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Cultural Mythology and Magical Realism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract: ***The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an important contribution to contemporary Indian diasporic literature, notable for its unique blending of cultural mythology and magical realism. The novel presents the story of Tilo, a mystical woman who is trained on a sacred island to become a "Mistress of Spices," endowed with the supernatural ability to use spices for healing emotional, psychological, and spiritual suffering. After completing her training, Tilo establishes a spice shop in Oakland, California, where she assists members of the immigrant community who are struggling with loneliness, cultural dislocation, identity crises, racism, and family conflicts.***

This research paper explores how Divakaruni effectively combines elements of Indian cultural mythology with the narrative technique of magical realism to portray the complexities of immigrant life in a multicultural society. The mythological framework of the novel, including the mystical island, the First Mother, and the sacred powers of spices, reflects ancient Indian traditions and spiritual beliefs. At the same time, magical realism allows these supernatural elements to coexist naturally with the everyday realities of modern urban life in the United States. Through this narrative strategy, the author bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, homeland and diaspora.

Furthermore, the novel uses the symbolic power of spices to represent emotional healing, cultural memory, and spiritual wisdom. Each spice embodies a particular quality that helps individuals overcome personal struggles and reconnect with their inner selves. Tilo's journey also reflects an inner conflict between duty and personal desire, particularly when she falls in love and challenges the strict rules imposed upon her as a Mistress of Spices.By examining the interaction between mythology and magical realism, this study highlights how the novel portrays themes of identity, belonging, transformation, and resilience. Ultimately, The Mistress of Spices demonstrates how myth and magic can function as powerful literary tools for representing cultural heritage and the psychological experiences of diaspora communities.

Keywords: Cultural Mythology, Magical Realism, Diaspora, Identity, Healing, Immigration, Symbolism, Cultural Memory, Transformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English literature often incorporates myth and magical realism to explore complex cultural and psychological realities. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a remarkable example of this literary approach. The novel combines traditional Indian myths, folklore, and mystical beliefs with the technique of magical realism to portray the lives of immigrants negotiating between two cultures.

The protagonist, Tilo, is trained on a mysterious island to become a "Mistress of Spices," a guardian who uses the magical powers of spices to help people overcome emotional and spiritual problems. Each spice possesses a unique symbolic and healing quality, allowing Tilo to assist members of the immigrant community who visit her shop seeking guidance and comfort. However, the mistresses must follow strict rules that forbid personal attachments, creating a conflict between duty and desire when Tilo falls in love with Raven.

By blending mythological elements with magical realism, Divakaruni constructs a narrative that transcends ordinary realism and reflects the deeper psychological and cultural experiences of diasporic individuals.The use of magical realism allows Divakaruni to merge folklore and myth with contemporary reality, creating a narrative that feels both timeless and modern. The novel juxtaposes the traditional East represented myths and folklore with the modern West and its liberating lifestyle. Divakaruni shares:

I ventured into the paths I hadn't travelled before, breaking ethnic barriers, showing people of different races at war and in love. I dipped into the language and imagery of my childhood, the tales I grew up on, and alternated them with slang from Oakland's inner-city streets. And I wrote in the spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable. ("Dissolving Boundaries")

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II. CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE NOVEL

1) *Mythical Origins and Transformation of Tilo*

The character of Tilo is rooted in mythological tradition. Her transformation from an ordinary girl into the "Mistress of Spices" resembles the mythic journey of initiation found in many ancient legends. She undergoes a spiritual rebirth on a mystical island where she learns the secret powers of spices and the responsibilities associated with them.Everything is so fascinating since it is different from our real world and enhances our curiosity related to traditional myths and folklore. The training is also not an ordinary one demanding strict adherence to rules which a common human being feels unable to follow. The mythical origin of these mistresses consolidates the idea of our ancient belief system that their powers are divinely inspired. This is suggestive of the continuation of mythic intervention even in the postmodern world. Tilo shows in the beginning what does she know about the spices. She admits: "I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From amchur to zafran, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers" (3).

