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Breaking the Bonds of Silence: The Immigrant Experience in Magical Realist  
Novels of Katherine Vaz and Chitra Divakaruni

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Hillary Dawn Hester  
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Keywords: Magical Realism, Subaltern, Immigrant, Silence, Sugar,  
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## ABSTRACT

Breaking the Bonds of Silence: The Immigrant Experience in Magical Realist  
Novels of Katherine Vaz and Chitra Divakaruni

by  
Hillary Dawn Hester

The genre of Magical Realism is normally explored on the sole basis of its identification with and fantastic expression of Latin-American cultural identity. However, the genre, when employed by non-American immigrant women, takes on new characteristics. It not only highlights the mystical underpinnings of everyday life but instructs in a subliminally didactic manner by opening the reader to new possibilities through delightful imagery and a plot woven around transposed myth and folklore.

In examining how two female Magical Realists translate their narratives of immigrant life in twentieth-century United States, the instructive nature of the genre is laid bare. Both use a coupling between the genre of Magical Realism and Culinary Fiction to entice the reader into following the lives of each novel's protagonist, lives communicative of how cultural oppression can persecute immigrant women in a foreign land unless a certain level of assimilation is attained.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Magical Realism and Post-colonial literature is symbiotic in that each form of writing relies on and enhances the strengths of the other; Magical Realism is instrumental in opening the reader to new possibilities while Post-colonialism serves to instruct. Post-colonial literature can be characterized, in some cases, as writing “concerned with identifying a social force, [ . . . ] with the attempt to understand the resistances to that force, *wherever* they lie” (Slemon 106). The social force in question here is the dominant white majority of the United States and its relation to the oppressed immigrant minorities who seek to find their place in the totality of Western culture.

Post-colonial criticism typically “involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Alternatively, it can refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places by writers hailing from the colonizing culture” (Murfin and Supriya 294). Even though the general perspective surrounding such criticism is not entirely applicable in desaggregating the meaning of the Magical Realist content of Vaz and Divakaruni’s novels, it is related in that it can be employed to explore the social and psychological development of the non-western immigrant and the culturally displaced European transplant.

What the term *Magical Realism* wholly encompasses in both an artistic and literary scope has never been agreed upon even though many critics and researchers have tried to identify its most common characteristics in order to both narrow and define the genre. The history of the

movement is vague, but, “[d]espite the various critical disagreements over the concept of magical realism, one element which does recur constantly throughout many magical realist texts [ . . . ] is an awareness of the ineluctable *lack* in communication, a condition which prevents the merger of signifier and signified” (Simpkins 83). This is the primary complaint of members of the marginalized communities of the United States--small pockets of immigrants who find their home within the engulfing confines of the metropolis. Overshadowed by the homogeneity of this Western empire, U.S. immigrants possessed of rich cultural connections to their homeland and the desire to communicate the importance of these ties are swallowed up in the cacophony of voices of other marginalized groups and bounced against the deaf ears of American society. Thus, even though they speak, no one exists to listen.

Not only is this fate especially hard for immigrants to bear, but immigrant women have it doubly hard. Forever blamed for man’s initial fall from grace, women have since struggled to free themselves from the imposed guilt associated with Eve’s temptation and lack of self-restraint in tasting the apple offered to her from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” (KJV, Genesis 2:9). Thus, burdened by the stain of foreign blood and original sin, immigrant females find themselves subjected to the oppressive force of patriarchal ideals and racism. They become, in turn, the most silenced of minorities--the subaltern female. Post-colonial literary critic Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, hypothesizes on the mute voice of the female in works of post-colonial literature, emphasizing the dichotomy between men and women when she says, “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the

subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 28).

In examining the exact denotation of the term “subaltern,” Spivak explains:

“It is not ‘just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.’ [ . . . ] In postcolonial terms, ‘everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern -- a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern.’ (“Subaltern” 1)

Even though oppression is a natural result of marginalization, it does not fully explain the position of immigrant women in the United States. Not only are they suppressed intellectually but put in their place physically, relegated to the outskirts of society as fixtures in the home or matrons of other domestic-oriented positions such as waitress or maid. They are not praised for their aptitude but upbraided for their brazenness when extending the breadth of their talent to encompass the more traditionally male-oriented task of creative, political-minded novelist. Novelist Divakaruni points out that, “As a girl, I was not encouraged to ask questions. Women in my family were not expected to work outside the home, except perhaps to teach” (qtd in Sarvate 33).

However, Magical Realism affords immigrant female writers an out. Deeply concerned with the sentiments of the native, the genre is able to transcend stereotypes to present to the literary world a compendium of ideas, hidden behind the allegory of supernatural events. Most often identified with Hispanic writers of the late nineteenth through early twenty-first centuries, Magical Realism has been touted as more real than customary Realist texts. In keeping with the

tradition of the allegorical myth, magical realist writers use local, culturally bound lore and legend to transmit thematic content artistically, a tactic that appeals to man's eternal fascination with the unexplained. By drawing the reader in with such a device, the author can then instruct-- enchantment has superceded social mores.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady in her book, Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony, highlights the most commonly encountered characteristics in works of magical realism. She says, "Although critics do not agree on which characteristics are essential to magical realism, certain traits are mentioned frequently" (18). One of these qualities is the ability of the writer, through selective stylistic measures, to communicate his or her message.

Critics have incessantly attempted to disqualify style as a defining characteristic of magical realism, and Chanady does the same, claiming, "The themes treated in magico-realist narrative are often a more important criterion than style or structure, and authors are frequently excluded from the category because their stories or novels are set in large urban centers rather than amongst the . . . natives" (19). But, thematic elements are driven by style, for if a writer is unfamiliar with a language, setting, or culture, then his or her style, inclusive of both the colloquial and refined speech and mannerisms of the characters, is infected with the inability to report accurately on such subject matter as local myth and legend--and the trials of the immigrant in a culturally imperialist nation.

Buttressing this argument is Paula Rabinowitz, a Magical Realist literary analyst, who cedes, "As a woman, I will always be an outsider within patriarchal culture, as a white woman, I will always be an outsider to the experiences of the oppressed minorities in America; however, as a feminist, I wish to begin bridging those gaps which racism has created among all women" (239).

In her examination of three landmark Magical Realist novels, Song of Solomon , Ceremony, and China Men, all composed by minority women writers of the United States, Rabinowitz concludes:

“if the images of minorities has been stereotyped, a minority woman artist must negotiate a new process of writing to mention the unmentioned [ . . . ] These authors [must] construct a magical realism from the anger and power of otherness. Refusing the censorship of deep areas of themselves and their audiences upon which the form of realism is based, they give voice to “all we have” (Silko, 1997: 1), our stories.” (243)

This “new” form of writing, Magical Realism, is, according to Rabinowitz, the necessary plaything of minority women writers who seek to be heard above the silencing din of white male authors.

Two novels to be discussed in light of their classification as both Magical Realist texts and works of Post-colonialism, Katherine Vaz’s Saudade and Chitra Divakaruni’s Mistress of Spices, refute the possibility of losing sight of their direction: to entertain and instruct. Both demonstrate that, even though they are set in the populous state of California, and, at times, allow their protagonists to remain heavily shielded behind the microcosmic barrier of oxymoronic native-immigrant cultural influence, by illuminating how food preparation, consumption, and distribution act as avenues of supernatural communication they stay true to the aims of both genres, delighting and educating in unison.

And, instead of writing from the perspective of a minority influenced by an invading culture in their homeland, the two women elucidate the struggle of the minority in the homeland of the dominant majority. This is the central vein that ties the two works together as seminal efforts in uncovering the struggle that female immigrants face when dealing with the cultural

mosaic of a twentieth-century United States.

## CHAPTER 2

### SUGAR AS CULTURAL SIGNIFIER AND METAPHOR

“One never encounters the testimony of a woman’s voice-consciousness,’ ‘There is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak” (qtd in Parry 36). So claims Spivak, and so she is disproved, for there is such a space, as transplanted Indian novelist Chitra Divakaruni and her contemporary, Katherine Vaz, a sympathizer of the Portuguese immigrant experience, demonstrate in their novels of Magical Realism. By focusing on the theme of food and its ability to transmit to the consumer the mysteries of its distributor, Vaz and Divakaruni effectively refute the assertion of Spivak in that they demonstrate how an unlikely medium can provide a subliminal, sometimes actual, voice to the doubly-oppressed society of immigrant women in the United States. Post-colonial women writers such as Vaz and Divakaruni use their “texts [to] deal with and often challenge their dual oppression--patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism (or, in this case, immigration) and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood [ . . . ]” (Katrak 257). Both interweave their texts with fibers of Magical Realism, Post-colonial criticism, and feminist discourse to produce a tapestry of messages that, at times, overlap--but never contradict. Instead, these techniques complement each other in a way that produces a new voice, one that echoes with the calls for equality, feminine self-expression, and cultural competency.

