

DISCOVERING A REENCHANTED WORLD. AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

Sofia Cavalcanti¹*

¹Department of Humanities, University of Macerata (MC), Italy

Abstract

Thought of as attractive and seductive, tales of wonder have traditionally been associated with the female sphere. Often representing women as selfless healers and care-givers due to their privileged link with the natural and supernatural world, myths and legends can easily lend themselves to reinforcing gender stereotypes. This article examines the widely praised magical realist novel *The Mistress of Spices* (Divakaruni 1997) through an ecofeminist lens proposing it as a counter-example to the problematic representation of women and nature as passive, non-agent, and non-subject entities. Drawing from material ecocriticism and ecofeminist studies, and following a non-anthropocentric approach, the article discusses how the biosemiotics of the book contributes to the “reenchantment” of the natural world and the subsequent empowerment of the woman protagonist. Capable of intentionality, creativity, and effectivity, both the spices and their mistress establish an interspecies bond that eventually breaks the link between gender oppression and exploitation of nature, thus enabling new forms of expression and emancipatory discourses.

Keywords: ecofeminist materialism; interspecies literature; feminist magical realism; Indian-American literature; *The Mistress of Spices*.

* Sofia Cavalcanti is postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Humanities of the University of Macerata and adjunct professor of English Culture and Literature at the Department of Interpreting and Translation of the University of Bologna (Forlì campus). Following a strong interdisciplinary and transnational approach, her research focuses on material culture studies, diaspora and migration, and feminist theory applied to postcolonial women's writing. Her publications include articles on Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, feminist diasporic fiction, and transcultural YA fiction. She recently published her first monograph entitled *Reading Things. Gender and Material Culture in Contemporary Anglophone Women's Writings* (Bologna University Press 2023). Currently, she has been working on a research project concerning gendered representations in modern climate migration fiction and refugee literature. E-mail: sofia.cavalcanti@unimc.it. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4130-3691>.



Introduction

Traditionally associated with fates, fairies, and spinning, women have been identified with the art and power of storytelling in most cultures. As Karen E. Rowe pointed out (1986), storytelling “is semiotically a female art” (71) since women have historically been represented as the spinners of tales in folktale collections and frame stories. Like tales, evoking the wondrous, the mystic, and the primitive, women embody the mysterious Other (Bacchilega 2004) with privileged access to supernatural worlds, ancestral wisdom, and marvelous powers. Devona Mallory (2008) explains that women were the first beings worshipped as deities in pre-historic times and this gives them “a unique link with the divine power” (31). Universally, these goddesses were bestowed with attributes like “love, death, creativity, the moon, and sexuality” (31), which put them in a unique position between the sacred and the fanciful. This ancestral link with the supernatural is paralleled by a deep connection with the natural world, as Susan Griffin also writes in her prologue to *Woman and Nature* (1978): “He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her” (31). According to this romantic conception, women are able to decipher nature’s language and signs, use its healing powers, and share its nurturing qualities of life-giving, support, and empathy. Interestingly, as Lesley Kordecki notes in her article, “Like a Creature Native” (2018), in the classic literary imaginary women are frequently related with the elemental energies, metaphorically incarnating the four elements and their mysterious and untamed force. The philosophical field also supported the stereotypical view according to which women, just as nature, represent an irrational entity that needs to be mastered by a superior rational being. As Jeanne Addison Roberts (1991) reminds us,

[t]he equation of women and Nature is so ancient and so ubiquitous as hardly to need documentation. From Aristotle on, philosophers have seen women as formless matter upon which men must imprint shape, even as Nature was the raw material from which human Culture was to be constructed. (25)

The assumption of nature as the realm of the feminine—as opposed to reason and culture, which are the privileged domains of the male master—has generated a series of problematic stereotypes that involve both the female and the natural sphere. Indeed, they have both become fields of multiple exclusions and control, the invisible background against which the foreground achievements of reason and culture take place. As the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood stated (1993), nature and women share the condition of being an alien realm to be molded in relation to specific purposes, “whose domination is simply natural” (4). In other words, following a typical Western structure of dualism, women and

nature are characterized by a state of passivity and non-agency that exposes them to different forms of oppression by a master embodying rationality and culture.