2) *The Magical Island and the First Mother*

Like the magical world of Harry Potter, Tilo's training is organized on a mysterious island outside normal boundaries of time and space. This island is not an ordinary one, it is located beyond the human reach so that they can practice their art without any distraction. This type of setting is common in myths where the rules of the mortal world cannot be applied. Only amid such supernatural atmosphere spiritual growth is possible. What is divine is always secret and beyond the human reach. The mysterious island is a metaphor for discipline, self-discovery and connection to mystical powers that govern the universe. Divakaruni writes that: "The island has been there forever, said the snakes, —the Old One also. Even we who saw the mountains grow from buds of rock on the ocean bed, who were there when Samudra Puri, the perfect city, sank in the aftermath of the great flood, do not know their beginning" (24).

The presence of the First Mother, the spiritual guardian of the spices, further strengthens the mythological dimension of the narrative. The First Mother symbolizes divine authority and represents the transmission of sacred knowledge from one generation to another.Through the island and the First Mother, Divakaruni illustrates how myth shapes identity, preserves cultural knowledge, and provides a framework for understanding human experience. Divakaruni shares in one of her interviews:

There are a number of legends about women healers in my language, and there are other legends about serpents who can guide you in your journey to light, who can act as a spiritual guide. There are other legends about the island of spices, and other legends about islands where only women live. So I took a lot of different legends and wove them together depending on what the story needed. ("Writers are Great Eavesdroppers" 60).

Through this mythic framework, the novel establishes a connection between ancient cultural traditions and the modern world.

3) *Symbolism of Spices in Cultural Mythology*

Spices play a central role in the novel and carry profound symbolic meanings rooted in Indian cultural traditions. In many traditional societies, herbs and spices are believed to possess healing and spiritual properties. Divakaruni transforms these everyday ingredients into mystical objects with supernatural abilities.Each spice has distinctive personality and power that enables them to change the lives of those who come to seek help. For example, turmeric has the power to heal physical wounds; cinnamon can ignite love and passion; and chilli has the power to encourage and make someone fierce. So by showcasing the magical powers of these spices, the novelist raises the ordinary to the mystical level and blurs the boundary between the reality and myth. Her attempt shows how routine life objects can carry deep cultural and symbolic meaning.

Each spice represents a particular emotional or spiritual quality. Turmeric is associated with purification and healing, cinnamon with warmth and protection, and red chilli with courage and transformation. By assigning symbolic meanings to spices, the author draws upon cultural mythology that views nature as a source of spiritual power.Makaradwaj is known as the king of all spices. It is life giving prescribed by the twin physicians of the gods, the Ashwini Kumars, to their student Dhanwantari to prepare him as the chief physician and healer. It is to be used with utmost care and in adequate measure since even the mild carelessness can cause death or madness: "Whatever a person weighs, measure out one thousandth of it, mix in milk and amla fruit. It must be sipped slow, one spoon an hour, over three nights and days" (262).

Then we have sesame or til, the seed that inspires the name of Tilo. It is deemed as life-giver and as the element of health and hope. Divakaruni names the second chapter on this and describes it as: "Til is the sesame seed, under the sway planet Venus, gold-brown as though just touched by flame.

The flower of which is so small and straight and pointed that mothers pray for their grandchildren to have noses shaped like it. Til which ground into paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver, til which fried in its own oil restores lustre when one has lost interest in life" (43). There are other spices also and they all function in different ways to help the immigrants in maintaining their native culture and prepare themselves to resist the issues of racism, segregation, alienation, identity crisis, displacement and cultural lack. This mythological symbolism reinforces the idea that traditional knowledge can provide guidance and healing even in a modern urban setting.

4) Myth as a Link to Cultural Identity

For the immigrant characters in the novel, mythology functions as a connection to their cultural roots. Living in a foreign land often creates feelings of alienation and displacement. The spice shop becomes a symbolic space where immigrants reconnect with their heritage and rediscover their cultural identity.Through mythological references and rituals, the novel preserves the cultural memory of the homeland. Tilo's knowledge of spices represents a continuation of ancient traditions that help immigrants maintain a sense of belonging.

As per the Archetypal criticism, myths are not static or dead, they get reflected in our beliefs, rituals and cultural memory. In this sense, myths are the preserver of cultural heritage of any country. Every person carries this cultural memory from his/her birth in the form of collective unconscious propounded by C.G. Jung. The shared past and cultural memory is present in the mind of every human being which connects the natives of a particular place or country together. In this narrative we can see how these myths connect the immigrants to their roots and shared past in a foreign land.