Philosophical questions surrounding the communicative properties of absolute silence abound in modern thought, particularly post-colonial theory, where every work of art or fiction is analyzed from the perspective of a marginalized society, whether Luso-American or Indian, and

treated as a social commentary on the position of the oppressed. As noted in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, “Until recently, feminist and post-colonial discourses have followed a path of convergent evolution [ . . . ] In the last ten years, however, there has been increasing interest [ . . . ] in the nature of their actual and potential intersections“ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 249). The emergence of language and its development into a specific, feminine voice are topics treated metaphorically in Katherine Vaz’s novel, Saudade. Through her employment of expert characterization, magical realist imagery, and well-crafted allegory, the author achieves an effective statement on the position of immigrant women in the United States. In her novel, Vaz illuminates the theme of oppression and subsequent voicelessness of women under the dominant, patriarchal power of the protagonist’s patria, Portugal, and the jeering rejection the girl encounters as an immigrant to the United States.

The protagonist, Clara, an enlightened, sensitive soul, is doomed to the margins of her community because of her inability to speak. She is born completely mute, and grows up nearly alone, except for the few relatives and friends who attempt to rescue her from the far reaches of inner tranquility. There are those who try and fail, such as Clara’s forlorn father, José Francisco, a man longing to bring his daughter into the world of speech, humming to her ceaselessly as she lay pressed to his chest, absorbing the vibrations of his lungs and diaphragm as they tremble with the intake and release of his breath. When this effort proves futile, Francisco, using natural materials garnered from his job at sea, seashells, begins projecting his voice into hundreds of the discarded exoskeletons unearthed from the depths of the sea by his fishing net. Clara becomes entranced with the objects, remaining hours upon hours on the floor of her home, sitting with the shells

pressed to her ears, straining to hear and internalize every note of the melodious sound of her father's voice mingled with the voice of her homeland, the islands of the Azores, islands bordered by leagues of salty water, hemmed in by freedom. One afternoon triumph seems nigh and all of José's efforts effective, when, upon his return from the pier, he encounters his daughter "posed in front of the mantel, with her eyes closed and face tilted skyward [ . . . ] They (José and Conceição, Clara's mother) could both see that silence was no barrier to their daughter" (Vaz 18). Her parents conclude that, even though Clara does not physically speak, the majesty of her presence and poise communicates the girl's willpower to survive in a world bent on delivering unspeakable heartache.

Clara continues in this state of mute placidity for many years until her true salvation reveals itself in a surprising medium, an unassuming dry-good, that, when imbued with significance, becomes Clara's entryway into the world of self-expression.

The scene unfolds as Maria Josefa Magalhães, Clara's neighbor and closest confidant, on impulse grasps a multitude of sugar grains within her palms and lifts them to the girl as if to say, "I'm glad you're my visitor! Take as much as you want" (Vaz 19). Desperate to break free from the silencing confines of the home and its patriarchal influence, Maria Josefa attempts communication with the girl, a marginalized, persecuted member of her own culture, in order to gain a sympathetic ear to the plight of living under the oppression of an unhappy marriage. Maria Josefa concedes she:

was not exactly sure what was prompting her to try to speak with sugar to the little girl. Maybe it was the impulse to be sweet, or simply to use whatever was at hand. So great was her sudden desire to get through to Clara--to get through to

*someone*-- that she was not in the least surprised that Clara immediately understood this sugar--language and added several grains to the mound in Maria Josefa's hand to say "Thank You." (Vaz 19)

Clara responds to her neighbor's joy in creating an avenue of communication with the child by pressing her hands over the particulate hills cupped in Maria Josefa's palms, "letting cascades run over the rims of their clasping" (Vaz 19) as if to say "Life is too brief to marry shadows" (Vaz 19). Poetic in its simplicity and ambiguity, Clara's "sugar-language" elucidates her inner thoughts, thoughts that belie her young age and foreshadow another quality that will distance her even further from traditional American society: a psychic sensitivity to the world and its misgivings only Azoreans can understand.

Clara's move from these Portuguese isles to America was not an independent decision but a forced one. Having inherited a vineyard in Southern California from a distant uncle, Conceição fantasized about resettling her family in this land of opportunity, a vision of America commonly held by foreigners after the termination of the Vietnam War. Clara's family believed even "though [the New World] was perhaps no longer a place of absolute peace, it had at least returned to being as they had always dreamed it--a shelter of abundance" (Vaz 24). Conceição often mused upon how she "would get to eat ice cream, play pinball, and have a washing mashine, and Clara could grow up in a paradise of clothing, shoes, elbowroom, and limitless hope" (Vaz 24). In this world Clara would be "normal," would be able to choose her own path and live life free from dependence on anyone but herself. However, this dream would never be realized, neither for Clara, nor her mother, nor her ill-fated father, whose love for the open sea led to an overwhelming desire to taste adventure one last time before moving to California.

Vaz's novel opens with a myth centered around how the islands of the Azores were populated by the union of an immortal mermaid who, enamored with a mortal man, forsook her true form to become human. Vaz recounts how, "as [the mermaid] ran toward the man's arms, her scales littered the ground like mother-of-pearl monocles and enclosed, as if in skins, the blood that dropped from her freshly carved feet. Many water-children arose from this trail, all doomed to sharp pains on land" (3). Jose Francisco was a product of this clandestine union, "He was enamored with water. It was like the taste of Coneição," (Vaz 13) his mortal love. But, this double-edged longing was never completely fulfilled, and his final voyage would indeed be his last. Victim of shipwreck, Jose Francisco was returned to the birthplace of his ancestry, his bones resting on the soft, sandy, welcoming bed of the ocean floor.

Vaz's myth describes the widowed women of the Azores who, as they pine for their purloined husbands at the water's edge, are lured by the voices of the water-gods calling, "Come to us; come back--the ocean is your steadfast groom" (3). So interconnected was Jose Francisco's life with that of Conceição's, that she heeded the call of the mythical sea-gods, trailing steadfastly after her husband in death just as she did in life. The message this sends to the reader is expertly coated with amorous sentimentality, but Conceição's decision has a profound effect on Clara.

Conceição believed, "Maybe in California, a change might trigger [Clara's] voice" (Vaz 46). But, it would be a different type of change that prompts the girl to speak--the transition from beloved daughter to orphan. "In Portuguese death, the soul flies away as a moth, white as a snowflake" (Vaz 47). As her mother lies in bed awaiting death to carry her to her beloved husband, Clara also waits, lying prostrate alongside Conceição, to clasp her mother's hand as the

moth flees her dying lips. But Clara does not awake in time; she opens her eyes to see the moth “abandoning its station” (Vaz 47), neglecting to give the girl her ultimate opportunity for farewell. At that moment, Clara “[f]inds] her voice” (Vaz 47). The strange, unnatural shrieking awakens the neighbors, including Maria Josefa, who comes running to the care of the girl. It is then she realizes “that [Clara] was not ignorant of the colorations of sound but had simply refused, until now, to speak the language of the known and brutal world” (Vaz 48). This “brutal world” is the one her mother inhabited with Jose and Clara, and the one she abandons in favor of Jose. The lesson taught to Clara is one of reciprocal dependence--women cannot survive without men, nor men without women. It is this vicious paradox that destroys Clara’s family.

The equally damaging/sustaining symbiosis of this male/female co-dependence can be seen as universal to the human condition, but it becomes especially magnified in the plight of immigrant women to America. Alone in the chasm of otherness, they must cling to their male counterparts--for it is by, and often through them, that they survive. Maxine Hong Kingston, in her literary illustration of life as a female Chinese immigrant to America, China Men, offers up an example of this dependence in examining the relationship between the protagonist and her father. The young girl, confused and angered by having to wear a dog tag at school marked with the letter “O” (which the other students, singling her out, interpret to mean “Oriental”), pleads with her father, saying ““What I want from you is for you to tell me that these curses are only common sayings that you did not mean to make me sicken at being female . . . I want to be able to rely on you [ . . . ] to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people”” (qtd. in Rabinowitz 241). Here, Paula Rabinowitz identifies the “you” in Kingston’s quote as carrying a more profound significance than is typical for the simple pronoun: “[t]he “You” from whom [the

protagonist] seeks recognition is the voice of the Father, patriarchal culture” (241). When the protagonist fails to receive this recognition, she “subverts [her father’s] authority by writing his and his father’s stories” (Rabinowitz 241), discovering herself on paper.