However, women's intimate link with the art of storytelling as well as their deep bond with the natural and supernatural could conflate in a revisionist form of narrative with an ecofeminist agenda, as this article will demonstrate. In this respect, contemporary Anglophone Indian literature provides a series of counter-examples to the Cartesian opposition between nature and culture, humans, and other-than-humans¹, body and mind, portraying reality in less oppositional and hierarchical terms (Chanda 2008; Sen and Roy 2013)². Among the different books by Indian authors writing in English, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's widely praised novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (hereafter mentioned as *TMS*, published in 1997), constitutes an interesting case study for its non-anthropocentric perspective and consequent reconfiguration of woman-nature relations. Proposing a revision of the myth of the Indian goddess Tilottama, the novel reconceives both women and nature as capable of agency and intentionality, thus challenging their backgrounding as well as their objectification. Following a subversive strategy, Divakaruni's novel represents the extent to which the deep connection between the other-than-human and the female human might enable new forms of expression as well as an empowering form of agency. In order to enact her subversive goal, the Indian-American writer availed herself of the genre of magical realism since it lends itself to multiple interpellations, especially in an ecofeminist key. Hence, after examining magical realism as a powerful ecofeminist tool, this article will discuss how the nonliving entities in the story, namely spices, are rehabilitated as agentic matter which, intersecting with the female human system of the protagonist, are capable of producing emancipatory narratives. In other words, following the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism and ecological postmodernism, this essay will show how the "disenchantment" (Griffin 1988) of nature that has pervaded the modern times could be replaced by its reenchantment as vital and dynamic entity whose liberation from a cycle of oppression parallels that of the woman protagonist. The deep bond between spices and their mistress represented in the novel ultimately suggests the possibility of affirming women's special qualities without endorsing their traditional role and confinement to a natural sphere.

Magical Realism as an ecofeminist tool

In its quest to voice the other(s) of the world, magical realism can be an important tool for the emancipation and empowerment of both women and nature. From a terminological viewpoint, a certain confusion exists around the proper term to use to refer to the genre which combines reality and fantasy. The most frequently adopted expressions are "magic realism," "marvelous realism," and "magical realism." The term "magic realism" commonly refers to the art movement developed in Germany in relation to the painting of the Weimar Republic which attempts to produce a clear depiction of reality that includes

the presentation of mysterious elements of everyday life. “Marvelous realism,” on the other hand, refers to the combination of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature. “Magical realism,” introduced in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fiction, has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative. Hence, the latter is the term that will be used throughout this article.³ Magical realist narratives have been a useful tool for writers who choose to write from the perspective of the marginalized from the mainstream for its transgressive spirit and border-crossing nature. Indeed, since the mid-twentieth century, many postcolonial, cross-cultural, and feminist writers have employed magical realism to give voice to their ideals. As Stephen Slemon writes (1988), “[magical realism] creates marginal spaces in which the silenced voices of totalizing systems can speak” (18). In other words, it is a genre on the borders which has the power of transcending conventions and deconstructing the given order of things. Slemon demonstrates how the hybrid nature of this literary genre makes it a perfect means of resistance to assimilation into the imperial center. The first instance of hybridity, he claims, is enclosed within the very expression “magical realism,” which sounds like an oxymoron suggesting the binary opposition between the representational codes of realism and those of fantasy. However, in magical realist texts, the two oppositional systems coexist in an ongoing dialectic to the extent that one genre is never completely assimilated into the other. No hierarchy is constituted between magic and reality because the narrative is always suspended between the two literary codes in a perfect balance. As a consequence, through this genre it is possible to represent every dimension of reality, not only the rational, but also the irrational. Moreover, the hybrid nature of the magical realist genre questions the binary vision of the world as either rational or magical, thus rejecting the idea of conveying a single truth. As Wendy B. Faris states (2004), “[i]n magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption” (3). Indeed, however fantastic they may seem, magical realist texts are concerned with the socio-cultural reality to the extent that “the magical mode is frequently designed specifically to support the mimetic ends of the text, to define social and political realities in highly unrealistic ways” (Zamora 1988, 249). This porousness between fiction and reality makes magical realism a powerful tool for feminist discourses, too. It is interesting to note, for instance, that magical realism is an originally feminine mode of storytelling. It has its origins in *One Thousand and One Nights* and the art of Sheherazade as a female narrative voice (Kolahjooei and Beyad 2011). The Persian storyteller mixed reality and fantasy in her tales and used them as a means of survival and resistance against the tyranny of a man. Sheherazade’s controversial choice to marry king Shahryar, who in the previous three years had married and executed all the virgins of his kingdom, shows that the tale of wonder can easily lend itself to reinforcing stereotypes, such as women’s submission to masculine power. However, due to their hybrid nature, magic-laden stories can be re-interpreted

through a new lens and become a means of empowerment and change, as Divakaruni demonstrates through her novel.

