

Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor's *Mama Day*

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**Susana Vega-González,**

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor's *Mama Day*," Susana Vega-González analyzes the intertextual connections between these two novels. In Vega-González's view, the texts discussed transcend their authors' different ethnic and ethno-cultural backgrounds and appeal to universalisms found in literature. Vega-González proposes that writing from a bi-cultural perspective, Indian American Chitra B. Divakaruni and African American Gloria Naylor share both content and stylistic features in their acclaimed novels. Their conscious effort to dissolve established boundaries as well as their ethno-cultural legacies leads these authors to a magic realistic approach, an apt means to reflect their own conception of the world and of the act of narration. In Divakaruni's and Naylor's fiction, the interaction between the mythical, the supernatural, and the everyday reality and the interplay between past and present point to the advocacy of a hybridity that negotiates and transcends boundaries. According to Vega-González, reading these two novels we can conclude that, although coming from different ethno-cultural contexts within the common setting of the United States, Naylor and Divakaruni adhere to magical realism as an apt means to synthesize divergent conceptions of the world and to advocate eclectic positions.

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**Susana Vega-González**

### **Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor's *Mama Day***

Despite their different ethno-cultural backgrounds and life experiences, Chitra B. Divakaruni and Gloria Naylor share more than their belonging to the group of so-called "minority" writers in the United States. In two of their most acclaimed novels, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Mama Day* (1988), they venture into the unfathomable world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence in the "patchwork quilt" that constitute the United States of America (Naylor, Interview with Charles H. Rowell 190). Many other ethnic writers have undoubtedly contributed to the stream of what we could term "ethnic magic realism" in the last decades. As Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar aptly argue, "the seventies and eighties have witnessed ... the reentry of the supernatural into mainstream literature. This is especially true in the case of women writers, and perhaps ascribable in part to the increased publication of women of color by mainstream presses" (9-10). Well-known authors such as African American Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, Native American Louise Erdrich, Asian American Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston have all pushed the boundaries of the real into the beyond. And Divakaruni has clearly acknowledged the influence some of these writers exert on her fiction (see "A Woman's Places" <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98apr/index.htm>>).

Both Divakaruni and Naylor have acknowledged their intention to transcend consciously the established boundaries of the real and to devote their literature to magic and spirituality. This objective is based on the autobiographic experiences that impregnated their childhood through the tales they heard from their grandparents (see Innes 1). In one of her interviews, Divakaruni answers a question about her use of fantasy in her novel as follows: "A writer should push boundaries, and I wanted to try something new, take risks ... all this risk-taking ... involves bridging barriers, doing away with boundaries: not only boundaries between life and death, the everyday world and the mythic one, but with the thought that perhaps the boundaries we created in our lives are not real. I'm talking about the boundaries that separate communities and people" (see "The Spice of Life" <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/05.08.97/books-9719.html>>). And Toni Morrison makes a similar statement when she argues that: "el uso de la fantasía me permite llegar más lejos, me otorga un mayor espectro de posibilidades. Me permite introducir ciertos interrogantes de orden político, histórico y estético. Gracias a ciertos encantamientos, no me veo constreñida por los límites de lo que se suele denominar realismo. En el mundo poscolonial, lo que para mucha gente es real se reviste de caracteres tan extraños, tan exagerados, que no es posible representarlo adecuadamente por medio de un lenguaje realista" ("La Magia Creativa de Toni Morrison" 5). Divakaruni, for instance, explains how a near-death hospital experience, in which she was "hovering between life and death" triggered her focus on boundaries and how that experience "gave birth to the main character of the book, Tilo, the mistress of spices, who moves back and forth between one existence and another" (see "The Spice of Life" <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/05.08.97/books-9719.html>>).

Likewise, Naylor analyzes the genesis of her novel in these terms: "When I got to *Mama Day*, I wanted to ... write about what I believed. And I believe in the power of love and the power of magic -- sometimes I think that they are one and the same. *Mama* is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles" (Interview with Angels Carabi 42). With that similar purpose in mind, both authors produced, with a time difference of nine years, two much-acclaimed novels that share the main parameters of magical realism as well as strong symbolic connections which I explore in this study. Having as a starting point the loaded image of the island and the magic powers that stem from it, these novels fuse fantasy and reality into a hybrid world where neither of them is excluded. Spirituality and the folk beliefs of the ancestors intermingle with the social circumstances of African American and Indian American women, whose experience of involuntary and voluntary immigration into the United States marks their identity.