The paradoxical codependence evident here is that the protagonist, an immigrant minority, seeks to identify herself through literature as an individual entity, separate from the confines of patriarchal ideals. However, in acknowledging herself as a liberated being, she must first obtain identification *by* the patriarchy in order to garner a sense of self. This contradiction harkens back to one of the more fundamental difficulties of immigrant women’s literature: A woman may discover her voice, but, if no one exists to listen, the voice resonates in silence. It is useless.

Vaz neglects to reveal whether or not she pulls her myths from Portuguese folk literature, but her forthright establishment of Azorean beliefs solidifies their prominence and worth in relation to the interpretation of the text. However, in explaining the relationship between unearthed myths and contemporary fiction, Vaz does say, “the use of mythology as a ballast is the drive behind so much modernist twentieth-century literature [ . . . ] If I have any suggestions about how to write songs of fate, I would say we should look to the models of grand stories as we unearth our loved ones [through fiction]” (Songs . . . 223).

According to Chanady, the presence of mythological and cultural faith in the supernatural is a necessary qualification for inclusion in the genre of magical realist fiction. Vaz uses this inclusion to shed light on the condition of Clara as one that is both chosen and fated--she denies inclusion into the female’s world of sadness through silence but is ultimately controlled by the

overwhelming depression of life as an oppressed interloper, an unwanted intruder in both the world of the Americas and in her own society.

The last line of Vaz's introductory tale illuminates Clara's feeling of sorrow, a sadness manifested in a bold language of sobs and wailing--a feeling known as "saudade." Leo Pap, a Portuguese linguist, notes "One of the most discussed words in the Portuguese language is the word *saudade*. It refers to a kind of emotion often said to be distinctively rooted in the Portuguese national character, so much so that it has been declared untranslatable; an approximate gloss would be 'nostalgic longing'" (97). The water-gods declare to the women of the Azores, in selecting flesh over water and land over sea, "The feeling of Absence [saudade] will become your truest presence. Your longing will wax until it becomes the giant looming at your side" (3). Thus, Clara is destined for discontent in her element, for it is not in her fate to subsist in felicity as a prisoner of land or men.

In his study, Folklore and Literature: Studies in the Portuguese, Brazilian, Sephardic, and Hispanic Oral Traditions, Manuel da Costa Fontes unearths the ballad of *Flérida*, from the annals of 19th century Azorean literature. Published in 1869, this ballad is reminiscent of Clara's plight in Saudade, for, just as Clara is shipped off to survive in the spiritually uncharted land of California, so is Princess Flérida sent to follow her love to England.

On the morning of Clara's departure for America, she is surrounded at the dock by her closest friends, including Maria Josefa and her son Eugenio. In a moment of touching, internalized sentimentality, Eugenio bids farewell to Clara silently, thinking, "Farewell to you as you battle with the way the world talks and sounds and looks. Good-bye from your country of bright and sudden explosions [ . . . ] good-bye from the friends who will faithfully sing to you"

(Vaz 49), a eulogy sadly reminiscent of the town's fervent desire to extract language from their silent resident.

Flérída, too, bestows the same parting wishes on her patria, the island of São Jorge. She "says: "Farewell, one thousand flowers, my gardens of cold water, for I will not see you again" (Fontes 160). And, just as Clara received promises of a more fruitful life across the ocean, so does Flérída, as her beloved assures her, "In the ports of England there are even clearer waters, more gardens and groves for your ladyship. I also wish this, maiden, to keep you company" (Fontes 160). It is left to the reader to assume that these promises did not meet with fruition, for the prince, Don Duardos, is characterized as hypnotic and persuasive: "At the sweet rowing of the oars the girl fell asleep on the lap of her beloved, for he convinced her so" (Fontes 160). Thus, the reader is led to believe that her lover is selfish, only wanting the princess to himself, without any actual concern over her happiness in England--just in getting her there.

The character of Don Duardos is paralleled in Saudade by Father Eiras, Clara's guardian and keeper of the vineyard her mother inherited in California. Maria Josefa relies on Father Eiras as trustworthy and faithful, as he is a priest, and a supposed honest man of God. The same premonition of doubt in intention is felt in Saudade as in *Flérída*, as Father Eiras is described as having "booked a swift passage for him and Clara. Taking her along would by all appearances keep him in compliance with Conceção's wishes" (Vaz 48). Thus, it can be inferred that Clara is being strung along as a tool in Father Eiras' plot to gain land and riches in the New World at the expense of his peculiar charge.

In California Clara is taught English by another Portuguese immigrant, Glória Santos, who invites Clara into her home, sympathizing with her forced plight in the Americas, but one who

knows the importance of language. They work daily on advancing the skills of Clara's speech until it becomes functionally perfect. To celebrate, Glória symbolically fills a pan with sugar and water, boiling the mixture until it is ready to be pulled into doves. Clara remarks on these figures saying, "I flew on the backs of sugar doves into a land of new words. No one knows my plan yet [ . . . ] this never forgetting until what I carry within me can be put beyond words and into action" (Vaz 54). Clara is uncomfortable with the move, and even more so with Father Eiras, who is obviously in California to advance his own interests with little concern over the well-being of Clara. But, she has a plan--one that will tear both his and her soul from what they believe is a measurable level of comfort, ascending to an infinite amount of longing.

Her plan is to seduce Father Eiras with little tact, and, it succeeds. Violating the young temptress with sinful frequency, Father Eiras is too blinded by lust to recognize Clara's intentions--shame her warden into exile by impregnating a minor, leaving her to reside in peace and autonomy. When Clara begins to show, Father Eiras leaves the winery amidst a fog of scandal. However, Clara's satisfaction is ephemeral, for, the baby, a boy, is born incomplete. He exits his mother with a gaping hole in the middle of his chest, a wound that displays his small, beating heart. Clara blames not nature, but herself, postulating how "His wound must have been caused by how fiercely her own longings for her family had pounded in her chest, wanting to burst out where her anguish could be touched, or maybe she had stretched her arms too wide to claim her land, snapping herself open" (Vaz 89). In desiring a return to her homeland, Clara has seen this longing manifested in the physical deformities of her son. She knows he will soon die, for no medical procedure can repair the aperture. But, her sorrow peaks when she realizes the ultimate fate of the boy--that she "will be robbed of his voice!" (Vaz 91).

This ironic twist of fate, parallel with Clara's childhood, catalyzes a damaging downward spiral in which Clara loses the ability to function in her world. She sees herself as damned, not only to the margins of economic restriction, but to the subservient persona she must don in the presence of the succession of Catholic priests, her charges, that follow in the wake of Father Eiras.

Debra Castillo, in analyzing a work of similar nature, "Cariboo Cafe," by an "American Latina, Helena Maria Viramontes" (76), states "the child is the centering force, the disputed territory in this secret war, the starting point for the twinned narratives of the man and the woman" (90). Subsequently, what place does the child have as communicator? As the ultimate combination of two opposing factions, males and females, how can a child alter situations? Castillo believes children bond, whereas Vaz proves they can exist as a complete antithesis to cohesion.

To the author herself, the act of speaking under the muffling silencer of oppression is a daunting task. She asks, "How do we command silence to speak?" (Vaz 223). And, once uttered, who exists to listen? If there is no one there to listen, is the verbalization equivalent to silence? But, Clara must learn to speak English if she is to survive and flourish in California, even though she remains surrounded by many Portuguese immigrants much like herself.

From this moment on, Vaz integrates a host of symbolic and metaphorical images into the narrative, as well as allegorical situations, that revolve around sugar and its engaging taste.

After the death of her newborn child, and the employment of another avaricious charge, Clara concludes that the ultimate method of self-government is to withdraw into her own mind, willing herself to die. It is in this state of repose that she imagines a conversation between herself

and a multitude of unidentified voices, voices that offer a very philosophical conclusion on the purpose of “the Egg:” ““For the Egg to be full of all kinds of memories,” said the voices patiently, “can it stay the same old egg? How does it create different sweets?” [ . . . ] “For our Egg to take its many forms, it must be released from its shell!”” (Vaz 111). Here, the term “sweets” has a literal meaning, sugared confections, and a metaphorical one. It can be inferred to mean “happiness” as well, for that is what Clara seeks--a contented comfortableness in a world that is not her own.

Not only do these mystical voices aid Clara in drawing herself out of her mental seclusion, but the people she has come to love, and who have come to love her, attempt to bring her back into the world of the living. After seven years of caring for Clara, Gloria Santos, frustrated with the constant care the semi-catatonic young woman requires, discovers that Clara, who has also abandoned eating, is infested with parasites. At first, Gloria and Caliopia, another Portuguese immigrant living in Lodi, bring to Clara “almond-and-cinnamon cakes with sugar lilacs to cheer her up, but Clara [is] appalled that someone [has] shaped stems and petals that would become tenfold worms” (Vaz 157). Again we see Vaz’s expression of the equality between sugar and happiness. Not only do Gloria and Caliopia attempt to draw Clara out of her sadness with saccharine fare, they are also attempting a physical cure. They believe the sugar will heal Clara both mentally and physically.