The ancient myth of Tilottama that inspired the Indian-American author depicts a self-effacing and submissive goddess whose life is totally devoted to the wellbeing of others. Tilottama, a celestial nymph, goddess of knowledge, mysticism, and power, took her name from *Til*, the Sanskrit word for the sun-burnished sesame seed, the spice of nourishment. As the mistress protagonist of the book explains, “*Til* [...] ground into paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver, *til* [...] fried in its own oil restores lustre when one has lost interest in life. [...] [*T*il, life-giver, restorer of health and hope.” (42). Just like the seed she embodies, the goddess was supposed to devote her life to others, entertaining them with her beauty and dancing skills. The legend, according to which Tilottama was required “to never [...] give her love to man—only to the dance” (43), clearly points out how the goddess was submitted to an external patriarchal power that controlled her and threatened her with serious consequences in case of disobedience. If she dared to rebel, she would be condemned to “[s]even mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limbs.” (43). The mistress protagonist of the novel, Tilo, apparently follows the same life pattern as the ancient Indian goddess. Indeed, after a period of apprenticeship on the magic Island of Spices under the surveillance of “The Old One” (5), she is sent to a place where she can be of service to the Indian people, namely the city of Oakland, California, where a high number of Indian immigrants live. During her passage from the island to her American destination, the woman undergoes a deep transformation, giving up her youth and her beauty as well as all her possessions. When she materializes in California, she wakes up naked, in an old woman’s body. There, she manages a small spice bazaar, a sort of microcosm of India, where Indian diasporic customers find comfort in the smell, sight, touch, and taste of familiar things. Her mission is to alleviate the sense of loss and disorientation of her people in the foreign land through the power of spices. The promise Tilo has to make before taking up her new role recalls the myth: “Are you ready to give up your young bod[y], to take on age and ugliness and unending service? Ready never to step out of the places where you are set down, store or school or healing house? Are you ready never to love any but the spices [...]?” (40). As is evident, her prospect is that of living a life of sacrifice as a selfless woman supporting others by offering comfort and cures.

However, at a specific moment in the narrative, Divakaruni reverses the myth by proposing a substantial shift in perspective. Tilo challenges the patriarchal expectations that had entrapped her for a long time and breaks the rules set by the Old One. Leaving the store to visit one of her customers, falling in love with a man, and using the spices to change her own appearance from old woman into a charming young girl are some of her deliberate acts of rebellion. The progressive change that the woman protagonist undergoes throughout the book is backed by her deep and controversial relationship with her spices, which are far from being passive and inert matter under her control. In fact, they play a crucial role

in Tilo's process of emancipation thanks to the mysterious vital force that flows within them. The fact that the other-than-human world acquires a life of its own and consequent agentic potential is a typical characteristic of magical realist texts. The representation of objects in other genres, such as the realist narratives, differs radically from the nature of objects depicted in magical realist narratives. While literary objects are typically required to represent themselves, in a magical realist context the real world of everyday things, places, and people become the container of the magic of the text. This feature reflects Franz Roh's assumption (1995) according to which "the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (16). In other words, magic does not come from the outside but is intrinsic to things. In *TMS*, for instance, Divakaruni does not represent a static, romanticized version of the natural world, but rather a natural system imbued with life, value, and agential power. Following an ecofeminist agenda, the instrumental treatment of nature and its consequent exclusion from ethical significance is reversed in a recuperative way. The other-than-human, which is traditionally backgrounded in narratives, is not only brought to the forefront, but is given its own voice and a new knowledge for readers is opened up. Through the technique of defamiliarization, i.e., the presentation of familiar things in unusual ways in order to stress their overlooked properties, a more thought-provoking notion of nature—and its relationship with the human world—is presented. As a result, Divakaruni's novel, as a magical realist text, follows a non-anthropocentric approach rejecting not only the binary representation of reality hierarchically divided into humans and other-than-humans, organic and inorganic entities, mind, and matter, but also the oppressive patriarchal association between women/nature and passivity. On the contrary, it celebrates interspecies bonds occurring in a hybrid, living world.