The traditions, knowledge and customs that Tilo carries and is well versed in, are deeply rooted in Indian folklore and mythology. Tilo keeps alive all these things and uses them for healing the affliction of Indian immigrants. She proves that myths are more than just stories, rather they are living legacies that hand over wisdom, values and ethical guidance across boundaries of time and space. This preservation of cultural memory ensures that the knowledge of the homeland is maintained, even when physical ties to India are distant.

III. MAGICAL REALISM IN THE NOVEL

1) Blending the Ordinary and the Supernatural

Magical realism is a literary technique in which magical elements are presented as natural parts of everyday reality. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the magical powers of spices coexist with the ordinary environment of a small grocery shop in Oakland.Tilo communicates with spices, hears their voices, and understands their desires. These supernatural interactions are described in a matter-of-fact manner, making them appear normal within the narrative world. This seamless integration of magic into reality is a defining feature of magical realism.

Ultimately the result of fusing myth and magic with reality highlights the continuity of tradition beyond the limits of time and space. We see Tilo helping immigrants in a modern environment but it is the ancient wisdom and knowledge that she carries in her heart shape her intentions and direct her actions. Myths, in this context, act as a bridge between past and present, demonstrating that cultural knowledge, moral codes, and spiritual insight are enduring forces in human life. The fusion emphasizes that modernity does not erase tradition; instead, it provides a new context in which myth continues to inform identity, morality, and personal growth. Through this combination, Divakaruni creates a narrative that is at once contemporary, mystical, and culturally resonant.

2) Magical Realism and the Immigrant Experience

The magical elements in the novel often symbolize the emotional struggles faced by immigrants. Many characters who visit Tilo's shop suffer from loneliness, cultural conflict, racism, and identity crises.Through the magical properties of spices, Tilo helps them overcome these difficulties. For example, spices may restore confidence, heal emotional wounds, or strengthen family relationships. These magical interventions represent the psychological and cultural support that traditions can offer to individuals living in unfamiliar environments.Magical realism therefore becomes a powerful narrative tool for exploring the complexities of diaspora life.

3) Magical Realism and Inner Transformation

Another important aspect of magical realism in the novel is its representation of personal transformation. Tilo's journey reflects a conflict between her sacred duty as a Mistress of Spices and her personal desire for love and independence.

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When she falls in love with Raven, she breaks the sacred rules that bind her. This act disrupts the magical balance and leads to a crisis that forces her to reconsider her identity and responsibilities.The magical events surrounding this conflict symbolize her inner struggle between obedience and self-discovery. Through this process, the novel portrays magical realism as a metaphor for emotional and spiritual growth.

4) Interaction between Cultural Mythology and Magical Realism

One of the most distinctive features of the novel is the fusion of cultural mythology with magical realism. Myth provides the symbolic and spiritual foundation of the story, while magical realism allows these mythological elements to exist within a contemporary setting.The mystical island, the First Mother, and the magical powers of spices originate from mythological tradition, while the modern urban environment of Oakland represents the realities of immigrant life. By combining these two narrative dimensions, Divakaruni bridges the gap between tradition and modernity.This interaction also highlights the enduring relevance of cultural mythology in contemporary society. The novel suggests that myth and magic continue to shape human experiences even in a modern, rational world.