When dealing with magical realism in West African fiction, Brenda Cooper refers to the concept of

hybridity as "a fundamental aspect of magical realist writing," together with the idea of transition, change, borders, and ambiguity, concluding that "such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies, and where there is the syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created" (15). These writers' African American and Indian American ethnicity draws back to their ultimate African and Indian roots (Divakaruni was actually born in Calcutta and lived there for 19 years before immigrating to the United States), which are constantly revisited in their fiction through memory and imagination. In Divakaruni's words, "My imaginative roots are in India, and always will be" (see "A Woman's Places" <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98apr/index.htm>>). The opening pages of both novels introduce the reader to an island which, in both cases, turns out to be ruled by an old woman with special powers: Sapphira and the Old One. These women are further connected by the same symbolic images, those of fire and the power of the hands, described in similar terms: "Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman ... She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot ... She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature ... It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge" (*Mama Day* 3) and "Nights when the Old One climbs the highest point, she is a pillar of burning. Her hands send the thunder-writing across the sky ... On the island and also the waters that touch its roots, her power alone prevails ... It is the hands that call power out of the spices ... Therefore the first thing the Old One examines when the girls come to the island are the hands" (*The Mistress of Spices* 24, 32).

It is not by chance that both authors decide to set the whole or part of their stories on an island, inasmuch as it constitutes a metaphor of nurturing ancestral connections and a preserved cultural redoubt. Although Naylor's island appears under the fictitious name of Willow Springs, its location indicates that it is one of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where many elements of the African cultural wealth slaves had brought along across the Middle Passage are still preserved, where past and present, magic and reality interact. As we can see, from the outset of the novel, Naylor puts forward the same ideas of boundary breaking Divakaruni advocates, bridging the gap between extremes and apparent opposites, thus complying with one of the traits of magical realism. Taking a cue from the ancestral Sapphira and the Old One, two more female characters, *Mama Day* and Tilo (*The Mistress of Spices*), spread their innate magical powers -- albeit their human limitations -- throughout the narrations. At this point both authors draw on a shared folk belief in their ethnic cultures, according to which the seventh daughter/son of a seventh daughter/son (*Mama Day*) and a baby born with a caul over her face (Tilo) will have special powers, being able to communicate with the dead and see into the future. After being captured by the pirates who kill her parents, the young Tilo recovers her powers and becomes the queen of pirates. She then decides to go in search of Spices and the island where the Old One lives. On it she is trained to become a true Mistress of Spices and given the choice of any city in the world where she will have to live devoted to the welfare of her fellow Indians with the help of her beloved Spices. Plunging into Shampati's fire, she travels across the ocean on to Oakland, California, where she is reborn Phoenix-like to a completely new life in an old woman's body (Similarly, Sapphira flies in a ball of fire from America to Africa). In a similar manner, *Mama Day* is another old woman who inherits from her great grandmother Sapphira the wisdom to heal people's ailments with medicinal herbs. Like Tilo, her old body gives away but an uncertain age, "and when you think about it, to show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a toe inching over into the one approaching is about as close to eternity anybody can come" (*Mama Day* 6-7). As we can infer so far, in this two characters coalesce a series of opposites in a symbolic undoing of boundaries: young/old, human/otherworldly, life/death.

A further characteristic of magical realism that applies to the texts discussed here is the absence of

a linear narration. Instead, a temporal circularity and frequent flashbacks and flashforwards uniting past and present are characteristics of the narratives at hand. Naylor forces the limits of time even further, as her novel starts in a hypothetical future in the year 1999, moving then backwards into the past so that two deceased characters can re-member it. Similarly, both islands play into the deceits of time, since "time took on a different meaning on that place" (*The Mistress of Spices* 54), "living in a place like Willow Springs, it's sorta easy to forget about time" (*Mama Day* 160), and "time definitely stands still in Willow Springs" (*Mama Day* 165). This temporal dislocation is enhanced by the occasional suspension of time, as it happens in *The Mistress of Spices* when Tilo's lover begins to tell her his lifestory just to leave it incomplete and continue several pages later on (171, 212). Apart from the aforementioned characteristics, folklore, myths, and legends are essential components of magic realist fiction (on the characteristics of magic realist fiction, see, e.g., Ricci Della Grisa 82-83). In their specific brand of magic realist venture, Divakaruni and Naylor embellish their narratives with the old legends of the conjure women Sapphira/The Old One and the fire of Shampati, "bird of myth and memory," into whose flames the disciples of the Old One must plunge to reach a new land where they can fulfill their mission of salvation (*The Mistress of Spices* 58). Similar to Gabriel García Márquez's flying carpets in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the motif of flying so often present in magic realist works, is included in both novels (see also the novel *Song of Solomon*, where African American author Toni Morrison elaborates on the myth of the flying Africans through the final flight into the air of the protagonist, Milkman Dead). If Tilo is supposed to "fly" into American lands with the aid of the mythical bird across the ocean, Sapphira undergoes a reversed journey flying back to Africa wrapped in a ball of fire. Moreover, both women appear connected especially and meaningfully to the spice of ginger: "And from the folds of her clothing she [Old One] removed it and placed it on my tongue, a slice of ginger root, wild island *ada* to give my heart steadfastness, to keep me strong in my vows." / "Hot prick of ginger, you were the last taste on my tongue when I stepped into the heart of Shampati's fire" / "And when I woke in America on a bed of ash, an age later or was it only a breath, the store already hardening its protective shell around me, the spices on their shelves meticulous and waiting, you were the first taste, ginger, gritty and golden in my throat" (*The Mistress of Spices* 60-61).