A gendered ecological vision of a living world

One of the main revisionist messages that the novel object of this article conveys is that it is necessary to reconsider the categories into which our world is divided, especially from a gender perspective. As David Griffin suggests in the book he edited, *The Reenchantment of Science* (1988), modernity seems to alienate us from our bodies and nature in general because of a slow but destructive process of disqualification and "disenchantment" (2) of nature itself. Following the German sociologist Max Weber's theory of the "disenchantment of the world" ([1917] 2004), Griffin claims that no creativity, no self-determination as well as no intrinsic value have been granted to nature by modern science because of its mechanistic vision of our surroundings. Interestingly, Weber used the term *Entzauberung*, which literally means "taking the magic out," to explain the extent to which the natural environment was disqualified and deprived of any creativity and self-determination. According to this view, natural things were denied any hidden power, such as experience, memory, feelings, aim or decision, with the consequence that "human life was rendered both alien and autonomous" (3).

However, this dichotomic perspective does not reflect the way in which reality actually works since, arguably, all beings, even the most elementary physical units, are characterized by an internal relatedness and enact different kinds of causal structures. In this respect, Serpil Oppermann (2014), one of the main theorists of Material Ecocriticism, maintains that “relational materiality” (21) is demonstrated by the numerous material processes intersecting with human systems as well as the ongoing interchanges between organic and inorganic matter. Whether manifested in species extinction, climate change, racial or gender discriminations, health policies, in the extraction, transformation, and exploitation of natural resources, the world’s phenomena are instances of a relation between human and various other-than-human beings, which act together in indissoluble “collectives,” as Bruno Latour put it (2004, 61). Material Ecocriticism, as theorized by Oppermann and Iovino (2014), opens up a new conceptual horizon based on the idea that an other-than-human viewpoint is necessary to engage with the world and understand its material, cultural, and discursive mechanisms. By claiming that the things we interact with are “alive and undeniably expressive” (Oppermann 2018, 9) and they have stories to tell about human practices as well as ecological dynamics, this theoretical framework invites to be attentive to the messages encoded in the activities of the various creatures and elements with which we share the world.

The relatedness between human and other-than-human systems—and their shared narrative potential—advocated by the material ecocritical thought contrasts starkly with any anthropocentric models of knowledge, which inevitably determine both natural disequilibrium and oppressive social practices, such as sexism, racism, and patriarchy. Conversely, the re-evaluation and empowerment of nature will lead to the rehabilitation of those groups traditionally associated with nature, such as women. In other words, if considering nature as a lifeless mechanism generates exploitation, its re-evaluation as a vital and dynamic entity will contribute to a shift in the perception of women as agential and powerful beings. In the book they edited entitled *Material Feminisms* (2008), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman advocate for a profound reconceptualization of nature as a potentially feminist space. Even though nature has been a treacherous terrain for feminism (Val Plumwood 1993; Sandilands 1999; Alaimo 2000), they suggest that it might be redefined as a place where “otherworldly conversations” take place (Haraway 2008) between humans and other-than-humans through productive relations that respect difference and enable mutual transformation.

In *TMS*, Divakaruni portrays the constructive link that can be established between women and nature going beyond the pernicious association that traditionally depicts them as blank, silent resources for the exploits of dominant forces. The author’s revisionist tactic, which insists very much on the materiality of both the human body and the natural world as means of reciprocal empowerment, has a big impact on the readers’ perception of reality, both at the ecological and gender level.

Throughout the book, Tilo is metaphorically associated with the elemental forces of nature in an ecological vision of animate reality. In the first part of the novel, focused on her childhood and youth, she has a symbiotic relationship with water. Born from a poor family in an Indian village, Tilo soon discovers to hold the special power of clairvoyance. She becomes popular all over India and people from everywhere crave her prophecies; until one day, a group of ruthless pirates ravages her village and kidnaps her with the aim of using her as their protector at sea. For years, she sails the ocean as the unwilling legendary protector of pirates, reading the signs of the waves, mastering the force of the seas, and controlling tides. However, a growing sense of oppression, emblemized by the ocean, “dark and thick, like clotted iron” (21), sneaks within her. Tilo’s urgent desire for freedom culminates in a devastating typhoon, “called up from its sleep in the ocean throughs of the east” (21-22) thanks to the woman’s deep connection with water. The interchange of energy between Tilo and the aquatic world creates the conditions—a tropical storm and a shipwreck—that set her free from the shackles of patriarchy embodied by the pirates.