But, it does not, and the two women are forced to call upon the one man whom “they should have come to [ . . . ] years ago,” (Vaz 155) Dr. Helio Soares. Burdened by his own sorrow and resplendent dreams of a release into happiness, Soares latches onto the history of the girl as Caliopia relates it on the way to Clara’s residence. Upon arrival, Helio falls into a state of

shock and compassion to see the young woman in a serious state of disrepair: “Her arms were bruised, [ . . . ] He touched her chest, where bones floated like those bendable needles that poke unmoored in fish’s meat. There was a small bald spot near her hairline, and some whitish streaks on her neck” (Vaz 161). Helio, overwhelmed, scoops Clara into his arms and carries her outside into the warmth of the sun. It seems as if he is driven by an intuitive force, one that tells him that the “cure for their condition was that someone must come along and hold the other” (Vaz 161). Clara, also guided by an inner, spiritual intuition, can sense the love available to her in the doctor. Snuggling up to him, just as she did her father as a child, she murmurs, ““I think I’m very hungry. [ . . . ] Are you?”” (Vaz 161).

Debra Castillo, in the preface to Talking Back, describes this parallelism between real and psychic hunger. In analyzing a passage from Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, Castillo questions the distinction Woolf makes between “spiritual and physical repletion” (Preface xvi); Woolf believes they exist in isolation within a woman. Castillo replies, “What would Virginia Woolf say to those whose hunger is spiritual but also entirely physical?” [ . . . ] [She] does not foresee the diversity of women writers who would take up [the search for a voice in literature] with a spiritual hunger similar to, or different from, hers, looking in Woolf’s pages for a key to the pantry/room she so tantalizingly describes” (Preface xvii). However, Vaz treats the theme splendidly in her novel--Clara, empty nutritionally and emotionally, has found her savior in a man, Helio Soares, an odd pretense to the suffering and oppression Vaz has professed thus far.

As further proof of Vaz’s implied correlation between sugar and happiness, Clara and Helio are depicted, only moments after her leave of the vineyards, “eat[ing] sundaes at the ice

cream parlor until both of them were in wonderful agony” (163), and buying “edible bracelets [ . . . ] bit[ing] the round banana-flavored candies off the strings for breakfast” (180).

Helio is also a grafter of plants, unifying such objects as “duck’s feather’s . . . [with] a willow to try to create buoyant weeping “ (Vaz 183), a symbol of felicity, or “pumpkins to water-lilies dyed red [ . . . ] to devise love with a hard shell” (Vaz 256). However, most of his fanciful experiments are unsuccessful. His implausible combinations speak of Clara’s inability to mesh within her new culture--her island sensitivity mixed with the harsh realism of America lends itself to an anti-polar attraction--and relate to his attempts at drawing Clara deeper into a world in which she has no place.

One deep, ironic twist lies beneath this narrative, an irony expressed in Vaz’s characterization of Clara’s true love. Helio, as a peripheral profession, is a dentist--his role is to cure the decay left by years of untended happiness. He is also a beekeeper, gatherer of nature’s sweetness. Clara recognizes the imminent danger in letting herself fall in love with Helio, saying, “My beekeeper brought buckets of honey to court me. I think he hoped the sugar would rot my teeth so I would also go to his dentist’s chair”( Vaz 224). Clara demonstrates here a grander knowledge of love than her mother, a woman who willingly submitted to her husband, even in death. Sugar, or happiness, is, to the pessimistic woman, a trap that leads to a physical decay, and, if left unchecked, a mental one as well.

This inability to submit to male domination and control also leads to the greatest act of elocution Clara endeavors to perform. Ever since her arrival in California Clara has been subjected to a series of priests eager to reap the financial benefits of the land bequeathed to the girl from her mother. As an act of revenge, and escape from the fear of lost love in Helio, Clara

digs a pit beneath the land of the vineyard, rigging the entrance so that, with a slight tug, she and all her anguish will be buried beneath the soil. Her goal was this:

“Her vehemence had to penetrate every grape to end up within every bottle of wine that would ever be sold from the Transfiguration property. She would interrupt dinners for decades to come. Guests would listen to her yelling in their glasses and would pour her down the sink, and those who drank her would double over with a bellyful of moans. Private drinkers would crawl into bed terrified. [ . . . ] Leaving [Helio] this way was horrible [ . . . ] If she did not become what was hers, her life with him was already dead.” (Vaz 243-44)

This moment would not come to fruition--Clara's dead Tio Vitor talks sense into the bitter woman just as she reaches for the cord, then, he boots her out of the sepulchre and dies a second death, smothering his unearthly form under a cascade of large stones and earth. This act of retribution, not only for the mistreatment of his niece but the exploitation of the land that was once his, causes all of the wine to turn to vinegar, a misguided reference to one of the many miracles of Christ-- the transfiguration of water into wine. And, just as the wine sours, so does Clara's luck. The court finds her legally without jurisdiction in reclaiming the land, and sells it to a development company to build an “entertainment ranch.” This leaves Clara in an awkward predicament--she has neither a physical home in California or the Azores, a dilemma indicative of the bicultural confusion most immigrants wander into after settling in a new land. Their home is in one location, but a part of their heart always remains in another.

Clara's reaction to this cultural homelessness is painful for Helio; her answer is to search out a “New land. Her own” (Vaz 250), one that does not incorporate him. But it does

incorporate a host of American men, men symbolic of Clara's grappling toward acceptance through embracing her sons. Thus, she disappears from Helio, leaving him in a state of emotional helplessness. She is able to break free from the codependent relationship she shares with the doctor, a separation made possible under the guise of New World ideals and women's liberation. But, Clara does not survive well without the only tokens of her homeland she had managed to gather in the New World: Helio, Gloria, the ghost of her dead Tio, and Caliopia. The only logical step is a return to Portugal, the land she was forced to leave behind. Clara describes the homecoming with trepidation, saying,

“Terceira was smaller than she remembered, but she knew that was to be expected, and although she had Portuguese words inside herself, she had never spoken the language. She was a stranger coming home after twenty years [ . . . ] She knocked at Maria Josefa's door and it gaped. [ . . . ] Clara hugged her. Maria Josefa could not speak English and Clara could not speak much Portuguese, but they could communicate with sugar” (Vaz 280-81).

This ironic twist of fate poetically speaks of the transcendence achieved by the sugar language devised by a mute, misunderstood little girl and a sympathetic soul who wanted to reach her almost three decades earlier. It supercedes both the language and cultural barriers constructed between Clara and Maria Josefa over the years, allowing the two to communicate as if no time has passed. This, Clara has found her own land, but it is not new, it had merely lain forgotten for some time, always ready to embrace its prodigal offspring.

The novel draws toward conclusion with a brilliant scene in which Clara confronts the spirits of her dead ancestors in the gardens of Terra Nostra, or, “Our Land,” including her beloved

Tio, her mother, and Jose Francisco, whom she lost without proper valediction. There, spirits float among eight gazebos, awaiting communication with those who sit beneath them. Clara does not recognize some apparitions, but the sixth holds a special surprise. There, her father waits patiently to give his little girl the message she has waited a lifetime for:

“Clara, that water you drank between the valleys of heaven and hell was your Soup of Sorrow. It is your sadness that you must first pass through an infernal landscape to find it; it is your joy that you know it when it is in your hands, but even then much of it slips through your fingers. [ . . . ] Do not worry about the blank pages of your future. Sweet mountains are hiding inside them. [ . . . ] Let them be a platform on which you stop, high over time. [ . . . ] That will find you the whole world, in a way that collecting names and places will not.” (Vaz 287)

This diatribe is Jose Francisco’s interpretation of the final sugar message given to his daughter, a single grain she loses in California. Through death they can communicate on an astral plane, in a realm of higher understanding, proving that the love of father to daughter is universally conveyed. Again, Vaz symbolically equates sweetness with happiness: mountains of it await Clara, but in between she will find valleys of sorrow. However, it is on these peaks of joy that she will be able to look around at the wonderful world available to her, one unified in culture, without exclusive appellation or location.

