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## **The Spice of Life: Magical Realism and Identity in ‘The Mistress of Spices’**

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### **Abstract**

Literature serves as a profound reflection of life, blending aesthetics and ethics to explore the human condition across time and space. Among the various literary forms, the novel stands out for its ability to articulate a nation's ethos, offering a flexible and accessible medium to address both contemporary and eternal concerns. In India, the rise of English-language literature, influenced by Western education and liberal ideas, has significantly contributed to the growth of the English novel. This paper focuses on the genre of magical realism in Indian literature, particularly in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*. Through an exploration of magical realism, the paper examines how Divakaruni integrates elements of the fantastical and the real to portray the complexities of the immigrant experience and the tension between tradition and modernity. The novel's protagonist, Tilo, uses spices to heal and guide people, and in doing so, experiences her own internal struggles related to identity, desire, and belonging. Divakaruni's use of magical realism allows for a deeper exploration of cultural, personal, and societal issues, blending the mystical with the mundane to offer both an imaginative and thought-provoking narrative. This paper highlights how magical realism serves as a powerful tool for Indian authors, enabling them to bridge cultural narratives, explore personal transformation, and offer a nuanced perspective on the immigrant experience. Through this lens, *The Mistress of Spices* exemplifies the evolving role of Indian literature in the English language, using imaginative storytelling to provoke critical reflection on the human experience.

**Keywords:** Magical Realism, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, Indian Literature, Identity, Immigration, Tradition, Modernity, Fiction, Aesthetics, Ethics.

The emergence of female English writers in India marks a significant turning point in the nation's literary landscape. This development not only signals a new era of hope and empowerment for Indian women but also reflects their growing participation in the public discourse through literature. Yet, despite these advancements, the spectre of societal subordination continues to affect women. This highlights the ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-expression, with many educated women taking up the pen to articulate their personal experiences and challenge the social structures that restrict their freedom. Through their

writing, they sought to convey the complexities of women's lives, reflecting both personal suffering and broader social reforms.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, India faced a number of social, economic, and political challenges, including rising unemployment and pervasive corruption. These problems shook the moral fabric of society, affecting the average man's sense of identity. In response, the focus of Indian fiction shifted from broader social and political concerns to more personal narratives, emphasizing emotional struggles and the quest for safety and security. The novelists of this period began to portray the inner lives of individuals, delving deeply into the personal agonies and emotional turmoil that arose from living in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

By the close of the twentieth century, the shift in Indian English fiction became more pronounced, as writers increasingly turned their attention to the private sphere, particularly family life. The psychological and emotional dilemmas faced by educated women became a central theme in the literature of the time. This focus on women's experiences within the domestic realm highlights the influence of Western feminist thought, which encouraged women to explore their own identities and assert their voices in a world that had long been dominated by patriarchal structures. Issues such as the crisis of self-identity, marital conflicts, and the search for self-fulfillment emerged as key concerns in these works.

This period in Indian literature saw a growing emphasis on the internal struggles of women, particularly in the realm of psychological anguish. The modern woman's quest for autonomy, recognition, and self-expression took center stage, as writers portrayed their characters grappling with their sense of identity, both within their immediate familial roles and within the larger socio-cultural context. The narrative was increasingly shaped from a female perspective, allowing for a more authentic and nuanced understanding of women's lives. This era also marked a significant shift in language, with writers using feminine discourse and expressions that were previously marginalized, giving voice to female subjectivity in ways that had not been explored in earlier literature.

As women writers gained prominence, their work became a powerful tool for reflecting and reshaping the narrative of Indian society. These women began to confront issues such as the limitations imposed on their roles, the demands of family life, and the constraints of tradition, using their writing as a platform for challenging the very fabric of patriarchal society. Their stories portrayed women as multi-dimensional characters, not merely as symbols of sacrifice or purity, but as individuals with desires, struggles, and complex inner lives. This marked a significant departure from earlier portrayals of women in literature, allowing for a broader, more diverse representation of womanhood in Indian fiction. Virginia Woolf writes:

"For most of history, Anonymous was a woman." (6)

The rise of female writers in India, particularly those writing in English, reflects a shift not only in the literary world but also in the broader societal understanding of women's roles. These writers not only address issues of gender and identity but also act as agents of social change, reflecting the complexities of modern life and the emotional lives of women. Their

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works highlight the ongoing struggle for equality and self-empowerment, offering a much-needed counter-narrative to traditional portrayals of women in Indian literature. Through their voices, the conversation on women's rights and societal reform continues to evolve, paving the way for future generations of women to share their stories and challenge the status quo.

