

**MAGIC REALISM IN THE SELECT WORKS OF
GITHA HARIHARAN, CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI
AND KIRAN DESAI**

Synopsis

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By

K. Deepshikha

Reg. No. F9033

Under the Supervision of

Dr. Mary Magdalene Abraham

Associate Professor

Research Centre of English

Fatima College (Autonomous)

Madurai – 625 018.



MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

MADURAI – 625 021

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**MAGIC REALISM IN THE SELECT WORKS OF GITHA
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SYNOPSIS

This thesis analyses the select novels of three novelists- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githa Hariharan and Kiran Desai using the framework of magic realism. The thesis is divided into five chapters. A brief summary of the thesis is as follows:

The first chapter introduces Diasporic literature as Divakaruni and Desai belong to the Indian Diaspora and women writers in general, giving a brief review of Indian fiction in English created by Indian women writers of the recent past. This is followed by a note on the lives and works of the authors chosen for this study.

The traditional form of story-telling guided by writers like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and G. V. Desani, was consolidated and carried forward by Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Singh, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai. The 1980's witnessed a transformation of writing as an effective medium of contemporary literary expression through the writings of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Raj Kamal Jha and others. The surge in women's writings in English and other regional languages is one of the most remarkable features of contemporary Indian English Literature.

It has been accepted from ancient times that women were natural story tellers. Their creativity found place in the oral traditions. Neglected as writers, women have now made a

mark in the literary field. The Indian Diaspora is considered the second largest in the world with its diversified global presence. The most notable Indian diasporic writers are Salman Rushdie, Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, V.S. Naipaul, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to name a few.

The presence and use of magic realism in the literary works by three Indian authors, namely, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githa Hariharan, and Kiran Desai has been studied at length. The researcher found numerous instances which fit into the tradition of magic realism and hence felt it a viable proposition to pursue research in this area.

Moved by the twin forces of the pre-immigration and post-immigration circumstances, touched by the pains of women in a male dominated civilization, and stimulated by the aspiration to safeguard memories, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kiran Desai began writing their works with the touch of magic realism. Not stopping with the diasporic writers Magic Realism was one of the favourites among the other Indian writers also. One such example is Githa Hariharan who use magic realism in a unique way as the reality is brought into myth (magic) against the usual way of bringing magic into the domain of reality.

Chapter II titled “The Defamiliarized World of Magic Realism” traces the history of Magic Realism. It also traces the nuances of the theory and elaborates on the themes associated with Magic Realism.

Magic realism is a literary or artistic genre in which realistic narrative techniques are combined with elements of dream or fantasy. It is an aesthetic style or genre of fiction in which magical elements blend with the real world. The plot presents these magical elements as real occurrences, in a straightforward manner that places the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’ in the

same stream of thought. Although it is most commonly used as a literary genre, magic realism also applies to film and the visual arts. The origin of magic realism can be traced back to earlier times, but the term was coined by Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a tendency in German painting in the early twenties. Later, Magic Realism encompassed European painting, literature, and film making.

The majority of the people in the world believe in some kind of God or religion and all of us have heard of (or at least seen in movies) the parting of the Red Sea for Moses to lead his followers, the wondrous feats of Hanuman bringing the mountain containing Sanjeevini to Lanka from the Himalayas or the disrobing of Draupadi in Mahabharata. It is the art of narration. Not all can narrate a story or myth so convincingly that the listener identifies himself/herself with the character and lives the role without a semblance of doubt as to whether such a thing/event is possible. The question of doubt or incredibility does not enter the picture at all. The thought of whether the Red Sea did actually part to allow Moses, does not enter one's mind. Neither does one question whether Lord Krishna helped Draupadi with unending yards of saree to protect her chastity when she cried for help as she was being disrobed by the kauravas.

This element of conviction is what gives life and meaning to mythology. The element of doubt never crosses the mind of both the narrator and the listener. This element of magic realism has been the backbone of all mythologies. As long as it was considered mythology it was not given a name. Gabriel Garcia Marquez used this tradition of oral narration and created written literary masterpieces. Thus even though the concept without being termed 'magic realism' was in existence, the moment it appeared in black and white in print form it was welcomed with the new label 'Magic Realism'.

