

Echoes of Spices, Dreams and Destinies Across Magical Realism and Cultural Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*

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Abstract—This paper explores the intricate interplay of magical realism and cultural identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*. Through the lens of sensory landscapes, myth, memory, dreams, and personal transformation, the study examines how Divakaruni constructs a narrative space where magic becomes a metaphor for diasporic struggle, healing, and self-realization. Through the imaginative use of sensory landscapes, myth, dreams, food, and destiny, her stories capture the fluidity of identity while highlighting the struggles of belonging and transformation. Magical realism becomes a narrative device to blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, allowing characters to face the tension between ancestral traditions and modern lives. Spices and dreams, as recurring motifs, serve as cultural symbols that shape destiny and selfhood, reflecting tradition and modernity. By interlacing myth and memory, Divakaruni reimagines the immigrant experience, portraying how cultural heritage and personal aspirations influence each other. The representation of identity and belonging in a diasporic context emphasizes the adaptation of traditional values while embracing new realities. The present study examines how Divakaruni's storytelling not only preserves cultural traditions but also redefines them through the lens of myth, memory, and transformation, creating narratives that resonate with universal human experiences.

Index Terms—magical realism, cultural identity, destiny, myth, memory

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned Indian-American author whose storytelling effortlessly combines myth, culture, magical realism, and cultural identity. Her works often reflect the complex experiences of South Asian immigrants in America, focusing particularly on women and their journeys to balance traditional values with modern aspirations. Among her acclaimed novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* stand out for their unique portrayal of magical realism intertwined with cultural identity, crafting narratives that resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds. In both novels, Divakaruni masterfully uses magical realism to blend fantasy with reality, creating stories that are both captivating and insightful. This literary technique not only enriches the storytelling but also serves as a powerful tool to explore themes of cultural memory and identity. By presenting characters who find dual realities where the past and present, myth and reality coexist, Divakaruni adds depth to her narratives, going beyond a mere representation of immigrant experiences.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the use of spices imbued with magical powers symbolizes the deep-rooted cultural heritage and the protagonist's struggle to balance duty and personal desire. The spices not only represent tradition but also serve as metaphors for healing and transformation. The protagonist, a mystical spice shop owner, personifies the contrast between tradition and modernity. Spices in this novel are more than just culinary ingredients; they symbolize cultural heritage and carry magical powers that heal and transform lives. On the other hand, *Queen of Dreams* explores the mystical power of dreams as a bridge between the past and present, reflecting how dream interpretation shapes the characters' understanding of identity and belonging. This novel explores the life of a woman whose mother has a unique ability to interpret dreams. Dreams in this story act as a link between the past and the present, connecting the migrant experience with inherited cultural legacies. The mystical dream-telling ability becomes symbolic of the tension between holding onto one's roots and adapting to a new cultural setting.

Although these novels have been analyzed for their cultural and thematic elements, there is limited exploration of how spices and dreams intertwine with magical realism to depict diasporic identity. This study aims to fill this gap by

examining how myth, memory, and magical elements shape the experiences of Divakaruni's characters, reflecting the dynamic process of self-discovery and adaptation. This study examines how Divakaruni's use of magical realism and cultural identity in these novels offers a profound insight into the immigrant experience, where spices, dreams, and destinies intertwine to shape an individual's sense of belonging. Through an in-depth analysis of these themes, the paper seeks to uncover how myth and reality merge to create a vivid tapestry of stories that speak to the universal quest for identity and acceptance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many studies carried out in many articles on the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Most common discussions are: South Asian tradition (Agarwal & Kapil, 2016), hierarchies of human sensoria (Alam, 2021), post-colonial society (Aruna, 2016), Quest for identity (Geetha & Sobana, 2021), ancient Indian belief system (Goswami, 2021), magical role of spices (Jona & Davis, 2019), representation of Indian diasporic women (Maria & Anil, 2021), lifestyle of Indians (Pauline & Muraleeswari, 2017), the role of nature and environment (Sanjeetha & Haneef, 2018), the concepts of myth and nation (Banerjee & Basu, 2014), and displacement and identity struggle (Ravikumar et al., 2023).