Post-feminism is a complex and evolving concept that builds upon the foundation laid by feminism, arguing that, with the achievements of gender equality, women no longer require the feminist movement in its traditional form. This ideological stance suggests that women have attained the freedom to choose their paths, thereby eliminating the need for further feminist advocacy. Post-feminist literature reflects this shift by portraying women as active agents, no longer confined to passive roles of victimhood, inferiority, or subordination to men. Instead, female characters in post-feminist narratives are depicted as assertive, self-confident, and empowered, asserting their equality with men both in terms of status and opportunity.

One of the key tenets of post-feminism is the emphasis on metaphysics rather than historical constructs of gender inequality. Metaphysics, in this context, refers to the freedom of mind and action, highlighting the autonomy of women in shaping their identities and decisions. Post-feminist discourse suggests that women are no longer bound by the traditional societal structures that once constrained their roles. It posits that women now have the liberty to define their own destinies, unconstrained by patriarchal norms. This shift marks a departure from earlier feminist frameworks that focused heavily on historical and structural inequalities between men and women, advocating for changes in laws, policies, and societal structures.

However, post-feminism is not without its critics, particularly in the realm of feminist discourse. Notable feminist scholars, such as Uma Chakravarty, argue that the ongoing debate surrounding feminism should continue to examine the root causes of women's subordinate status. Chakravarty stresses the importance of understanding the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that continue to perpetuate gender inequality, even in societies that claim to have achieved gender equality. She suggests that, while women may have made significant strides in many areas, the persistent structural and ideological barriers must still be addressed in order to achieve true equality.

Post-feminism also probes into the idea of choice, particularly the concept that women are empowered to make their own decisions without being shackled by traditional gender expectations. While feminism has historically focused on dismantling barriers to women's choices, such as access to education, employment, and political representation, post-feminism takes this idea further by suggesting that women, having gained these freedoms, now enjoy the right to choose how they experience their lives, careers, and relationships. This autonomy is celebrated in post-feminist literature, where women are shown as characters who have mastered their own fate, making decisions that reflect their individual desires and ambitions rather than societal pressures. As Simone de Beauvoir (2009) famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). This statement highlights the social construction of gender roles, suggesting that women, once liberated from these roles, can shape their identities according to their own will.

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Nevertheless, this perspective is not universally embraced. Critics of post-feminism argue that it often overlooks the continued challenges women face, particularly those from marginalized groups. Issues like the gender pay gap, violence against women, unequal representation in leadership roles, and the underrepresentation of women in the media and academia remain significant barriers. Post-feminism's focus on individual choice may inadvertently downplay these systemic issues and the collective struggles of women, reducing the need for a continued feminist agenda. The challenges that women face are not merely individual but are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and economic structures that post-feminism can sometimes fail to address comprehensively.

Post-feminism presents an intriguing and often contested view of women's empowerment, emphasizing autonomy, choice, and equality. While it acknowledges the achievements of feminism in granting women greater agency, it also faces criticism for its potential to ignore or downplay ongoing structural inequalities. Uma Chakravathy says (2019):

Most of the time, women have been subordinated. This is a fact of life all over the world, with the extent and the form of this subordination based on the social, economic, and cultural environment in which women are placed. (Chakravarty 25)

Women, after centuries of silencing and subjugation, have begun to reclaim their narratives, speaking out about their personal experiences and fighting against not only institutionalized oppression but also the internalized norms that limit their potential. Modern feminism, in this sense, is less about striving for equal roles within an existing system and more about the freedom to redefine roles, identities, and relationships on one's own terms. In this evolving landscape, one of the most important early figures in shaping modern feminist thought was Virginia Woolf, whose works explored the complexities of women's inner lives and their struggle against societal norms. Woolf's advocacy for women's intellectual and creative freedom, particularly in her seminal essay "A Room of One's Own," (1911) remains a cornerstone of feminist theory. Her ideas about women's independence, both in terms of economic autonomy and intellectual expression, have deeply influenced the course of feminist discourse in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Parallel to these global feminist narratives, Indian literature in English has also reflected the changing roles and identities of women. One of the most prominent voices in this arena is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose works consistently address the complex and often painful intersections of gender, culture, and tradition. In her novels, Divakaruni portrays the struggles of the "New Woman" in contemporary Indian society, one who grapples with patriarchal expectations, familial duties, and the weight of societal norms. The female protagonists in Divakaruni's stories are multifaceted and resilient, embodying the strength and vulnerability of women caught between tradition and the modern world. Whether they are experiencing the oppressive structures of traditional family life or the demands of a patriarchal society, these women demonstrate a powerful struggle for agency, individuality, and self-expression.