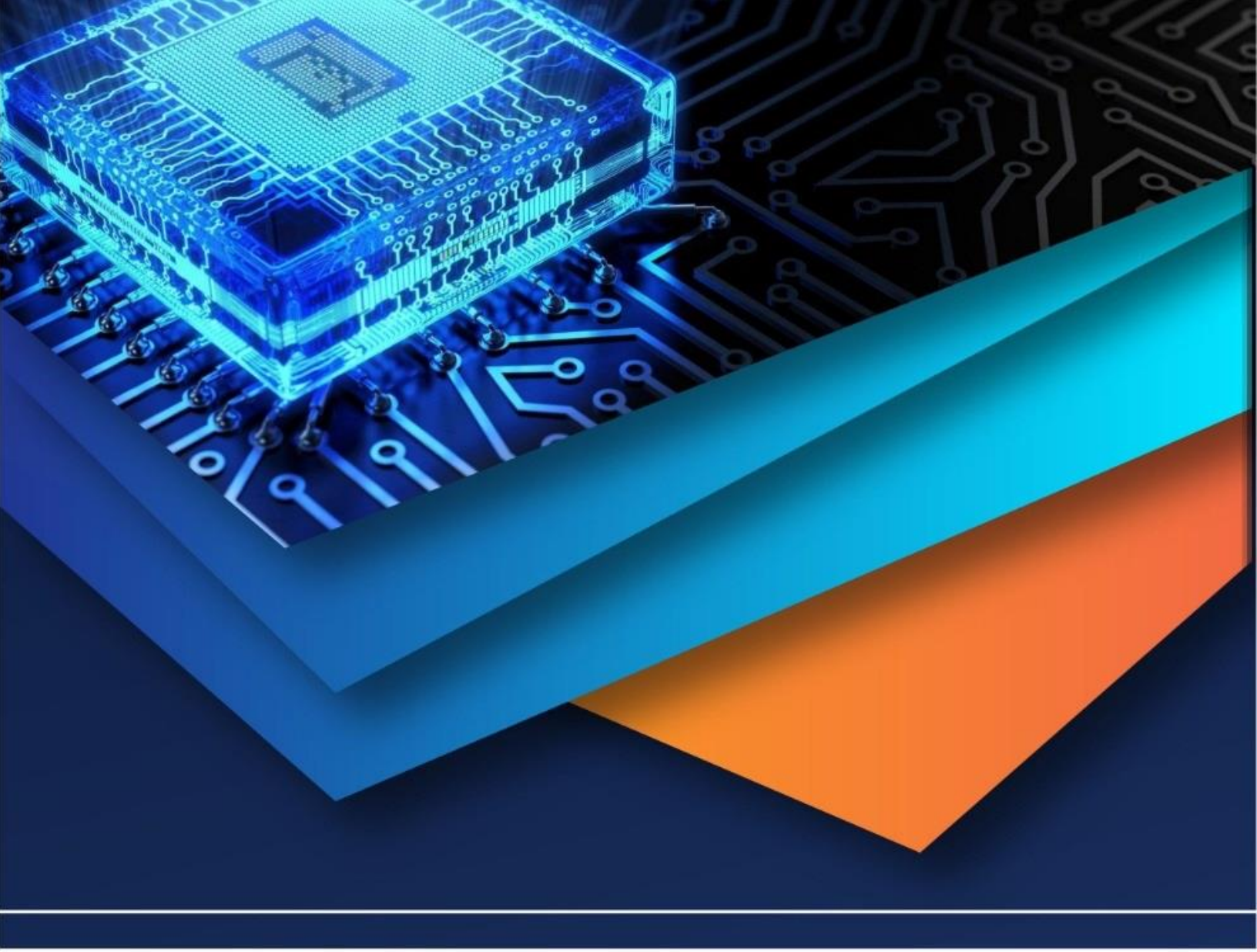
IV. CONCLUSION

The Mistress of Spices illustrates how cultural mythology and magical realism can work together to create a rich and meaningful narrative. Through mythological symbolism, the novel connects the present with ancient cultural traditions and emphasizes the importance of heritage and spiritual wisdom.At the same time, magical realism enables the author to portray psychological and emotional realities that cannot be fully expressed through conventional realism. The magical powers of spices serve as metaphors for healing, transformation, and cultural continuity.By blending these narrative techniques, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a profound exploration of identity, diaspora, and the human search for belonging. The novel ultimately demonstrates that myth and magic remain powerful tools for understanding the complexities of contemporary life and preserving the cultural imagination of communities across the world. Myth gives the story a timeless, symbolic dimension, while magic realism connects it to contemporary social issues. Ultimately, the novel shows that tradition and modernity, magic and reality, can coexist, reflecting the complex experience of living between cultures. Arul Renuga rightly sums up:

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a lyric novel, written in a mixture of prose and poetry, in the style that has been called “Magic realism”; while primarily set in this world, it includes features which defy natural laws and gives it an air of mysticism. The heroine, Tilo, comes to Oakland after she has been trained on a remote, magical island by the priestess-like old mistress of spices for a vocation of ministering to others. Assuming a crone’s body and forbidden to leave her shop, Tilo shares the magic of her spices and her own psychic powers with a variety of Indian immigrants who are alienated, lonely, and or in danger in their new homeland. (“Magic and Myth” 46).

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