The reader, in leaving Clara, does so in the nucleus of a graceful epiphany. Clara, in a small room in Maria Josefa’s house, re-discovers her undying love for the Portuguese man she left behind in America, Helio Soares, as she paints the colors of piano keys, a system she and Helio devised to teach her how to play the instrument, throughout the room. It is a gesture that

awakens and incites the birth of a spiritual language, one existent in silence between two lovers, unintended to be heard but by two sacred ears. In America, Helio, exasperated with waiting for her return, transmits a message of love over psychic airwaves, which Clara, amidst her frenetic art project, picks up clearly. She listens as he proclaims, “ ‘I am a lake, because the happiness of being inside you is rendered in particles of water. It is white because the eighty-eight colors you have brought me have fallen into the water and I am spinning them into a luminosity. They come from a piano, so there is also music here. [ . . . ] She answer[s] him, “And there is language too, since I can hear you speaking”” (Vaz 296). Thus, a new and final language is born, one that promises to carry Clara through the rest of her life, circumventing adversity, transmitting love and happiness, and bridging worlds.

The author, admittedly bottled inside her own ideals of cultural oppression, affords herself adequate postulation through writing. She says, “I do not write to say what I think, I write to find out what I cannot perceive on my own” (“Songs . . .” 227). In her works, particularly Saudade, Vaz masticates and digests the idea of a woman’s voice in an attempt to find one herself. What she realizes is this: in transposing her own inner search with the psychological quest of her protagonist, Vaz concludes that a woman has a choice in remaining silent or responsive, that she can attain happiness in creating a new language, even if only one lone soul exists to listen.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ASSIMILATION AS EQUALIZER AND LIBERATOR

In explaining her decision to take up the art and responsibility of writing, Chitra Divakaruni comments, “As I was getting my Ph.D., I felt that the things I was studying were very disconnected from the reality of my existence. I was studying the Renaissance, I was studying sixteenth-century literature. I really wanted to write about my own experiences” (qtd in Sarvete 33). As an Indian immigrant to the United States, Divakaruni, aching to break free from stereotypes, used her past experiences--and the desire to communicate the plight of Indian women in America-- as the driving force behind her writing. Unable to connect or sympathize with the situations of the American and British authors she was reading, Divakaruni turned to her inner consciousness to develop a new narrative, one that highlights not only the oppressive force exerted over women in both their native and non-native cultures, but how transposed traditions survive and mutate on foreign soil.

The narrative she opts for is Magical Realism--with an alimentary twist. The Mistress of Spices, Divakaruni’s first novel “stirs magical realism into the new conventions of culinary fiction and the still-simmering caldron of Indian immigrant life in America” (“Chitra . . .” 4). She, like Vaz, inculcates American societal notions that women should remain silent, particularly immigrant women. Magical Realism, as stated earlier, is a genre possessed of the power to transcend conventions in conveying a marginalized woman’s message. Divakaruni’s adroit encroachment into the territory of culinary fiction only eases the transmission.

In her article, *Culinary spaces, colonial spaces: the gendering of sugar in the seventeenth century*, Feminist Kim F. Hall explores the role of food, particularly sugar, as a neutralizing via into mainstream male society in the seventeenth century. It is a treatise on the history and purpose of the cookbook, a modern form of quasi-literature aimed at women, designed to relegate them even more the home and domestic duties. However, it did just the spiritual opposite, for it provided women with their first communicative outlet and expression of individual skills. Usually centered around confections, the cookbook ran with the notion that, with gratitude to the socially transitory, dulcet dry-good sugar, “the confectionary provided individual [ . . . ] women with a venue for social and artistic self-expression” (Hall 176). But, this edible articulacy came with a price: “While the production of confections and the language of sugar itself [was] connected with the feminine in fundamental ways, looking solely at women’s investment in the production of confections gives an incomplete picture of the cultural economy of sugar. [ . . . ] From its first appearance in the New World, sugar was connected with slavery” (Hall 177), not only with imported, physical labor, but the inevitable relegation of women to their “place” in the home--the kitchen, where they often slaved for hours to provide their husband with a delectable morsel to be devoured without second thought.

Divakaruni, however, takes advantage of the second, and final, gain Hall illuminates in her article--the cookbook as societal transcendent, replete with the unique ability to proffer a feminine experience to surpasses the ordinary. In his domestic manual, *The English Housewife*, published in 1615, author Gervase Markham decries the use of “foreign spices” in preparing dishes for the English table. In response, Sir John Evelyn, in his own manual *Acetaria*, counters, “It might be that the woman’s “familiar acquaintance” is the very thing necessary to remove the threat of

strangeness [ . . . ] the mere incorporation of such substances into recipes makes them less strange and unacceptable” (Hall 182). This is exactly what Divakaruni accomplishes in *Mistress* : she combines the unfamiliar, the female, Indian immigrant experience, with the familiar, urban life in America, blending the two into a magical narrative that relates a gifted young woman’s plight as an outsider in Southern California.

Divakaruni opens her novel with a simple, declarative statement, “I am a Mistress of Spices” (3). This unlikely claim invites the reader to continue, to find an answer to the question, “What is a Mistress of Spices?” It is not long before he or she encounters the answer--one who controls and is controlled by a store filled with Indian spices, inanimate entities that teem with life and knowledge beyond human understanding. The spices are characterized as “hold[ing] magic, even the everyday American spices [ . . . ] [b]ut the spices of true power are from [the Mistress’s] birthland” (Divakaruni 3). Already the reader sees a clash of factions--American vs. Indian. Divakaruni claims the Indian spices are stronger, and it is up to her to adequately prove their worth against the political, social, and economic powerhouse of the United States.

The history of the protagonist is unique yet sad--she too is born into silence, but, unlike Vaz’s Clara, can speak. Her birth is described with bitter remembrance: “They named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents’ faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girlchild [ . . . ] Wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor. [ . . . ] Perhaps that is why the words came to me so soon. [ . . . ] Or was it the loneliness, the need rising angry in a dark girl left to wander the village unattended” (Divakaruni 8). Shortly after birth it becomes apparent that the girl is special--she can see into the distant future with uncanny clarity--a skill that brings her fame, fortune, and vulnerability. She is unloved by her parents but duly appreciated as they revel in their

daughter's superfluous income. This attention only breeds contempt in the girl who longs to free herself from the family who only takes, never gives. Her internal wish is swiftly granted as pirates storm the village, taking the special girl with them to aid them in their plundering and killing her parents. Thus, Nayan Tara finds herself swept up in a life of roguish wandering--she had no real home in India, nor does she have one at sea. This searching despondency is ultimately satisfied in the sea; Nayan Tara throws herself in after hearing of a magical island of spices from two amicable electric eels, an act of desperation fueled by the will to find her place in the world.

But, even though it may seem so, her decision is not exceptional:

“Each year a thousand girls are sent back from the island because they do not have the right hands. [ . . . ] Each year a thousand girls whose hands have failed them throw themselves into the sea as they sail home. Because death is easier to bear than the ordinary life, cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children who will one day leave you.” (Divakaruni 35)

Nayan Tara is one of the lucky few who are accepted by the “Old One,” a grand, ancient figure who rules over the island, commands its victuals, instructs her maidens, and regulates the influx of new apprentices. She also has mandate over the departure of these apprentices, who, after fielding a vision, select a destination. They then pass through a cleansing, transmogrifying flame, Shampati's fire, to the location where they will set up a haven, a store, from which they will bestow their learned yet magical gift of physical and spiritual healing both through the sale and complimentary distribution of spices.

However, before they depart, each apprentice must choose a new name, one rich in meaning and apt in its appropriateness. This is not only symbolic of their new identity as

mistresses, but, in the case of the protagonist, a new identity in a “New World.” In choosing her name, Tilotamma, Nayan Tara incites both upbraiding and gentle laughter in the Old One: “It is certainly not confidence you lack, girl. To take on the name of the most beautiful *aspara* of Rain-god Indra’s court. (Tilo herself is quite homely) [ . . . ] I (Tilo) hang my head. [ . . . ] For this I could hate [the Old One] if I did not love her so, she who was truly first mother to me, who had given up all hope of being mothered” (Divakaruni 44-45). But, the Old One is not without misgivings, even though she permits the name for her most prized pupil. In a moment of foreshadowing, the ancient woman recites the myth of Tilotamma, saying, “Tilotamma, disobedient at the last, fell. And was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives. Seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limbs” (Divakaruni 45). Wary yet ever-supercilious, Tilo haughtily responds, ““But *I* will not fall, Mother”” (Divakaruni 45), a retort resonant with youthful ignorance.

Tilo’s day of departure is especially poignant for the inexperienced mistress who never had a true family. But, her roving background makes Tilo a perfect, resilient candidate to face life as an outsider in twentieth-century California. In establishing a setting such as this, Divakaruni constructs a narrative based around the influx of a variety of voices, both male and female, who translate their plight as immigrants to the United States to the protagonist, the mistress, whose task is to mollify her customer’s individual pain and suffering through specifically selected spices, each noted for their particular power. It will be through Tilo’s eyes, and the psychic visions she has of her customers, that readers come to know the life of this subaltern population.