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In novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni explores the personal and collective battles women face in reclaiming their independence. Her female characters, regardless of their social class or education, share a common thread: they resist those forces that seek to suppress their voices and limit their personal growth. Whether they are rich or poor, married or single, educated or uneducated, the women in Divakaruni's works fight against the silencing of their individuality. They are strong, bold, and fiercely determined to assert themselves in a world that has long relegated them to the background. These characters are not simply passive victims of their circumstances but active agents in their own lives, reshaping their futures despite the constraints of society and family.

Divakaruni's writing not only reflects the inner strength of her female characters but also critiques the cultural and social systems that continue to marginalize women. In doing so, her works resonate with contemporary feminist themes, including the quest for self-fulfillment, autonomy, and empowerment. Her portrayal of women is far from one-dimensional; instead, she presents a nuanced understanding of the complexities that shape their identities. Her characters are defined not only by the struggles they face but also by their ability to rise above them, creating new pathways for themselves and challenging the status quo.

The journey of feminism has evolved significantly, from a fight for basic equality to a more expansive and multifaceted struggle for empowerment, autonomy, and identity. While the feminist movement initially focused on achieving legal and social equality, it has grown to encompass deeper, more nuanced discussions about women's experiences, voices, and rights. Through their works, the women writers challenged traditional norms and offer new narratives of women's power, individuality, and self-determination, providing a much-needed counterpoint to the patriarchal systems that continue to shape our world. As women continue to speak out and assert their voices, literature will remain a powerful tool in this ongoing fight for gender equality and self-empowerment.

Throughout India's history, women have been at the forefront of the struggle for the nation's independence. Yet, even today, the battle for their true freedom continues, not from foreign rule, but from the stifling chains of superstition, tradition, and outdated customs. The modern woman seeks not just political or social liberty, but psychological autonomy. For centuries, the subjugation of women has been entrenched in religious and cultural practices. One religion may confine women to the domestic sphere, while other forces them to live behind the veil of purdah, while in yet another context, women themselves perpetuate the oppression by becoming perpetrators of the same restrictions that bind them.

One of the most striking examples of this cycle of subjugation is the transformation of a woman from a mother to a mother-in-law. This shift often illuminates the persistence of domestic violence and tension within the family. The domestic struggles between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law have the potential to escalate into an all-out war, often resulting in the destruction of the family unit. What is tragic is that the women involved in this conflict often fail to recognize that the mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law herself, and that the daughter-in-law may one day become the same. This generational cycle of victimhood and



aggression between women perpetuates itself, largely because of societal norms that pit them against each other rather than fostering solidarity. The saying, "when two birds fight over the same piece of bread, the cat will mediate," serves as a poignant metaphor for this situation. In households where such conflicts arise, the male figure often remains neutral, benefiting from the attention and care of both women without taking sides. This dynamic reflects a broader societal issue, where women are encouraged to compete with one another for male approval, leaving them divided and weakened.

However, this narrative cannot be generalized to all situations, nor can any single individual be blamed entirely for the dysfunction that results. Just as it takes both hands to create sound, it is not just one person but a complex interplay of cultural norms, familial expectations, and societal pressures that contribute to these dynamics. Therefore, while the issue of women's oppression is deeply rooted, solutions must also involve challenging these norms and fostering understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect between women. The fight for true independence for Indian women is an ongoing one, requiring not only the dismantling of external structures of power but also a transformation in internal attitudes and relationships.

### **Queen of Dreams**

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni encapsulates post-colonial and post-modern themes, exhibiting the defining characteristics of a hybrid culture. The protagonist, Tilo, a mystical figure known as the mistress of spices, possesses magical abilities that allow her to use spices to heal and guide the inhabitants of her community. Her magical powers provide not only physical healing but also emotional and psychological assistance, intertwining elements of mythology, realism, and faith with both the past and present. The novel thus combines the fantastical with the real, creating a vibrant and layered narrative that offers a deeper understanding of cultural identity, self-discovery, and the interplay between tradition and modernity.