Ginger also seems to be Sapphira Wade's identifying spice since several times throughout the novel she too is related to the taste of ginger. According to legend, Sapphira had killed her master and lover, Bascombe Wade, not before making sure that he would free all slaves on the island: "And what took him that high was his belief in right, while what buried him in the ground was the lingering taste of ginger from the lips of a woman" (*Mama Day* 308). The islanders show their gratitude to their ancestor celebrating the festivity of Candle Walk by walking along the path their conjurer had followed in her flight; for this commemorating walk, they take lit candles, food and ginger to help her lingering spirit carry out her journey: "ginger seems to symbolize the freedom and power that culminated in her flight" (Fils-Aime 29). Although in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* there is a great variety of spices -- each of which introduces the different chapters of the book -- the spice ginger represents the hinge between India and America, the last and first taste of her dual selfhood. Interestingly enough, it is the spice of ginger that represents the middle of the book, as out of its fifteen chapters, ginger introduces chapter seven, standing therefore in between the two ends. And ginger is the spice the protagonist invokes the first time she decides to leave the shell of her store to step into "America" (133). Also, ginger is one of the medicinal plants usually employed by healers like Sapphira, Old One, or Pilate and Circe in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and who are associated with its characteristic taste or smell. Its healing quality and beneficial properties on the cardiovascular system are suggested indirectly in *The Mistress of Spices* and are shown clearly in *Mama Day*, where Tilo invokes its assistance with the words "may your bright burning course up my sluggish veins" (133). For her, ginger represents the power of strength and determination and this is why, before her journey, Tilo is offered this herb, "to give my heart steadfastness, to keep me strong in my vows" (*The Mistress of Spices* 60). In Naylor's

novel we can read how from the tomb of Bascombe Wade grow heart-shaped wild ginger leaves that enclose the ancestral magic and the history of Willow Springs (*Mama Day* 206). When Mama Day's rational and sceptical son-in-law, George, bends down to read the inscription on the tombstone, the "heart-shaped ginger leaves twine around his knuckles, as if they were pulling him in closer to listen, willing to hold him there until he does" (*Mama Day* 207). Had George listened to the voices from "the other place," had he opened up his empiricist horizons, he would not have suffered the heart attack that took his life away. Holly W. Fils-Aime concludes in her study that "Ginger is the key to traditional beliefs about healing and transcendence that stymie Western rationalism ... the characters associated with the spice and its curative force are also powerful practitioners of the magic that can hurt or heal and give freedom to fly. Ginger itself is inextricably associated with life: as a stimulant for the heart, it serves to counteract some of the evil at large in the world" (32).

The clash between two contending worldviews, the rational and the spiritual, unites both novels. Both authors put forward the idea that there is certainly a need to make room for diversity and to be ready to accept contradictions, which might turn out to be complementary instead of excluding. While in *Mama Day* this clash is represented by the rational mentality of George Andrews in his capitalist Western surrounding and the magic of Mama Day's island, in *The Mistress of Spices* it is embodied in Tilo herself who, being aware of her responsibilities as a "Mistress of Spices" experiences, however, a mounting need to indulge in passionate love to the point that "*The Mistress of Spices* becomes a novel about choosing between a life of special powers and one of ordinary love and compassion" (Guy 20). The love story between Tilo and Native Americana Raven adds up to the atmosphere of ethnic diversity that the author wanted to create in her first novel: "I extended my subject matter from dealing exclusively with the Indian-American community to include three other ethnic groups living in the inner city" (see "The Spice of Life"). Whereas the love story between Cocoa and George in *Mama Day* revolves mainly around the dichotomy between the magic of conjuring on the one hand and rationalism and scientific empiricism on the other, the love story between Tilo and Raven in *The Mistress of Spices* is marked by the choice Tilo has to make not between the rational and the spiritual world -- Raven is also associated with the supernatural and the special powers passed down from his ancestors -- but between the isolated microcosm of the spices, with its strict rules of obedience which preclude Tilo's own complete freedom as a woman and, on the other end, the ordinary human life of an immigrant woman who can carve her own identity progressively and reinvent herself.