The first patron introduced to the reader is “Ahuja’s wife,” an attractive yet downtrodden creature bound to the home through an arranged marriage to a much older, domineering Indian

husband. Throughout the novel Ahuja's wife is never referred to by her real name, only as a sub-part of her husband. Tilo explains: "Ahuja's wife has of course a name. Lalita. *La-li-ta*, three liquid syllables perfect-suited to her soft beauty. I would like to call her by it, but how can I as she thinks of herself only as a wife" (Divakaruni 14). Thus, in a seemingly ironic twist, the narrator perpetuates Lalita's frame of mind by refusing to call her by her true name. However, her task is to prod the oppressed soul to escape its confines by a different means--the magic of spices, not words. Thus, the narrator, too, is silenced by an oppressive force, the mystical dry-goods she guards as their keeper, when, in truth, they shape her being as well. This muted obedience illustrates, "[t]he power language loses when it confronts the natural laws of that ordered chaos [ . . . ] call[ed] Nature" (Zoppi 1); the disparity evident in the binary opposition of order vs. chaos manifests itself in the narrator's loss of power over herself while maintaining control over the magical properties of the spices.

As Lalita mills about the store, Tilo quietly observes, noticing how she, "lean[s] over the showcase where [the mistress] keep[s] fabrics, looking at the *palloo* of a sari embroidered with *zari* thread" (Divakaruni 15). This prompts Tilo to delve into the inner workings of the oppressed creature, where, deep inside, Lalita guards a desire to open "her own shop, Lalita Tailor Works" (Divakaruni 15). Thus, the mistress both skirts and confronts the situation by commenting, "Why don't you work in this country [ . . . ] I'm sure many ladies here too need stitching. Wouldn't you like--" (Divakaruni 15). To which Lalita replies "Oh yes" (Divakaruni 15), then quickly withdraws from Tilo as if embarrassed. This action, apart from her verbalization, speaks volumes louder than its person, illuminating Lalita's desires to break free from the confines of

Ahuja--and how these desires are kept at bay by a man who “refuses that his woman should work” (Divakaruni 15).

To Lalita, “[a]ll day home is so lonely, the silence like quicksand sucking at her ankles” (Divakaruni 15). She is home alone, only allowed to leave at the bequest of her husband to fetch food for dinner or goods from the market for their home. Her life is devoid of any real pleasure; the loneliness forced on her by Ahuja has led Lalita to place all hope on one salvation--to bear a child who will ease her days of solitude and provide meaning to her existence. Like Clara, Lalita sees a baby as a means of escape--both from loneliness and the stigma of barrenness. So, she is given turmeric, “*who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasure of the universe. [ . . . ] who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between*” (Divakaruni 13). This description echoes the sentiment of order vs. chaos. Given to a human in need, it can heal, but the curative carries its own grave consequences. For Lalita, consuming turmeric, and subsequently conceiving, may ease Lalita’s loneliness, but it will only tie her closer to both her husband and the home, an even greater constraint on a life of singular speechlessness.

Divakaruni, in analyzing the role the spices play in her novel, describes how “they stand for aspects of the culture that [Indian immigrants] carry with us and can heal us and comfort us, but that when used wrongly can also destroy us or hold us back, or ghettoize us” (Kalamaras 3). She also explains the traditional expectations of Indian women in their native culture as “a daughter, a wife, a good daughter-in-law, and a good mother” (Kalamaras 3) traditional values Ahuja maintains and dangles over his wife in the United States. These values, when transmuted to include the value system of a more liberated society, such as America, can remedy and placate in

the face of stereotypes and racism. However, as exemplified in the character of Lalita, when maintained in ignorance, such values can oppress. As well, the relativity of the term “good” lends itself to an open interpretation in application to the behavior of Indian women inside the home. Thus, it can be extended to signify a restrictive servitude that ultimately sublimates rebellion for fear of castigation or abandonment.

As Divakaruni relates, the lack of both feminine transmission and reception in examining cases of repression and abuse by Indian men in America forced her to open the eyes and ears of not only the women subjected to ill-treatment in the home, but those with resources to help them. Upon arrival in the United States, Divakaruni nurtured the misconception that “Indian women [didn’t] have these problems” (Kalamaras 3) after failing to note any Indian women in local women’s shelters. However, she soon

“began to hear stories in the community of women who had problems, who had come here (to the United States) but didn’t have the support structures or people they could tell their problems to. They didn’t feel comfortable going to a mainstream organization because culturally they would not be understood. There is often a lack of sensitivity to Indian culture in the mainstream shelters, which are often run by well-meaning feminists, but people who don’t understand the context within which arranged marriages are created.” (Kalamaras 3)

This understanding is communicated in the story of Lalita, who fails to seek solace from a structures organization in favor of maintaining foreign expectations as a true female. Thus, she is held back not only by her husband, but by herself. Her silence acts as her ultimate oppressor.

In her article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak acknowledges how, “Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (26). Divakaruni, understanding the worth of the influential Indian elite in developing her narrative, injects them into the story as proof “that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous” (Spivak 26), a multi-strata of socioeconomic classes inclusive of the poor, working class, embodied by the narrator and the majority of her clientele, and the wealthy, protean Indian rich, who have adapted to the all-accepting climate of U.S. capitalism. Ranajit Guha, as quoted in Spivak’s article, explores the historical occurrences and implications of a subaltern subject encountering a voice, or voice-consciousness within a mainstream society. He states, “The same class or element which was dominant in one area . . . could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances” (26).

Divakaruni addresses these “ambiguities and contradictions” in her characterizations of the rich Indians who frequent Tilo’s store. The descriptions are at once specific and universal: “The car stops, the uniformed chauffeur jumps out to open the gold-handled door, and a foot in a gold sandal steps down. Soft and arched and almost white. Rosepetal toes curling in disdain away from what lines the street, wadded paper, rotting peels, dog shit, shucked-off condoms thrown from the back windows of cars” (Divakaruni 78). The combination of images speaks for itself-- people of a skin color not-quite-black and not-quite-white, bedecked in the finery of the Caucasian elite, curl their toes, not nose, at the filth lining the sidewalk in front of Tilo’s store. In doing so, they symbolically reject the plight of the poor, common Indian immigrant in favor of assimilation with the white rich, an incomplete amalgamation of foreign and native.

Having entered the store, “[t]he rich Indians rarely speak, as if too much money has clogged their throats” (Divakaruni 78). Thus, like Lalita, their silence exists out of choice--spurned by haughtiness rather than fear. They purchase only the most expensive Indian brands, acts that belie their fortune, not individual tastes, and “crane their necks and lift their chins high because they have to more always than other people, taller, handsomer, better dressed. Or at least richer” (Divakaruni 78). But, as the narrator proves, this comportment is a facade “[b]ecause inward even rich people are people only” (Divakaruni 79). They may behave as if they neglect all things Indian, but, in doing so, they only perpetuate discrimination and stereotypes.

The inner voice of these affluent patrons is transmitted psychically to the mistress of spices and to the reader. Thus, it become apparent that all have hidden conflicts, such as the woman who, “while drumming rubyflash fingers as [Tilo] ring[s] up the flat brown bread, is saying as shrill as tin “Come on I’m in a hurry.” But inside she is thinking of her teenage son” (Divakaruni 80) who has fallen into gang-related activity and drugs. The narrator does not judge the impatient woman harshly but regards her with gratitude: “Rich woman I thank you for reminding me. Beneath the shiniest armor, gold-plated or diamond, the beat of the vulnerable flesh” (Divakaruni 80) exists. Again, behind the facade of both wealth and confidence, there lies a woman with a voice, a voice she herself muffles. This illustrates a major theme in the novel : “the feminine ways of feeling, which are often through silence” (Kalamaras 1).

As Divakaruni discovered herself, silence, whether self-imposed or not, is destructive. Trapped within the confines of fear, this rich woman prefers muteness in favor of the perception of a “bad mother.” As journalist George Kalamaras indicates, Tilo “seems to understand the context of the various Indian people who come to her spice shop, and she helps them from within

that context” (3) Instead of exposing the woman as a potential failure and breaking down the cultural notions of good vs. bad parenting, again relative terms, she slips the preoccupied woman “*hartuki*, shriveled seed in the shape of a womb [ . . . ] to help mothers bear the pain that starts with birthing and continues forever, the pain and joy both” (Divakaruni 80). This she does in her own voicelessness, silently and secretly bestowing comfort on those that may not appear to need it- -but who really need it most.