Tilo establishes an interspecies bond not only with the liquid realm but also with the lithic realm. This link manifests itself in the privileged relationship she has with snakes, ancestral creatures “closest to earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast” (21) that follow her wherever she goes. Sources of protection but also reminders of our roots, snakes are far from being passive entities living savagely or unwittingly, as their interactions with Tilo demonstrate (21). The element of earth, and its special connection with Tilo, is also embodied by the island on which she lands after the shipwreck as well as the products she has to offer, i.e., spices. The Island of Spices is populated by women only—all aiming to become mistresses of spices—and is depicted as a utopic place where the female universe and the natural universe are inextricably related and reciprocally empowering. There, nature demonstrates its power as both nurturing mother and cruel stepmother demanding respect. This double-faced feature is clearly conveyed by Tilo’s memory of her first encounter with the Old One: “The sea had [...] thrown me at her feet bereft of all but my dark, ugly body. [...] In shame I crossed my arms over my chest and bent my head. But already was she removing her shawl, placing it around my shoulders.” (32). By coming into contact with a new world made of land and its products, Tilo understands how nature can both give and take, refusing to be mastered passively by human practices. Soon, she learns that “the spice power [the mistresses] were learning to bend to [their] purposes could have destroyed [them] in a moment if wrongly invoked.” (52).

During her training on the island, the mistress protagonist connects intimately with a further natural element, that is, air. Instructed on the different means humans can use to interact with nature, she learns that chants, whispers, and litanies can enable her to communicate with the spices. In order to become a good healer, she must be “quick to master every spell and chant, quick to speak with the spices, even the most dangerous.” (41). Interestingly, the natural entities that surrounded Tilo had a voice of their own and had to be listened to as vital

and agentic matter. When she picks up Turmeric, for instance, a sort of dialogue takes place between the two of them:

When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world. *I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between.* (13, italics original)

Finally, when all lessons are learned by the novices, the time comes for them to step out of the comfort zone of the island and measure themselves with the last and most powerful of the elements: fire. In order to leave the Island of Spices, they have to undergo initiation by stepping into a pyre, symbol of purification and rebirth. Tilo tells that the mistresses “piled wood in the center of the volcano” and “danced around it singing of Shampati, bird of myth and memory who dived into conflagration and rose new from ash, as [they] were to do.” (56). After the ritual is accomplished, they would wake in their new body in the destination assigned to each of them, without feeling any pain. Through that ceremony, Tilo becomes one with fire, the element that gives her access to her new life.

This series of supernatural events typically occurs in magical realist texts that, by definition, demand a suspension of judgment by readers who are confronted with eerie elements and accept that they are part of the tangible and material reality. To put it in Salman Rushdie’s words (1991), the “commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (9) highlights the deeply relational nature of reality. Looking at the reciprocal emotional involvement between human and other-than-human beings from a gender perspective, it is interesting to note that women position themselves with nature, not above it, in an inclusive pattern of mutual exchange and influence. This thought is at the basis of Divakaruni’s ecofeminist revision, which is ultimately accomplished towards the end of the novel, when both the spices and the mistress protagonist perform rebellious acts leading to the dismantling of the patriarchal shackles that entrap them and, consequently, reciprocal empowerment.

The power of matter(ing)

The human and other-than-human characters in *TMS*, display a material-semiotic system of agents that generate embodiments and events. From a material ecocritical viewpoint (Iovino and Oppermann 2014), it is evident how agency assumes many forms, including material forms, to the extent that intentionality cannot be associated only to human beings, but is a pervasive property of matter, too. In this respect, Bruno Latour (1999) notes that other-than-humans are no longer seen as mere objects, but “full-fledged actors” (174). This assertion is exemplified in Divakaruni’s novel, which highlights the metaphorical conversation between female human beings and other-than-human entities as well as their reciprocal exchange of properties. Spices, in particular, establish a privileged