The magic realist narrative strategy may attempt persuasion with the mythic as part of its aesthetic appeal but it allows the reader to decide if the fantastical events of the narrative are true. The evolution of this method of reading myth in literature will eventually include inter-regional studies of fictions from around the world that will further probe and question our reading practice. Myth often ends up expressing pride in a past grandeur and nostalgia for a time when that culture was both unchallenged and pure. Mythology is an additional theme which can be discussed and used as a concurrent theme to magic realism.

Magic Realism employs various techniques common to this movement: hyperbole as exaggerated effects, the use of mythological or religious elements, ghosts, and living people; characterizations of people communicating between the now and the hereafter, and intermingling of events of time in random sequences of time. Magic Realism can be seen as a combination of reality, myth, magic, and fantasy, terms that Latin Americans often identify with because all of these terms are important elements in the diverse but unique cultures created by the sudden juxtaposition of the primitive cultures with the of modern society.

Magic realism as a technique of transforming the fantastic into reality is represented by Chitra Banerjee. She has the ability to turn the unbelievable into the believable, as demonstrated in *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and *The Conch Bearer*. Through magic realism she conveys a reality that incorporates magic, superstition, religion and history which are unquestionably infused into the world. Hence magic realism is an aesthetic style or genre of fiction in which magical elements blends with real world, Myth and magic has also become a perennial source of themes for literary writers like Chitra Banerjee.

Chapter III titled “The Marvellous and the Mundane” examines the select works of Githa Hariharan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kiran Desai. In doing so the style and the symbols of the works chosen for study are discussed in detail.

The victims are bound to play various roles demanded by culture and society against their will. The Indian feminist has to combat national and local problems even if she is part of the present-day feminist society. While this chapter discusses Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* and Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the following chapter will examine Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams*, *The Conch Bearer*, *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* and *Shadowland*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s originality, literary value and her importance for posterity rise above the mere connection to her heritage and to the issues pertaining to (South Asian) women living in a new environment. Rather, Divakaruni’s literature represents a daring yet also smooth and spontaneous interaction between various worlds and ways of existence, those considered as real and those considered as supernatural or imaginary. The characters in her novels are placed in social settings where the supernatural is a commonplace and a regular companion to the daily events, although the humans who hold power continue in their endeavours to bend these powers so as to use them for their personal gain.

Cultural displacement and quest for identity are the major concerns of post colonial writing. The novel *The Mistress of Spices*, addresses both these issues. The identity which the protagonist Tilo has to create for herself has been focused and discussed. Tilo has to reinvent herself many times over. Her life shows her the struggle to get noticed in society. Tilo

undergoes a search and journey to find her true self through various identities without realising it in the beginning. The purpose for Tilo's existence changes according to the environment she lives in. Finally it ends in love.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* unfolds the different aspects of the life of Mrs Gupta and her daughter Rakhi such as their professions, personal and social relationships. The unending turmoil in the mind and heart of Mrs. Gupta and Rakhi is dealt with. Rakhi's parenthood is expressed well when readers come to know how hard she has worked to establish a routine for her child to see her do better in life. The novel ends on a hopeful note of repaired relationships.

Myth is a prominent element in Divakaruni's novels. Basically, her novels are reminiscences of all Indian aspects ranging across myth, culture, land, food and even spices with the typical diasporic nostalgia. In a distinctive fashion, *The Conch Bearer* is labeled as children's fiction. It appeals especially to the children of the Indian diaspora in America. Herself an Indian diasporan, she attempts to educate the children about Indianness. While commenting on her book, *The Conch Bearer*, Divakaruni rationalizes the importance of teaching children about diverse cultures. If children are able to appreciate the characters in books, in real life too, they can be tolerant towards people of other cultures. Another noteworthy feature of the novel is the style of narration in a way that lures children to its adventurous hero Anand, his magician like guide Abhaydatta, their game like expedition with difficult levels and final winning of the prize, the conch. Likewise, the author handles her usual themes in a way suitable for children to imbibe values. The central conflict between good and evil and the value of protecting ecology is taught to the children through this trilogy *The Brotherhood of the Conch*. The trilogy parallels the subjects of myth, history and science and creates an assumption that all the three are equally substantial for human life.