III. DISCUSSIONS

A. Sensory Landscapes and Cultural Identity

In 'her maiden novel' (Mirza, 2021, p. 230) *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni creates rich sensory landscapes, which are deeply intertwined with magical realism and cultural memory, and function not merely as backdrops but as major elements that shape character, identity, and cultural belonging. Harrini and Shanthichitra (2022) comment on culture as, "Culture plays a very important role in life of a person. Culture defines the person as a whole" (p. 244). They guide the narrative and influence the protagonists' internal journeys, linking personal transformation with ancestral wisdom. The sensory details are not incidental; they are intricately woven with magical realism and cultural identity, influencing the inner worlds of the characters. Their heightened sensitivity to the sensory world, whether through spices or dreams, marks them as different, and this uniqueness becomes both their strength and burden. It empowers them with insight and healing, but also isolates them and imposes responsibilities that challenge their personal desires and sense of belonging.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the island where Tilo trains under the First Mother is steeped in the tactile and aromatic essence of spices. "*Mistress of Spices* works as a channel to broadcast the previous value of Indian spices and its healing properties to the world" say Narwal and Gakhar (2021, p. 717). Each spice whether it is turmeric 'the spice of love and luck' (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 21), cinnamon, tulsi, or fenugreek, holds symbolic and medicinal value, representing ancestral knowledge and emotional healing. Tilo (Divakaruni, 1997) explains that, "Different spices may help us with different troubles... for each person there is one special spice" (p. 71). Tilo's heightened sensitivity to these elements defines her magical identity, but it also binds her to strict rules. Her connection to the spices becomes both a source of power and limitation, highlighting her struggle to balance personal desire with cultural duty.

In *Queen of Dreams*, the dreamscape forms a sensory world of mystery and emotion. Mrs. Gupta's inherited ability to interpret dreams links her to a mystical tradition rooted in Indian spirituality. Her sensory gift becomes a tool of cultural preservation and personal insight. However, her choice to marry, an act forbidden in her magical realm, causes her to lose this gift. Her longing to reclaim her dream-telling ability reflects a deeper desire to return to her cultural roots and spiritual purpose. Bharathi and Kalamani (2012) Comment, "The novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the possibility for establishing a bicultural identity in spite of Mrs. Gupta's initial refusal to transmit her culture" (p. 7).

Here, both Tilo and Mrs. Gupta are marked by their heightened sensory awareness, setting them apart from others. Divakaruni uses sensory landscapes to embody not just magical elements but also the emotional and cultural identities of her characters, offering a vivid portrayal of diasporic and mystical experiences. Hemavathy (2019) says, "The magic world that she manages to weave with her vivid imagination and lyrical prose is something that one has to experience first-hand" (p. 1).

B. Myth and Memory Bridging Past and Present Destiny

In the select novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores how myth and memory act as powerful forces that bridge the gap between the past and the present. Aruna (2016) mentions, "She (Divakaruni) fuses myth with magic and get success in achieving the literary flavors" (p. 97). The protagonists in both novels experience an ongoing internal conflict, a dilemma between living in the present world with its desires, duties, and identities, and the pull of a mystical, magical realm rooted in memory and myth. While the allure of a self-fashioned identity draws them forward, the weight of memory and myth pulls them back. This back-and-forth movement reflects not just personal confusion but also the larger diasporic tension of navigating between cultures. Destiny in these novels is portrayed as something inherited in tradition, duty, and spiritual legacy. Divakaruni presents destiny and fate not as rigid frameworks but as spiritual and emotional journeys that intertwine with cultural identity. The journey of each woman shows that identity is not solely inherited; it is also created through struggle, resistance, acceptance, and transformation.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist Tilo is a trained mistress who has mastered the mystical properties of spices. Although she resides in modern America, her identity is deeply rooted in the mythic traditions of an ancient sisterhood. She is caught between her spiritual obligations and her growing desire for human connection and individuality. Tilo's internal conflict intensifies when she falls in love with Raven. Though she attempts to live an ordinary life with him, her sacred duty as a mistress of spices prevents her from fully embracing this relationship. At the moment she resolves to relinquish her powers for the sake of love, a series of disturbances emerge, prompting her to reconsider her choices. Her vacillation between the mystical past and a modern life of love and freedom leads to emotional and spiritual turmoil. The magical realm of spices continues to summon her, reminding her of an identity she cannot wholly forsake. Tilo (Divakaruni, 1997) thinks, "the spice failing which is a failing of my life also" (p. 97).