One of the key literary techniques in *The Mistress of Spices* is magical realism, a style that has become one of the most influential of the 20th century. The term "magic realism" was coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, and it has since become synonymous with works that blend the fantastical with the ordinary, creating a narrative that transcends the boundaries of reality and imagination. Throughout the 20th century, magical realism gained both immense popularity and critical derision. Its oxymoronic nature suggesting a dichotomy between reality and fantasy serves as a tool for exploring deeper truths hidden within the surface of everyday life. According to Roh (1958), magic realism is not simply a blend of fact and imagination but a method for revealing the underlying mystery of everyday reality (14).

Magical realism as a narrative style aims to include elements of folk tales, fairy tales, fables, mythology, and epics, weaving these magical elements seamlessly into the fabric of the real world. It is a genre that incorporates political, mythological, and historical content, creating a nuanced depiction of reality. The roots of magic realism lie in European post-World War I art, and it was initially described by Franz Roh as the "New Objectivity" within post-expressionist art movements. However, its most significant contributions as a literary genre

emerged in Latin America, where authors like Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Carlos Fuentes brought it into global prominence. The genre's capacity to blend the magical with the real makes it a unique mode of storytelling that bridges cultures and histories. Notable authors, such as Márquez in his celebrated work *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and other influential voices like Gunter Grass, Ben Okri, Isabel Allende, and Salman Rushdie, further enriched the genre. In India, authors like Divakaruni also adopted this narrative technique to explore complex social realities and cultural tensions.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2017) probes into a world where the boundaries between magic and reality blur, creating a rich narrative that intertwines the mystical with the everyday lives of her protagonists. The novel employs magical realism, a genre that seamlessly merges the fantastical with the real, to explore the immigrant experience and the unique lives of those who experience the complexities of both the old world and the new. Through this technique, Divakaruni introduces readers to a universe where magical occurrences, such as dreams, telepathy, and intuition, reveal hidden truths about the characters' lives and futures. In the novel, dreams and other forms of intuitive magic serve as tools for guiding the characters through their emotional and physical struggles, making magic an intrinsic part of their reality.

The novel's protagonist, Tilo (Tilotamma), is a "spice mistress" and a priestess entrusted with the magical secrets of spices. She is a woman imbued with ancient knowledge, trained in the mystical properties of various spices, and appointed as the protector of these secrets. Spices, for Tilo, represent both her vocation and her passion. As she asserts, "From amchur to zafran, they bow to my authority. At a whisper they yield up to their hidden properties, their magical powers" (35). Tilo's mastery over these spices allows her to heal the ailments of immigrants and the Indian expatriate community in America, blending the therapeutic power of the spices with the wisdom of ancient traditions.

Tilo's magical ability extends beyond her knowledge of spices; she is also gifted with second sight, which allows her to foresee future events. This ability earns her the name Nayan Tara, or "Star of the Eye," symbolizing her power as a seer (52). Though she is initially neglected by her parents, her prophetic ability eventually brings her fame and attention. She uses her gift to generate income for her family, but as her reputation grows, so does her influence. Tilo's life takes a dramatic turn when she is kidnapped by pirates, who rename her Bhagyavati, meaning "Bringer of Luck." Tilo soon overthrows the pirate captain, claiming power for herself and rising to become the pirate queen. She later creates a storm to escape her captors, and sea serpents, drawn to her magical abilities, come to her aid. The sea serpents reveal to her that she is destined to become the Sarpakanya, a powerful being with the ability to wield the magic of spices, and they guide her to an island where an elderly woman, the ruler of the island, will teach her the ancient art of spices (78-85).

The narrative of *The Mistress of Spices* is deeply rooted in the themes of myth, magic, and self-discovery. Through the use of magical realism, Divakaruni creates a unique world where magic is not just an abstract concept but a living force that shapes the lives of the

characters. The story reflects the complexities of the immigrant experience, as Tilo's journey from an isolated young girl to a powerful and wise woman mirrors the challenges faced by many immigrants who seek to preserve their cultural identities while adapting to new environments. Divakaruni's blending of the fantastical and the real invites readers to reflect on the intersections of magic, identity, and cultural belonging, making *The Mistress of Spices* a rich and thought-provoking work.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, the protagonist, realizes that her intense desire to master the art of spices can be encapsulated in the phrase "spice lust." This overwhelming urge propels her to the island where she seeks to become the apprentice of the elderly woman, a powerful mistress of spices. However, before Tilo can attain this mastery, she must surrender her personal desires to adhere to the rigorous laws of being a spice mistress. The transformation process involves entering Shampathi's purifying fire, where the mistresses are transformed into elderly women in order to rid themselves of worldly desires (72). When Tilo expresses her wish to be named "Tilo," the old woman hesitates because the name Tilottama is already associated with a divine apsara in Lord Indra's court, who was punished for her desires. Nevertheless, Tilo reassures the old woman that she will never falter, and so she enters the fire, determined to shed her personal longings and embrace her new role as a mistress of spices (74).

