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BOOKS

Dissolving Boundaries

After a lengthy near-death experience, Divakaruni casts storyteller magic

Julie Rajan, Philadelphia

It is not an easy task for a Hindu writer born in India to break into the mainstream American market. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has done just that with her very first novel. *The Mistress of Spices* has received rave reviews from major newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and San Francisco Chronicle and influential trade publications including Library Journal and Publisher's Weekly. This and her equally-acclaimed, earlier collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, exude a poetic, realistic and mystic voice that set them apart.

Divakaruni is getting recognition not just from reviewers, but also top writers. Amy Tan, author of the *Joy Luck Club*, describes *The Mistress of Spices* as "a dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires, hopes and expectations, woven with poetry and storyteller magic." Author Pat Conroy exclaims, "It is a splendid novel, beautifully conceived and crafted. I want to read everything that Divakaruni has written

before and everything that she will ever write in the future."

The concept for *The Mistress of Spices* grew out of a 1994 near-death experience that Divakaruni had following her second pregnancy. Following mishaps during delivery, Divakaruni found herself hospitalized, caught in the boundary somewhere between life and death for one month. She did not experience the typical tunnel of light or out-of-body experience that many encounter when near death. Rather, she went into a meditative state that allowed her to experience a profound understanding and appreciation for life. "I felt as though I floated between states of life and death, and that it didn't matter which side I landed on. The boundary we humans had drawn between these two states was not as important, nor as irrevocable, as we believed," she wrote. "And it seemed to me, in some wordless way, that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is about."

"But I didn't know how," she goes on, "until Tilo, my heroine, the *Mistress of Spices*, came to me. I wrote the book urgently--almost breathlessly. Having been so close to death, I could no longer take even a single day for granted. It was a book full of risks for me. I ventured into paths I hadn't traveled before, breaking ethnic barriers, showing people of different races at war and in love. I dipped into the language and imagery of my childhood, the folk tales I grew up on, and alternated them with slang from Oakland's inner-city streets. And I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth-century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable."

"I am the Mistress of Spices," Tilo says to open this fable. "I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers. Yes, they all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot."

Tilo, following her training in the healing power of spices, sets up practice in the unlikely location of an Indian grocery store in Oakland, California. She takes on the body of an old woman to disguise herself. She was first taught that the spices are meant to heal only South Asians. But she soon is helping everyone.

In the way of fables, the spices talk. For example: "I am turmeric, who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas [angels] and asuras [demons] churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in-between." Divakaruni works through the medium of spices because she feels they are one of Hinduism's most important symbols. Spices play a large role in pujas (worship), as spiced food is a common and central ritual offering.

"I see my writing as a gift and as a sacred activity," Divakaruni states. "I think it comes not from the conscious mind but from some place deeper within us." Divakaruni broke into the US market first as a poet--for which there is precious little readership (even her husband showed scant interest)--then five years ago made the transition to stories (which her husband loves). "Once I started writing fiction, I was very

fortunate. I really do think of it as God's grace in my life," she says of her meteoric success. Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common "female experience." All her heroines must find themselves within the constraining boundaries of their cultures and religions. "My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibility and individual happiness, which is, in a way, at the center of the conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, as the nurturer, and as sacrificing herself for the good of the family, and the Western concept of self-happiness."

It has been 19 years since Divakaruni left Bengal to live in Sunnyvale, California. Leaving her homeland has only strengthened her Hindu beliefs. She is an avid follower of Gurumayi Chidvalasananda of SYDA, successor to Baba Muktananda. Gurumayi's spiritual guidance has allowed Divakaruni to understand her direction and purpose in life and to be more loving and universal in her thoughts.

"Mine is a very simple life. I found that because I do several things that are very important to me, I've had to make my priorities clear," she said. "I think one of the things that our religion teaches us is to try and make our lives simple and to cut out things that are not necessary, so that we have time for the important things." As a wife and mother of two sons, family is a strong priority in her life. She is a creative writing professor at Foothill College. "I love teaching," she said, "It is a great satisfaction." Divakaruni is also president of MAITRI, the first help line for abused women of South Asian descent in California.

In Bengal, India, Divakaruni understood that the spirituality of Hindu women was as important as that of Hindu men: "The worship of the Mother Goddess is a big part of the Bengali culture. It's given me a sense of the power of the Goddess in women. I was brought up to think that women can do anything that they want, that women are successful. They are powerful guiding forces in the family and outside the family."

"I think one of the first things that I learned about Hinduism, and that I always loved about Hinduism, is its inclusive and all-embracing attitude to the world." She acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult to bridge the gap between the Western mindset and experience and true Hindu principles. And for Divakaruni, modern-day Hinduism does not always seem so loving, so understanding. She points to the selfish and hateful acts that Hindus committed during recent religious riots in India. "How can we believe that the same divine Self is in everyone, and then turn around and do something horrible to another person who calls God by another name? It distresses me."

Divakaruni's next novel details the relationship between two female cousins bound by love but separated by distance, time and culture. Her newest collection of short stories, *Leaving Yuba City* is set for publication in August 1997

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