Mrs. Gupta in *Queen of Dreams*, belongs to an ancient lineage of dream-tellers with the rare ability to interpret and influence dreams. She (Divakaruni, 2004) says, "I dream the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives" (p. 7). Though she embraces her marriage and attempts to assimilate into a conventional life, she is unable to detach herself from her past. The memories of her earlier role as a dream-teller haunt her, compelling her to revisit the mystical life she once led. Her dreams become not only symbols of memory but also agents of self-discovery and spiritual awakening. As her daughter gradually uncovers the secrets of her mother's past, she too becomes enmeshed in the world of dreams. These dreamscapes serve as portals to cultural identity, forgotten histories, and inherited wisdom.

"Myth deals with the fantastic, supernatural and divine. That will be reason for Divakaruni to take myth as her technique..." stress Devi and Vijayanand (2023, p. 234). In both novels, myth and memory are not passive themes but active forces that shape the protagonists' realities. Divakaruni portrays her characters as bridges through which her characters travel, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes reluctantly between who they are, and who they are becoming.

C. Dreams as Triggers in the Surreal and Subversive

In *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*, dreams emerge not only as mystical or psychological experiences but also as powerful tools of resistance. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses the dream world to challenge rigid boundaries between reality and the fantastical, allowing her protagonists to confront internal conflicts, rediscover their roots, and question societal expectations. Within these surreal spaces, dreams become sites of empowerment, offering clarity, truth, and purpose that remain hidden or suppressed in the waking world. Through dreams, the magical realm is kept alive, and the protagonists' true identities, rooted in myth, tradition, and cultural memory, are gradually revealed. Thus, dreams not only inspire magical action but also play a critical role in the characters' journey of self-realization and cultural belonging.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, although the protagonist's visions are not conventional dreams, they function in a similar capacity, offering spiritual guidance and revealing emotional truths that lie beneath the surface of her lived experiences. Her interactions with the spices often occur in trance-like, dreamlike states, connecting her to a deeper intuition and reminding her of her mystical origins. One notable instance is the recurring dream of Raven, who is saved by a raven from ending his life atop a mountain. This dream reveals his deeper purpose and leads him to Tilo, setting the foundation for the central events of the novel. The symbolic resonance of dreams in this context reinforces the narrative's spiritual undertones and illustrates how destiny unfolds through surreal, magical experiences. The First Mother (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 140) warns Tilo as, "Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate".

In *Queen of Dreams*, dreams play an even more central role in linking the characters to their cultural and spiritual legacies. The protagonist's mother, a dream-interpreter, maintains her identity by remaining anchored in the dream world, even as she struggles to reconcile it with her domestic life. For her daughter, dreams become a gateway to uncovering her mother's hidden past and, in the process, she understands her own fragmented identity. A particularly significant moment occurs when Rakhi has a dream in which she is pursued and seduced by a man, yet Mrs. Gupta, having lost much of her interpretive power, fails to warn her. This loss weighs heavily on her, as she reflects on the pain of no longer being able to protect her daughter: she "who interpreted dreams for a worldful of strangers, would never be able to explain to her daughter what her dreams meant or warn her away from the disasters of her life" (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 52). This loss compels Mrs. Gupta to reclaim her original powers and distance herself once more from the ordinary world. In both novels, dreams and dreamlike experiences act as subversive tools, offering healing, clarity, and resistance against the disintegration of cultural identity in the diaspora. Divakaruni's surreal and subversive dreamscapes enable characters to reclaim agency, navigate conflicting realities, and forge a path that honors both their heritage and individuality.

D. Forbidden Love and Marriage in Magical World

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents magical landscapes governed by unspoken rules, where love and marriage are often forbidden to those who possess otherworldly powers. The protagonists in the novels, who are gifted with spiritual insight or magical abilities, are bound by sacred laws that demand emotional detachment and sacrifice. Love, in these realms, is seen not as a source of strength but as a threat to magical discipline, something that can corrupt power and weaken the sacred duties assigned to them. When the protagonists fall in love, they feel that their powers are vanishing slowly and they are cursed. Though they acquire worldly power, their inner desires as human beings come out at certain

point which forces them to love and marry which is forbidden in their world. The result of such love and marriage is drastic which makes the protagonists suffer till the end.

Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, is trained in a mystical tradition where emotional involvement, particularly romantic love, is strictly prohibited. It is mentioned (Divakaruni, 1997) as, "...Mistress must leave her own passion behind" (p. 31). Her bond with the spices and her role as a healer depends on remaining detached from worldly desires. Her meet with Raven and his touch on her hands brings changes in her physic which results in her attraction towards him. However, she chooses to love despite knowing that this attachment will sever her from the magical world she belongs to. Tilo's desire for personal happiness and emotional fulfilment comes at a heavy cost that her powers begin to fade, and chaos ensues in both her inner world and the lives of those she seeks to help. Love becomes both a humanizing force and a destructive one, unraveling the carefully maintained balance of duty and power. She (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 219) says,

For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the Old one, not the awe I felt for the spices...the anger of spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose the love.

Though the romantic dimension is less overt, the theme of emotional conflict within a mystical framework is present in *Queen of Dreams*. Mrs. Gupta, a dream interpreter, is bound to a dream-world that demands isolation and secrecy. Unfortunately, she falls in love with Mr. Gupta and marries him in a temple and moves to abroad. After her marriage, she realizes that her magical power is vanished from her and she cannot be a dream interpreter. Her marriage to a mortal man represents a rupture in this mystical commitment, creating distance not only in her magical role but also in her relationship with her daughter. The tension between love and spiritual responsibility continues into the daughter's life, as she, too, grapples with relationships while uncovering her own ties to the magical realm. The consequence of breaking the mystical code through love is subtle yet deeply felt, resulting in estrangement, confusion, and an emotional cost that haunts both generations. Shaw and Banu (2023) interpret, "*Queen of Dreams* examines into the relationship between the conscious and subconscious mind" (p. 161).

Forbidden love, in this context, acts like a curse, which is tempting, powerful, yet often leading to destruction and loss. It also reflects the deeper theme of choice and sacrifice, raising questions about whether one can truly balance personal fulfilment with inherited spiritual roles.

E. Women as Guardians of Myth and Memory

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni places women at the heart of her narratives, portraying them as custodians of ancient wisdom, memory, and transformative power. Through their mystical roles and spiritual callings, they protect the sacred traditions and memories inherited from generations past. The protagonists are portrayed as unique individuals, entrusted with extraordinary powers having the ability to command the mystical spices or to interpret dreams that reveal deeper truths. Their lives are devoted to healing, guiding, and serving others, especially those in distress. In this way, they are born to bring change and relief to suffering people. However, the moment they begin to desire personal happiness or alter their lifestyle to fit into the everyday world, their magical order begins to unravel. The shift triggers inner turmoil and external consequences, turning their lives upside down. Ramana et al. (2022) observe, "The novel validates women's empowerment through articulation of their desires" (p. 6668).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo's connection to the mythic world of spices is deeply intertwined with her identity and sense of purpose. Her every action is governed by the rituals, discipline, and ancient knowledge imparted to her during her mystical training. She symbolically embodies the essence of the spices, regarded as divine gifts to the world, through her healing practices. Tilo (Divakaruni, 1997) proudly says, "I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone... But the spices are my love... They are the ones I work with" (p. 1). As a woman endowed with a nurturing, and motherly instinct, Tilo offers Ayurvedic treatments to those who suffer, addressing both physical ailments and emotional pain. Her devotion to this sacred duty is unwavering. However, a turning point emerges when she is forced to confront her personal desires and emotions. Despite this internal conflict, Tilo remains bound to her tradition, choosing to uphold her spiritual responsibilities, thereby demonstrating her deep-rooted dedication to preserving the cultural and mystical legacy she represents.

At the same time, in *Queen of Dreams*, the dream-teller's role is firmly rooted in myth and ancestral tradition. Although Mrs. Gupta attempts to lead a life that outwardly appears ordinary, her internal world continues to be shaped by her spiritual calling and inherited memory. She never fully abandons her mythic role, even when confronted with the demands of family life. Her willingness to distance herself from her family in order to reclaim her lost abilities reflects a profound loyalty to her origins. She (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 297) says, "I was not a good mother to Rakhi. I loved her, but not fully." Unlike Tilo, who primarily carries her legacy in silence, Mrs. Gupta actively shares her memories and insights through the *Journal of Dreams*. This written account serves not only as a repository of her own experiences but also as a means of passing on knowledge and preserving cultural memory for future generations. In both novels, the protagonists serve as guardians of tradition, demonstrating how myth and memory function as vital forces in shaping identity and sustaining cultural continuity.