Before the transformation, the old woman gives Tilo a dagger, symbolizing the need to guard against succumbing to her passions, and a piece of ginger root to help her maintain her vows. This ginger root represents the power to resist temptation and stay true to the path of the spice mistress. When Tilo emerges from Shampathi's fire, she is awakened as an elderly version of Tilottama, now living in Oakland (79). The spices seem to exert a subtle influence on her, guiding her actions and reminding her of the rules she must follow. Each time she seems to violate the mistress's law, the spices intervene, opposing her behaviour (80).

As Tilo begins her work, she helps the people who seek her out by offering them the appropriate spices based on their issues. Each spice is associated with a specific day, and sometimes the spices seem to sing in her hands, enhancing her ability to connect with the individuals who come to her for assistance. Despite the magical elements at play, Tilo finds herself torn between her mistress code of detachment and her compassion for those who come to her seeking help (85). One example of this conflict arises with Ahuja's wife, a young woman who had previously visited Tilo's shop weekly before being forced into marriage. Ahuja, a security guard, forbids her from working, believing it to be a man's role. Tilo, sympathetic to Ahuja's wife, gives her hope through the spice turmeric, which is known for its healing and fortifying properties (87). Later, Ahuja's wife returns, telling Tilo that she can no longer tolerate her husband's oppressive behaviour. Tilo offers her fennel, a spice that provides the strength and fortitude to endure life's trials, urging both the wife and Ahuja to consume it to find inner strength (92).

Another instance where Tilo aids someone is with Haroun, a cab driver dissatisfied with his job. Recognizing Haroun's frustration, Tilo decides to assist him by selecting a spice that



will help him find clarity and peace. She chooses Kalojire, a spice associated with the dark planet Ketu, which is believed to shield one from the evil eye and protect them from negative influences (95). In doing so, Tilo helps Haroun overcome his dissatisfaction and rediscover purpose in his life. This episode further demonstrates Tilo's inner conflict as she experiences the responsibilities of her role while still maintaining her compassion for the human experiences around her.

The tension between Tilo's spiritual duties as a spice mistress and her emotional empathy for those in need serves as a catalyst for much of the novel's conflict. Divakaruni masterfully uses magical realism to explore the inner turmoil of the protagonist and the lives of the individuals she touches, bringing a supernatural element to the otherwise ordinary struggles of immigrant life in America. Tilo's journey is one of self-discovery and transformation, both for herself and for the people she helps.

Jagjit, a young Indian boy, struggles to find acceptance in the United States. His peers mock and bully him due to his accent and background. In an effort to help him, Tilo, the spice mistress, places cinnamon in Jaggi's turban. Cinnamon is a powerful spice, known for its ability to give strength and vigor to both the body and the mind. With the strength of the spice, Jagjit finds the courage to speak out against the bullying and the injustices he faces (110). However, his newfound bravery comes at a cost: the spices begin to turn against him, punishing Tilo for breaking the sacred rules of the mistress. To rectify her mistake, Tilo feeds Jagjit manjistha, a spice known to purify and calm the blood, hoping to restore the balance she has disrupted (115).

Geeta, an Indian girl from a Bengali family, finds herself estranged from her family when she declares her love for a man. Tilo uses the spices to reunite Geeta's family, combining almonds and saffron into a powder to be boiled in milk. The mixture is meant to "soften your words and thoughts, to recall the love buried beneath your rage" (120). Yet, the spices turn against Tilo once again, as she chooses to visit Geeta in her office. In an effort to help Geeta further, Tilo offers a blend of 'methi' (fenugreek) to heal the breaks in the family and 'ada' (ginger) for courage (122). That night, Tilo has a dream in which she converses with the First Mother across space and time. The Old One's invisible presence warns her, saying, "Do not allow America to reduce you to unimaginable tragedies. Dreaming about love, do not stir up the spices' animosity" (125).