Woven throughout the narrative of *Mistress* is another tale of oppression, one associated with the theme of familial expectations of Indian women in America. This account of rebellion and exclusion is not related from the point of view of the oppressed female, Geeta, but from her grandfather’s perspective. This inversion in standpoint heightens the reader’s sensitivity to and sympathy for an intelligent Indian woman caught between love and custom. Her grandfather says, “mental peace I am not having, not even one iota, since I crossed the *kalapani* and came to this America [ . . . ] better to have no granddaughter than one like this Geeta” (Divakaruni 87). He is angry, not because the girl is obtuse, flippant, or defiant, but because, in coming to America at an impressionable age, she has subsequently begun to assimilate to its culture. She buys makeup and expensive cars with “money [she] should save for her dowry” (Divakaruni 89), with little concern over her future as a wife.

For, Geeta has other plans, plans that exclude an arranged marriage that would send her back to India. Her grandfather believes, “from birth a girl’s real home is with her future husband’s family only” (Divakaruni 91). Geeta disagrees with little candor, laughing her reply: “Can you see me with a veil over my head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house keys tied to the end of my sari [ . . . ] it just isn’t for me” (Divakaruni 91-2). However, her family

counters this decision with a serious upbraiding--they feel she does not respect their culture, while Geeta feels they have no interest in respecting hers. Her conclusion is to leave the home and move in with her boyfriend, a Hispanic man by the name of Juan. Geeta understands how his ethnicity only heightens the "impropriety" of the situation, but, to her, love is blind. Tilo is empathetic to the young woman, for, even though she herself is forbidden to love, she has fallen for a handsome American man who frequents her store regularly. Thus, her reply to the lamentations of Geeta's grandfather, and his desire for Tilo to talk with Geeta, is this "O very well, just this once, how much harm can it do" (Divakaruni 95). Because, Tilo, like Geeta, is "learning how love like a rope of ground glass can snake around your heart and pull you, bleeding, away from all you should" (Divakaruni 95). For Tilo, this includes her store, the spices, and her final promise to the Old One--never to abandon her gift of mistress life for love. Geeta stands to lose just as much. In her search for happiness through love she is threatened by her own reluctance to abandon traditional Indian culture, which could signify ex-communication from her family, the only support system she has in America. Thus, Geeta too is a self-silencer, an acceptor of diverse consequences. In opting against the ambiguous outcome of arranged marriage, she distances herself from familial love, relinquishing her voice within this subgroup, as it has never wielded any power.

As Divakaruni explains,

"The paradox (in cultural assimilation) is to find that balance between change and holding on. It's very important to find that balance because neither extreme is healthy. We cannot forget who we were and still are. Neither can we hold slavishly onto what we were, because what then is the point of coming to a new

country? I think that's what the grandfather learns at the end of *Mistress*: that what you hold onto are the deep values of loving and caring for the family and doing the best for the family; what you give up are the ways in which you do that."

(Kalamaras 6)

In silence, the grandfather communicates with his granddaughter, and she with him. Geeta's silence speaks of a need to chart her own life through cultural experimentation, his speaks of a disapproving yet gentle love, that, if abandoned, would catalyze a self-estrangement too imposing for the old man to bear.

Tilo's first excursion into the New World, an outing instigated at the bequest of Geeta's grandfather, does more than mend the broken lines of communication between two families. It also frees Tilo from one of the many confines placed upon her as mistress: "[W]hen I woke in this land the store was already around me, its hard, protective shell. The spices too surrounded me, a shell of smells and voices. And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me. Shell within shell within shell, and inmost of all my heart beating like a bird" (Divakaruni 133). The character of Tilo exists as the ultimate representation of conquering oppression--in peeling away the layers of her given self, she aims at cultural liberation. However, this emancipation is burdened by risk--if successful, Tilo will regain herself physically, but lose her magic. If the spices consider her unworthy of freedom, she will be doomed to immediate death by Shampati's fire.

This metaphorical revelation of self echoes the aim of most postcolonial works in "rewrit[ing] the development of the consciousness of the Indian nation in America" (Spivak 27). In uncovering the "true" Tilo that lies beneath the trappings of the Old One's magic, Divakaruni reveals the actual nature of female Indian immigrants in America. Her traversal is "a metaphor for

a woman's conflict between desire and duty" (Sarvate 35), between tradition and modernity. As quoted in Spivak's analysis of most Indian literature,

“to make the visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history [ . . . ] It is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering the individual, both avoiding ‘any kind of analysis of [the subject] whether psychological, psychoanalytical, or linguistic,’ that is consistently troublesome” (Spivak 27-8).

Thus, to avoid vexation, Divakaruni offers a psychological analysis of Indian immigrant women, as represented symbolically in *Tilo*, with emphasis on traditional mythology as transmitter of theme in literature. The author's premise resides in the belief that “Magic is there, and it's a part of everyday life” (Kalamaras 6). This philosophy makes the novel, and the mystical transformation of its protagonist, both believable and meaningful.

*Tilo*'s initial steps away from the store awaken in her a sensation both new and familiar at once. It is the “vertigo of homelessness” (Divakaruni 137), a feeling that drives her feet even further from the building as she searches for autonomy and place. Her journey takes her into a world where “in the distance sirens [ . . . ] wail, reminding us how fugitive happiness is. But of course no one listens” (Divakaruni 74). This realization highlights the dual existence of felicity and melancholy in America. As exemplified in the rich Indians, those who live in wealth are not shielded by such riches from the disparity of sadness. As well, those who subsist in poverty aren't immune to moments of joy. However, neither population actually heeds the truth transmitted by the sirens--happiness, though ephemeral, must be relished at any cost.

Tilo's contentment resides in her ability to free herself from the confines of the spiritual union between herself and the spices, entities who, upon her return from Geeta, express their reticence through muteness. To Tilo, "[t]he spice's silence is like a stone in [her] heart, like ash on [her] tongue" (Divakaruni 136). They represent Indian tradition, mirroring the reaction of Geeta's grandfather to his rebellious pedigree. The spices also allow Tilo to hear beyond the cacophony of the city outside to an inner voice, "the Old One laughing bitter as bile. [Tilo] knows what she would say were she [in the store]" (Divakaruni 136). She would remind her apprentice of the consequence of abandonment--banishment to normality or death by fire, steep punishments for one simple decision--a life of love and self-rule.

In forming "a distinction [ . . . ] between the old and new Indian diasporas" (276), Sudesh Mishra, in his article, *From Sugar to Masala, Writing by the Indian Diaspora*, traces the history of Indian immigrant literature from its emergence in the late 19th century to present. He states "the girit enclave, the new diasporic writers are inclined to inhabit the liminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectives that defines the experience of migrancy" (Mishra 287). Not only does the writing of Divakaruni embody this experience, but her contemporary, Bharti Mukherjee's novels, "trace the split in the diasporic subject, expressed in that sense of being here and elsewhere, of being at home and abroad" (Mishra 287). In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, "the eponymous heroine struggles to cheat the stars by fleeing to America, a country in which personal destiny is connected to individual action rather than, as in India, to the fateful action of the planets. Jasmine describes herself as transitory, as becoming, as rebirthing, and her life becomes a statement on the United States" (Mishra 287). This message of rebirthing, of shedding old identities for new, permeates Divakaruni's narrative. Tilo is reborn in her identity twice before coming to America,

as a plaything of the pirates and as a mistress of spices. However, this husk of a personage, the aged shell of a woman, does not reflect the youthful vitality underneath, nor the psychological transformation Tilo has undergone as a result of exposure to American life.

In a poetic, almost forced turn in the tale, Divakaruni directs Tilo towards her true love, an emotion as foreign to the mistress as American soil. His name is Raven, a moniker he hides from the seemingly old woman for fear of rejection based on ethnicity; he is intimidated by the “power of language to construct social relations and the power of names to establish cultural history” (Rabinowitz 240), a history his mother taught him to keep hidden. She, obviously, is Indian, he, American Indian. In a moment of coy coquetry, Raven hints at his heritage as he tastes a dish prepared solely for his tongue. Tilo, warning her “American” of the food’s spiciness, states, “It’s too hot for a white man’s mouth. [ . . . ] After a moment [Raven] says, “So you think I’m white”” (Divakaruni 159). Tilo, taken aback, is unsure what he means by this because, to her, he does appear white. Raven, noticing the confusion, relates the tale of how he, like Tilo, once believed himself to be Caucasian, but, through a surprising turn of events in adolescence, he discovered his actual identity.