Divakaruni thus presents her female characters as powerful yet restrained, spiritual yet human, burdened yet blessed, who "go through a variety of emotional struggles while trying to manage their daily lives" (Kavitha & Karthika, 2023, p. 219). They are the keepers of myth and memory, not just for themselves, but for their families and communities.

Through them, the novels explore how women carry the weight of cultural legacy, often at great personal cost, and how their silent resilience becomes a form of resistance and preservation.

F. Tradition and Transformation

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* vividly portray the tension and harmony between cultural tradition and personal transformation. The central women characters in these novels are rooted in age-old customs, spiritual roles, and inherited knowledge systems. Yet, their paths are far from static. They undergo gradual change as they confront the challenges of balancing their traditional responsibilities with personal emotions, desires, and identity. In the select novels transformation function as both a positive and negative force.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist Tilo undergoes multiple transformations throughout her life, each marking a shift in her identity and deepening her connection to tradition. "She is a woman who has lived many lives, many worlds" (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 215). Her journey begins as Nayantara, an unwanted daughter in a poor family, whose innate ability to foresee the future unexpectedly brings prosperity to her household. This early display of spiritual power sets her apart, marking the beginning of her mystical journey. She is later abducted by pirates and renamed Bhagyavati, before being rescued by snakes and transported to a magical island. There, she receives her final name, Tilo, and undergoes a rigorous training under the First Mother to become a Mistress of Spices. In this process, she relinquishes all memories and powers associated with her previous lives. However, in Oakland, Tilo is drawn into a personal transformation once again, assuming the form of a young, beautiful woman and entering into a romantic relationship with Raven. "By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at the beauty's summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone" (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 263). Despite these multiple shifts in form and identity, Tilo consistently strives to uphold the sacred tradition she was trained to protect.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Mrs. Gupta's transformation begins in her childhood when she is chosen and trained to become a dream-teller, a role that grants her spiritual identity and fulfillment. Her life, rooted in mystical wisdom, is shaped by discipline, secrecy, and service. However, transformation continues through her generational bond with her daughter, Rakhi. As a second-generation immigrant, Rakhi grapples with her dual identity, caught between the modern American world and the cultural mysticism of her heritage. She (Divakaruni, 2004) "...faces a sense of alienation in the sense of insider, outsider" (p. 32). As she uncovers the hidden layers of her mother's past, Rakhi undergoes her own transformation, a gradual realization of self, shaped by the inherited legacy of dream-telling. Thus, in both novels, transformation is not just physical or circumstantial but deeply spiritual and intergenerational, reflecting the protagonists' continual negotiation between tradition and selfhood.

Anju and Amrita (2018) suggest, "Divakaruni has insightfully presented the intricacies of human relationships conveying the nuances of cultural, emotional and familial discord" (p. 1). In both novels, transformation emerges as an act of internal growth, challenging rigid norms while still valuing the depth of cultural memory. Divakaruni suggests that transformation does not discard tradition but renews it.

IV. FINDINGS

The study reveals that Divakaruni effectively blends magical realism with cultural identity to portray the emotional and spiritual journeys of her protagonists. In both *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*, dreams and spices serve as symbolic tools that represent cultural memory, inner power, and the challenges of self-discovery. Magical realism in these novels becomes a medium for exploring the in-between spaces between cultures, generations, and realities. Women are depicted not just as carriers of tradition but as agents of change, who reinterpret their roles while striving to maintain balance between responsibility and selfhood. The findings suggest that Divakaruni's use of sensory symbols, myth, and dreamscape effectively captures the complexity of diasporic identity, where tradition and transformation coexist.

V. CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* offer rich narratives where magical realism serves as a gateway into deeper explorations of cultural identity, memory, and transformation. Through mystical elements like spices and dreams, Divakaruni presents women protagonists who embody the tensions between tradition and individuality, duty and desire, fate and self-realization. These women, while rooted in inherited roles and mythic pasts, redefine their identities through personal choice and emotional growth. The interplay of magical realism and cultural symbolism in these novels emphasizes how memory, myth, and the sensory world shape the characters' destinies. Rather than portraying culture as fixed or oppressive, Divakaruni reveals its evolving nature, one that adapts, resists, and renews itself through the lives of its bearers. Ultimately, the novels affirm that identity is not merely inherited but continuously forged through inner conflict, cultural connection, and spiritual awakening, making Divakaruni's work a significant contribution to diasporic literature.

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