When Raven enters the spice shop, Tilo is unable to read his thoughts or find the right spice to aid him. In her inability to find a specific spice, she resorts to 'mahamul', a root known to bring good luck and success, and to ward off bad fortune. Despite the mystic quality of Raven, who is drawn to Tilo's beauty and has a profound ability to see beyond her outward form, Tilo gives him peppercorn. The pepper induces Raven to sweat out his secrets, and he eventually shares with Tilo his own story, revealing that he believes she can help him unlock the secret power he failed to inherit from his great-grandfather (130).

To help unite Geeta's family, Tilo offers Geeta's grandfather 'kantak', a thorn herb known for its poisonous black needles. She instructs him to combine it with his dinner rice, as it will give him a "golden tongue" for one hour, allowing him to speak with clarity and

persuasion (135). Meanwhile, Marakadwaj, the king of spices, resides in the inner chamber, and it is this spice that holds the power to transform Tilo into a beautiful maiden. Despite the sacredness of the spice and the dire consequences it could cause if misused, Tilo ultimately violates the most sacred rule. The spice, if mishandled, can lead to insanity or death. Tilo consumes it in a single sitting, feeling immediate changes in her body (145).

After spending time with Raven, Tilo returns to her spice shop, bringing with her spices, lentils, rice, and other ingredients for her ritual. She builds a bonfire in the center of the room and prepares to enter the inferno of Shampati, a fire that will purify her. Dipping her hands in turmeric, she sits in lotus asana on a pile of spices, withdrawing from all attachments and experiencing an unexpected calm (150). Tilo recites the final incantations, holding up the last chili from the jar. However, nothing happens. She grows desperate, crying and trying various chants, apologizing to the spices for her transgressions. The ground trembles, and just before she can understand the force at work, it jerks violently (155).

Raven plays a pivotal role in *The Mistress of Spices*, protecting Tilo as she experiences the complexities of her magical and personal journey. As Tilo faces her trials, Raven reassures her, explaining that her acceptance of her fate in her heart was enough to alleviate the burden on her body:

"That was sufficient, mistress, when you accepted our sentence in your heart without resistance. Having prepared your mind for hardship, you did not need to endure it in body as well" (305).

This moment signifies the power of internal acceptance and strength in the face of challenges, as Tilo learns to align her mind with the hardships she faces, both mystical and real. Raven's words offer Tilo a kind of spiritual freedom, allowing her to transcend the physical trials and embrace her fate with grace.

As Tilo undergoes significant changes, she also gives her "Maya" a new name, symbolizing her transformation.

"In the Old tongue, it might have multiple meanings. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the force that sustains this imperfect reality on a daily basis" (317).

This renaming reflects the novel's exploration of identity, reality, and illusion, with the concept of "Maya" acting as a central theme. In this context, Maya becomes more than just a name, it represents the delicate balance between the real and the fantastical, between the material and the spiritual realms. Tilo's interaction with this powerful concept highlights the intersection of personal growth and cosmic understanding, blurring the lines between magical forces and human agency.

Divakaruni's novel is a rich tapestry of magical realism, weaving together images of various realms filled with magic, myth, and the historical significance of spices. The use of magic realism in *The Mistress of Spices* is a powerful narrative tool that allows the author to merge the supernatural with the ordinary, creating a world where both the mystical and the real coexist seamlessly. Spices, which hold deep socio-cultural significance, are integral to the protagonist's life and are imbued with mystical properties that affect both her and the people

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she encounters. The magical elements in the story are not merely fantastical; they are rooted in the cultural and historical significance of the spices that Tilo uses. These spices symbolize more than just physical healing and they represent a deeper connection to the cultural heritage and the identity of the characters, especially for the immigrant community that Tilo serves.

By incorporating magical realism, Divakaruni not only expands the boundaries of reality but also invites her readers to reconsider the nature of existence itself. Magic realism, as a literary genre, allows Divakaruni to elevate the ordinary into the extraordinary, bringing attention to aspects of human experience that might otherwise remain overlooked. The supernatural elements in the novel fill in the gaps of the forgotten past, addressing historical, political, and social factors that continue to shape the present. The result is a narrative that is both grounded in reality and infused with myth, magic, and spiritual wisdom, creating a rich and complex world that speaks to the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and transformation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni successfully merges the mystical with the everyday, using magical realism to explore the conflicts that arise when different cultures, histories, and identities collide. The novel presents a world where the boundaries between reality and fantasy are fluid, allowing for a deeper exploration of the immigrant experience and the power of tradition in shaping one's life. Through this literary style, Divakaruni opens a space for her readers to experience not only the struggles of the protagonist but also the broader implications of cultural and spiritual connections that transcend time and space.

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