As a Mistress of Spices, Tilo has to follow certain rules according to which she cannot pursue her own happiness but that of others; she is not allowed to fall in love with a man, not even leave her store under any circumstances. However, her personality has always been characterized by rebelliousness, as the Old One soon notices: "You've been nothing but trouble ever since you came, rule-breaker. I should have thrown you out at our first meeting itself" (*The Mistress of Spices* 44). Her foray out of the store into the streets of "America," her love for Raven, and her looking into a mirror -- an object also forbidden to Mistresses -- prove her rebel spirit. Throughout the novel we can see the constant inner struggle she has in this respect and the feeling of guilt that haunts her for her disobedience. Her mission to watch over the well-being of her Indian customers is carried out satisfactorily as she helps to solve generational and cultural problems that arise between the generation of immigrants and their US-born descendants; she also saves a battered woman from the tyranny of her husband and, finally, she deals with the racial violence suffered by another one of her customers. But Tilo does not want to renounce her human right to love and be loved. At the end of the novel, Tilo's dilemma is resolved happily: her decision to leave Raven behind for the sake of the Spices and their magic is however encountered by his lover's determination to stay by her side: "Good-bye Raven. Every cell in my body cries out to stay but I must leave, for in the end some things are more important than one's own joy," and Raven's reply is "Wait ... Then I guess I'll have to come too" (*The Mistress of Spices* 336). Thus Tilo is born to a new life as an ordinary human being since her choice of corresponding Raven far exceeds the rules she was supposed to abide by. Nonetheless, we



should not rush into simplistic conclusions that make our Western minds celebrate the triumph of realism over magic. While in *Mama Day* George Andrews is unable to see beyond what his eyes can perceive, to accept the possibility of magic, hence bringing destruction upon himself, Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* does not reject the supernatural but inflexible barriers and rules which, moreover, hinder her freedom to evolve as a person, even if they come from the other world. Tilo's acceptance of Raven, despite the anger this produces in the Spices, implies her disagreement with an enclosed world ruled by exclusion and static laws, as it is the case of the spice store and the magic realm behind it. The first thing she does immediately after confirming her relationship with Raven is to change her name, an act which significantly represents the complexity of her identity or, as Deepika Bahri says about a character by another Indian American author, "her sense that as a woman and an immigrant, her identity is constantly in negotiation" (149): "Now you must help me find a new name. My Tilo life is over, and with it that way of calling myself ... [a name] that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now" (*The Mistress of Spices* 337). Like many other immigrants, Tilo's identity is composed by an Indian part and an American part; it is, in other words, "a transnational hybridized identity" (Bahri 152). Furthermore, the meaning of her new name, Maya, is highly relevant at this stage. Phonetically resembling the word "magic," this name means "illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (*The Mistress of Spices* 338). The idea of hybridity with which we started this essay is clearly connected to this newly acquired name. Maya was the mother of Buddha (Walker 626) and one of the principles of Buddhist logic "allows one to confront and explain the ambiguities inherent in language and concepts. Indeed, Buddhists would argue that existence is like a flow of eternal becoming since what we understand as reality is kinetic" (Bahri 140).

From the analysis of these two novels we can conclude that, although coming from different ethnic groups within the common setting of the United States, Naylor and Divakaruni adhere to magical realism as a means to synthesize divergent conceptions of the world and to advocate eclectic positions. In Brenda Cooper's words, "Magical realism attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious. In the process, such writers walk a political tightrope between capturing this reality and providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership" (32): Divakaruni's and Naylor's texts manifest these characteristics to a high level and provide their readers with both entertainment value and engaged socio-cultural authorship. At the same time, the use of the supernatural in this genre of fiction does not preclude the authors' dealing with social everyday problems of their communities and the difficult historical circumstances they had to live, marked by slavery and immigration and the adaptation to a too often hostile society. A further importance is the autobiographical backdrop of the texts' genesis, namely that Divakaruni and Naylor pay tribute to their ancestors and their childhood cultures. In these texts, past and present are intertwined and from both nurtures a person's identity. Although apparently Maya seems to dismiss her Indian spiritual past, by choosing such a name she is still holding on to a part of it. As we can read in *Mama Day*, "Home. It's being new and old all rolled into one ... Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger" (49).

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