connection not only with the woman protagonist, but with all the customers that visit her bazaar. Indeed, as soon as they approach this food recalling India and its traditions—by breathing its smell, seeing its colors, and tasting its flavor—they feel relieved, protected, and less alienated in the foreign land: “They are breathing in the old comforting smells. Ground coriander, roasted *saunf*, the small tinkling of a woman’s bangles. Almost it could be home.” (62). Clearly, spices are not merely sources of physical sustenance, but they provide emotional and cultural sustenance as well. Karen Barad (2007), according to her theory of agential realism, would define this relationship between matter and meaning as “intra-action,” suggesting that matter has the power to build dynamics of meaning in and across bodies. Spices, as both matter of substance and significance for Indian immigrants, embody India itself and are a clear demonstration that there is no division between nature and culture. In a similar vein, there are significant connections between the inside and the outside of organisms. Indeed, material entities like spices have a powerful impact on how immigrant people feel and face their everyday reality. This interchange between physical and psychological states is represented in the following description of the spice bazaar’s interior, where material culture and emotions exist in a dialectic relationship:

And in the corners accumulated among dustballs exhaled by those who have entered here, the desires. Of all things in my store, they are the most ancient. For even here in this new land America, this city which prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat, it is the same things we want, again and again. (4)

Tilo’s shop is the receptor of all the migrants’ anxieties, but it is also the place where they hope to find the means to realize their desires, through the various spices provided by the mistress. Alaimo, in her book, *Bodily Natures* (2010), explores the mutual interference of places, social practices, and health of all living organisms that are thus constantly involved in trans-corporeal dynamics. In this respect, the transit of substances and discursive practices within and across bodies represented in *TMS* unveils underlying dynamics of objectification and instrumentalization of both the mistress and the spices she handles and distributes to her immigrant customers. Indeed, the unwavering commitment of both Tilo and her spices to alleviating others’ suffering positions them as instruments in the hands of the Old One, who is the embodiment of patriarchal power. Their sole purpose is to bring solace by practicing self-abnegation and bending to customary duties. Both involved in this vicious system, Tilo and her spices are in a relationship of mutual inferiorization. On the one hand, Tilo is submitted to the power of spices as they demand submission, self-sacrifice, care, and empathy. In Tilo’s head, their warning resonates like an old chant: “*A Mistress must carve hew own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves.*” (69, italics original). On the other hand, the spices are also objectified both as tools Tilo uses to relieve people’s pain and as material and cultural channels leading the migrants towards personal self-realization in the

new land. In other words, they represent the extent to which nature is exploited and consumed in the name of humans' needs. Hence, Divakaruni's problematic representation portrays both women, namely the mistresses, and nature, namely spices, as the instrumentalized and victimized Other that is not recognized as a center of needs and desires on their own account.

However, if at first the mistress and her spices undermine each other's independence, they eventually engender a reciprocal process of liberation. Indeed, it is through spices that Tilo begins her rebellion against the patriarchal system in which they are both entrapped. The longer Tilo lives in America, the deeper is her awareness that the ancestral knowledge represented by the Old One can be questioned. For instance, when she gives a young woman customer "*methi* for healing breaks and *ada* for the deeper courage [...], and also *amchur* for deciding right" (137), Tilo tells her in the end: "Ultimately the Mistresses are without power [...]. It is the spice that decides, and the person to whom it is given. You must accept what they together choose." (139). As this passage shows, no hierarchy is established between human and nature as they are fundamentally interrelated and shape each other in perfect synergy. Moreover, a moment comes when Tilo challenges the Old One's rules by acting for her own good and in her own interest—which is utterly forbidden to mistresses. When she falls in love with an American customer, she ignores the Old One's warnings and increasingly feels the pleasure of mastering her own destiny and fulfilling her own desires. Despite facing a conflict between her sense of duty and her desire for independence, Tilo eventually concludes: "It's my desire I want to fulfil, for once." (82).