He tells Tilo the history of his mother, how she ran away from her own cultural oppression to marry his father: “Maybe when she left them, run away, not even a note, *Don’t look for me*, when she’d cut and styled her hair, when she’d changed the shape of her eyebrows with tweezers and painted on a new mouth, when she’d given herself a name pretty and proper like she’d always wanted to have, it had been the same as dying” (Divakaruni 167). To Raven, his mother’s decision to leave life on an Indian reservation is selfishly foolish; she abandons a rich, aboriginal culture for the bland homogeneity of American society. Not even when they return to her home,

the reservation, is Raven enlightened. There, as his great-grandfather lay dying, Raven is offered an initial glimpse at his people: “Thick-necked men wearing dirt-stiff jeans, some drinking out of bottles, a few eating chunks of fried dough dipped in gravy from paper plates. The women sat like pillars, heavy in hip and thigh” (Divakaruni 220). Here, Raven sees acceptance, whereas his mother sees a primitive existence. Unsympathetic to the way her son feels, his mother spits out a warning: “Look carefully [ . . . ] the disgust clear in her voice. Don’t forget it. This is what your life would be if you--or I--had done what [her grandfather] wanted” (Divakaruni 220).

In *Mistress*, Divakaruni includes “many sections where the men are telling their stories” (Kalamaras 3), and tells how, “That became very important to me--to have the men tell their stories, and sympathize with and feel myself at one with the men” (Kalamaras 6). In the case of Geeta’s grandfather, the reader witnesses a first-hand account of the strife of patronymic Indian culture through the eyes of a typical oppressor. However, through the eyes of Raven and his own unique interpretation of oppression, the reader sees how the plight of a female minority, even in her own culture, can go misunderstood. Within her own culture, Raven’s mother is destined for societal ridicule and familial subservience. However, in joining mainstream America, she has a voice outside of her culture, even though she remains dominated by fear of discovery and rejection by her husband. It is this trepidation that torments her, but it is the knowledge of her other option, life on a reservation, that motivates and sustains the facade. Thus, her silence is both a burden and a liberator--if she reveals the truth to her husband she will be an outcast in two societies; if she remains silent, salvation through cultural acceptance is hers.

Tilo, listening intently to this story of difficult decisions, resolves to make one of her own. Enamored with Raven, and with the idea of transforming her being into a startlingly attractive

woman, Tilo sets her resolution--consume *makaradwaj*, "to break the final, most sacred rule of all" (Divakaruni 277)--to request beauty and youth from the spices. "The laughter of the spice is low and deep, but not unkind" (Divakaruni 277). They, like Tilo, have followed their mistress along the path of self-awareness, and, even though they, as representative of tradition, do not approve of her desires, the spices confirm to grant her beauty for one night only.

She passes this evening in blissful union, both sexual and spiritual, with Raven, who, as sensitive to the magic that inhabits this world as she, sees the same Tilo beneath the pleasing exterior as he did beneath the repulsive one. He also senses her restlessness, a sense of urgency that seems to pulse between them. Raven's senses are keen, for, at dawn, Tilo breaks from his embrace to return to her store. There, she nervously awaits Shampati's fire, but, instead, she encounters a "silence more profound than [she has] heard it, even the planets ground to a halt. And in that silence [she] see[s] the spices' punishment. They have left [her in America], alone and reft of magic. [ . . . ] [Tilo] is doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom [she] can turn" (Divakaruni 317). Tilo, frantic at the possibility of such a fate, is bereft of all hope. However, the will of the spices, which spurn the restlessness of several tectonic plates, resolves to alter the destiny of this forlorn mistress.

In the final passages of the novel, an earthquake as strong as Tilo's desire to remain powerful and mysterious hits southern California. Tilo is knocked unconscious, only to awaken beneath the warmth and softness of Raven's bedspread, driven away from the rubble that was her home. She is suspicious as she checks the mirror; in it she sees a new face, one not old or fresh, not beautiful or displeasing, but hers in truth. The spices, in a final act of gracious acceptance,

have chosen not to punish Tilo but to let her go, relinquished to the man she loves, and who loves her.

Tilo, wary of this unanticipated freedom and her lover's acceptance of an average, Indian woman, suggests, in a moment of insecurity, to halt their relationship. Pessimistically, Tilo postulates, "Don't you see why it would never work? Each of us loving not the other but the exotic image of the other that we have fashioned out of our own lack" (Divakaruni 331). To which Raven concedes, "Okay, maybe my ideas about you and your people were wrong [ . . . ] Let's teach each other what we need to know. I promise to listen. And you--I know you're good at listening already" (Divakaruni 331).

This conciliatory conversation holds within it a grand allegory--America, embodied in Raven, offers an apology for ignorance, for, in the past, turning a blind eye to cultural empathy. In perforating the metaphorical borders of exclusion to embrace love, Raven, as America, has discovered the powerful voice of the immigrant female. Ultimately, he promises to listen, to heed the cries of oppression and need in an extension of acceptance and benevolence. Tilo, as the feminine, immigrant archetype of the novel, is denounced as a figure who already knows how to listen. It is a skill she has perfected in silence; within the confines of cultural oppression she has been forcibly compelled to hear the voices of many, whereas now, as a metaphorically accepted member of American society, she may begin, like Divakaruni, to shape her own unique narrative.

## CHAPTER 4

### EPILOGUE

Katherine Vaz and Chitra Divakaruni, in constructing narratives of Magical Realism, “create a truly cross-cultural literature, one which opens the history and language of America to discordant voices” (Rabinowitz 243). Vaz illuminates the need for return when kicked out of the cultural womb prematurely, while Divakaruni highlights the impetuosity of a child past term. Clara, unwillingly forced from her homeland on the premise of her deceased mother’s dream, encounters only hardship and dependence in the New World. In falling for a man as much at war with his past as she is searching to make sense of it, a grave mistake is made. Helio knows who he is, and knows that Clara completes him. Clara, on the other hand, was, in youth, so detached from her parents she has never progressed past a childlike simplicity of mind. It is only when she returns to the Azores does she discover the autonomy missing from her development in an environment based on financial, spiritual, and emotional exploitation.

Tilo, in contrast, selects the United States and its varied canvas of personalities, races, and national origins as an ideal location to establish and employ her practice. For her, America guards a mystery, one she can only unlock through assimilation. Unlike Clara, she abandons all ties to her past, while maintaining a checkered heritage, to develop a first-hand sympathy for the suffering souls who populate America. Tilo finds acceptance through masculine love. However, she approaches the opportunity to meld with America in this manner with caution. Instead of

falling for someone who is accepting of his place in society, Raven exists in as much conflict with its mores and norms as Tilo.

Both narratives confront the theme of male dominancy but support the ideal that “the relationship between women and silence can be plotted by women themselves [with] race and class differences [ . . . ] subsumed under that charge” (Spivak 28). As female authors, Vaz and Divakaruni are able to offer an authentic perspective on the social constraints placed on immigrant women. In assuming the charge of revealing the plight of such persons, both writers place themselves at the forefront of the recent emergence of postcolonial and feminist texts to tackle the subject of female oppression both in society, inclusive of minority subgroups, and within the home.

Vaz succeeds in proving that women, through years of soul-searching, can supercede preconceived notions of appropriate behavior and subservience. Helio, although madly in love with Clara and desirous of giving her ultimate freedom, nonetheless oppresses her with the overwhelming need to possess her wild spirit. Clara, after years of living a life of asceticism under duress, flees from true love to find her voice--an instrument she uncovered and abandoned in the Azores. It is not until after her return to her homeland does she have the mental fortitude to accept love as is, even if it signifies a certain loss of self.

Divakaruni, in proffering the stories of a multitude of both female and male characters, is able to more fully explore the themes of cultural oppression, racial discrimination, cultural assimilation, and the discovery of voice. She brings to the table a smorgasbord of personalities and their corresponding tales: Ahuja’s wife, who struggles to escape her husband, is in search of the power to confront mental abuse. Geeta, who refuses to marry a man selected by her Indian

family, preserves a chosen silence in order to maintain freedom. As well, the rich Indians reside in muteness for fear of ridicule as poor parents. Finally, Tilo and Raven, whose stories of rebellion, love, and discrimination combine to form the backbone of the narrative, prove that, in accepting the binary existence of contentment and woe, male and female souls can transmit and receive on a plain of communication constructed on gender and racial equality.

Thus, Vaz and Divakaruni substantiate the culturally transcendent quality of Magical Realist literature, “an oxymoron which represents a binary opposition between reality and imagination, a permanently contradictory relation between two worlds, or apparently incompatible systems of signifiers and signifieds. These find a meeting-point in magical-realist writing, thus giving a voice to the unthinkable, and unspoken, or to those “living on the margins” (Zoppi 151). Both novels conclude with a synthesis of cultures--on the protagonist’s terms. What was once unspoken is left expressed, proving that, in utilizing the diametrically opposed characteristics of Magical Realism female immigrant writers do have a voice.

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