Kiran Desai is the other writer under study. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a novel which makes interesting reading as life is seen as 'orderly disorder'. Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is an allegorical representation of life as a 'Hullabaloo' or an uproar. She has examined the multiple layers of absurdly chaotic nature of life in this novel. Sampath Chawla, the protagonist is a representation of nature who is born exactly at the point of historical transition between nature's two extremities of drought and flood. At the time of his birth, drought ends and the monsoon begins. The novel traces his life from his celebrated birth to the dull upbringing and to the exciting climax. The author has made a fine distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' through the lives of characters.

Omnipotence of nature is juxtaposed with the helpless absurd lives of human beings. The collective life of the society and the lives of Sampath and his mother Kulfi in particular have been represented as absurd. The novel seems to hold the view that life is meaningless and absurdity is the only truth. The novel also treats life as innately chaotic. Chaos goes hand in hand with absurdity.

Modernisation of myths is a prominent aspect in Githa Hariharan's novels. *When Dreams Travel* is a classic example as it is a revisitation of the traditional *Arabian Nights* in the context of feminism. The novel brings out an alternative perspective on the archetypal image of women and their personalities. *When dreams travel* exclusively focuses on sexuality and power with their cascading components operating in the realm of femininity instead of the typical domestic domain. Unlike the traditional *Arabian Nights*, each minor female character has been given a voice of equal importance.

Chapter IV titled "The Magical Realist World of Hariharan, Divakaruni and Desai" analyses the novels chosen for study from the point of view of Magic Realism.

It is the researcher's contention that the power of Magic Realism gives a new identity to the women characters in these novels. It also empowers them to touch the lives of all around them. It is about unravelling truths through the elements of magic realism in the novels chosen by the researcher. Magic realism is a literary style that features the supernatural or magical elements as an aspect of an everyday, realistic setting. The use of magic realism often reveals political problems and social concerns that are concealed in the world of power. Though the cultures in which the works were produced differ from one another, the writers employ the style of magic realism as an approach of writing against aspects of the dominant patriarchal social system and suppression of women. Through analyzing passages from each novel which represent instances of the supernatural within the text, this thesis seeks to identify the aspects and elements of magic realism. The female characters like Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, Mrs. Gupta and her daughter Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*, Nisha in *The Brotherhood of the Conch*, Kulfi in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and Shahrzad, Dunyazad and Dilshad in *When Dreams Travel* are caught in the warp and weft of magic realism. The presence of the magical/mythic acts as an alternative world, an escape from oppression, and also as a means of empowerment against the oppression. This chapter makes us understand the unique ability of magic realist texts to allow for imagining a supernatural world within the conventional and the ability of magic realist writers to speak for those who cannot.

In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, the spices are portrayed as if they have the magical power to speak to Tilo. When she holds the spices in her hands, they magically 'speak' to her. The 'calling thought' is one of the components of magic realism which is effectively used. Whenever Tilo was in need or facing a crisis, she would talk to the 'Old One' from whom she learnt the power of spices. She speaks about the power of the calling

thought. She uses the calling thought, to conjure the elements. Snakes were her friends and they help her when in distress. They speak to her. For instance, in the heat cracked fields behind her father's house, the land snakes shielded her from sun when she was tired with playing. Another important magic realistic aspect found in the novel is the 'Shampati's Fire'. This fire gives new life to the 'mistresses' of spices as one gains a new identity, and is magically transported to a far away land.

When ten and a half year old Jagjit, is traumatised at school and physically harassed for wearing a green turban, Tilo uses her magical spice 'crushed' clove and cardamom to make his breath fragrant. She scatters cardamom on the night wind to open his teacher's unseeing mind. The sweet pungent clove, spice of compassion, makes his mother understand his situation at school and hold him dear to her heart. She also tucks cinnamon- the friend maker, unseen into his turban, just before he leaves for school. Magically, all of Jagjit's problems disappear.