The powerful impetus of liberation shown by Tilo is paralleled by the subversive force enacted by the spices that, once again, prove their vital force. Mirroring their mistress' claim for independence, they manifest their agency through a violent earthquake that leaves no escape to things and people. The spices' rebellion results in widespread devastation throughout the entire city: "[T] here were big cracks slashed across the freeway, fissures with gases rising from them. A stench like Sulphur covered everything. Buildings were burning, and every once in a while you could see glass explode. [...] [P]eople [were] screaming. Sirens. Ambulances." (308). This scene of environmental and social destruction occurring in the final part of the book not only depicts nature's outright rejection of oppressive practices, but also suggests that women's oppression—like the one the mistress of spices faced—is inextricably linked with nature's oppression to the extent that the only possible outcome is ecocide. Through a material ecocritical point of view, it might be argued that the city of Oakland, destroyed by the earthquake, tells the story of a decayed relationship between its organic and inorganic population. Reflecting on the multi-layered dynamics occurring within urban spaces, Jeffrey Cohen (2010) noted that a city is a mineral-vegetal-animal aggregate of porous bodies that exist in mutual transformation, thus enacting "geochoreographies" (56). Cities are places of encounter between matter and energy, human and other-than-human beings, living and non-living entities, and their hybrid form instantiates reciprocal exchanges which might reveal stories

of exploitation or hierarchical divisions. From this perspective, the devastating earthquake taking place at the end of the novel might be read as the result of the clash between human-made structures (such as the city and its relative social institutions) and the oppressed natural system. Nevertheless, in *TMS*, the porosity between the human and the other-than-human has a positive outcome in that it triggers the reciprocal emancipation of the woman protagonist and the natural elements with which she is deeply connected.

Conclusion

The material ecocritical analysis of Divakaruni's magical realist book has demonstrated that the world acts together with bodies in an ecological balance of give and take. The environmental feminist perspective adopted in the interpretation of the deep bond between the woman protagonist and her spices has shown that it is possible to highlight women's special qualities without confirming their traditional role and confinement to a marginalized sphere. Cooperativeness and connectedness both to other people and to nature are not necessarily a product of powerlessness. On the contrary, they might trigger virtuous mechanisms of resistance and empowerment. In *TMS*, the agency of the natural is manifested on multiple occasions and parallels the emancipation of the woman protagonist. The force of the other-than-human, combined with human life, produces transformative energy that deconstructs a patriarchal narrative to replace it with a tale of social and environmental justice. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, both women and nature have been ignited with creative life force, which makes them active participants in a world that has traditionally constructed them as passive, inert matter. The strong interspecies bond portrayed in *TMS* contributes to reinserting women back into nature, in a synergy that makes them not merely means in someone's hands but ends in themselves. Divakaruni's novel could be considered as a medium of "cultural ecology" (Zapf 2014), that is, a literary production the creative potential of which has the power to "actualize in always new forms the fundamental relationship between matter and mind, nature and culture, as a source of its creative processes" (51). Through magical realism, it expresses the fundamental interconnectedness between culture, i.e., the patriarchal and exploitative social and cultural practices, and nature, showing that women's experiences are part of a shared world and its eco-cultural processes. The key issue in this argument is that all things and beings, as David Abram underlines (2010), "have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings" (172). Recognizing their agency as an intrinsic property "steadily bodying forth [their] own active creativity and sentience" (170) not only brings forth new conceptions of the natural and material world in general, but also relocates women in a larger material-semiotic structure. Therefore, when subversive processes are enacted, as in the case of *TMS*, the destructive trend of "taking the magic out" (Weber [1917] 2004) of the living and nonliving entities, namely women and nature, is reversed and a new enchanted vision of the world is enabled.

Notes

1. The term “other-than-human” will be preferred to “nonhuman” in adherence to an ecocritical scholarship that seeks to avoid human exceptionalism and extend the social to other entities (see Gustavo Blanco-Wells, “Ecologies of Repair: A Post-Human Approach to Other-than-Human Natures.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, p. 1–10, 2021). The term other-than-human is also preferred to “more-than-human” to mark a contrast with the scientific and technological stances that aim to overcome the limits of the human in the sense of “human enhancement,” as Blanco-Wells put it.
2. Among the notable examples of books that challenge ontological hierarchies is Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). By employing the narrative strategy of adopting the viewpoint of seven-year-old twins for much of the story, the novel blurs the lines between reality and imagination, thereby subverting traditional assumptions that prioritize mentality over materiality. Similarly, Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* (New York: Penguin, 2001) portrays a woman protagonist who, by embarking on a transformative journey, achieves independence and self-realization through the exploration of her physical surroundings as well as her own sexuality, thus disrupting the dichotomy between body and mind.
3. For a detailed discussion on the origin of magical realism, see Anne Bower’s book *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004).

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