusion. Mohanty writes, "Tilo is not a deity but rather an abandoned body. Her soul is conditioned in her withered reflection, as the feminine goddesses overlooked in a patriarchal environment." (Mohanty, 120). The name change symbolizes turmoil of space and time, a paradigm shift in socio-political and cultural realities invoked as 'voices.' Chitra Banerjee firmly puts it, "If not for the voices of the dominant language, narratives and disciplining a new life could be sought as an alternative away from the mouth of dictating patriarchs." (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 1997).

Wilson Harris states that "association between dominant narratives and realist movement reveal the act of conquest, it thus explains why modification of realism as magical realism enabled so many writers' post-colonization, especially women, to put forth their views." (Wilson Harris, 148). Magical realism inverts this relationship and renegotiates reality by introducing imagination and myths as images, symbols, and narrative techniques. Post-colonization dominant structures and hegemonic narrative forms were traded in for more inclusive ones like magical realism that defamiliarized us from colonial and patriarchal narratives to fundamentally shape our understanding of the self in a globalized and multipolar world order. As Chitra Banerjee aptly puts it in the words of Lalita: "If not for the voices of language used for domination and disciplining, maybe a new life could have been started away from the eyes and mouths of a dictating patriarch (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 107)".

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