Like the spice island in *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Brotherhood of the Conch* has the Silver Valley. The old man one of the 'Healers' of the Silver Valley was trained in many arts. But according to each one's temperament, he developed one special power. His was the power of remembrance and forgetting. It meant that he could help people to remember what they needed to remember, and to forget what was better for them to forget. This was evident when the old man healed Anand's sister Meera, whose life was ruined after she happened to witness an accident on the road. The incident had a deep impact on her and she was dumb for years. In, *The Conch Bearer*, the main characters travel within the present time from the earthly, mundane world to a divinely magical world. In *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, they travel from the present to the past. Divakaruni takes the readers to the future in the final

sequel *Shadowland*. The characters are made to forget their real identities and embrace a new identity.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* is replete with cross-cultural connections and is spiked with mystery, suspense and the supernatural. There are numerous magical elements which turn into reality in *Queen of Dreams*. The readers are introduced to the snake as a symbol to remind Mrs. Gupta's duty as a dreamer who dreams the dreams of others. As a child, Mrs. Gupta was taken away from the slums to the caves of dream tellers where she was taught to use her talent by the 'dream teachers' who were addressed as 'Elder'. They are brought up with the power of dreams that enable them to reach out to people around them, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems by dreaming their dreams.

Sometimes they get a 'warning dream' which they must convey to the person it is meant for, a person whose mind is too thick for the dream spirit to pierce. In the progress of dream telling each dream teller is guided by a guardian spirit. For those who need extra guidance a messenger may appear which will be the last chance for the dream tellers to grasp the truth of the dream time. Those who are fortunate and blessed by the dream will live long in the world helping many souls but the others would receive a message at the moment of death and will be inseparable from it. Mrs. Gupta helps her daughter Rakhi by dreaming her dreams and helping her to face reality. Thus the novel presents a fine blend of magic realism through the life of the queen of dreams.

Kiran Desai describes magic realism as an exaggerated reality. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the mundane background and characters are transformed into something unique having their own identity through her rich imaginative colouring and perceptive humour. The instances like a normal guava inflating itself and exploding like a bomb, onions

growing large beneath the feet, creepers bursting from the floorboards, fish swimming beneath the doors, clearly tell us how largely the element of magic realism is used.

In *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan deconstructs the original myth by revising its misogynistic discourse and redefining the characters. The author has employed magic realism as a narrative technique to unfold the repressed female psyche. The novel centres around three female protagonists and their stories with balanced proportions of both reality and magic. The protagonist, Shahrzad delves deeper into the magical nature of her dreams which is the source of her stories. In this novel both magic realism and metafictional modes of narration go hand in hand. The seven pairs of stories told by Dunyazad and Dilshad (her slave) infuse the real world into the magical one. In the frame story of part two, Dunyazad encounters a supernatural experience when she visits her sister's grave. She senses a shadowy figure come up to her and turn her around. She was also able to feel a cautious, regular breath on her face, and then to her surprise she was lifted off the floor and carried into a marble enclosure. In one of Dunyazad's stories, her father Wazir in real life goes towards an oasis in search of water and a supernatural voice guides him. The voice reminds him of the Sultan's cruelty of innocent women as well as Wazir's part in it. In another story, Wazir meets the sultan's messenger who demands that he bring his daughter to the sultan. Wazir buries her in order to save her. Later he digs up the place and finds only a goat.

Thus *When Dreams Travel* has manipulated magic realism to trace the suppressed feminine reality in myths. Also it is noteworthy that Hariharan's use of magic realism is unique as it brings reality into myth (magic) against the usual way of bringing magic into the domain of reality. *When Dreams Travel* is a combination of realism in themes and magic in narration.

The fifth chapter is the summing up of the entire thesis. The inexpressible realm of the female world of reality is captured by magic realism. The magical narrations are sometimes symbolic of the physical and emotional threats to women by men. When reading through the novels based on magic realism, it has to be noted that most of those novels have female protagonists. What is striking about these women characters is that their lives are tinged with sadness. They all struggle hard to survive and at sometime would have been suppressed and isolated by the society. Despite not getting due recognition they strive to live and carve an identity of their own, that too a unique one. This happens with the writers' magic. In order to give visibility to the protagonist, the writers introduce magic realism which brings out the inner desires of the protagonists who till then lived a shrouded life. The power of magic realism not only gives them a new identity but also makes them immensely popular touching the lives of all around them.