

The Aesthetics of Trauma: Magical Realism as a Narrative of Healing in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* and Sarah Addison Allen's *Garden Spells*

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Abstract

*Trauma studies have explored new narrative strategies to represent trauma survivors' experiences in words. Among these strategies, magical realism has emerged as an important literary tool through which novelists can represent survivors' psychological wounds, fragmented memories, and emotional recovery. This paper presents a comparative study of magical realism in novels by Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and American writer Sarah Addison Allen's *Garden Spells* (2007) to examine how magical realism functions as a narrative of trauma and healing. Divakaruni sets her concept of trauma within the context of fractured cultural identity shaped by diasporic displacement and maternal silence. Allen's work explores self-identity, emotional neglect, maternal dominance, familial breakup, and personal loss through the enchanted landscape of the American South. The study draws on three theoretical approaches: Caruth's view of trauma as an experience that exceeds ordinary representation, Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery, and Wendy B. Faris's theory of magical realism. Though the novelists' cultural settings differ, both novels represent healing as a gradual process of emotional recognition, self-realisation, and acceptance of the past. This article contributes to contemporary trauma studies by showing how magical realism extends trauma narratives beyond psychological realism and offers alternative aesthetic possibilities for representing distress, resilience, and recovery.*

Keywords: Trauma, Healing, Magical Realism, *Queen of Dreams*, *Garden Spells*, Memory, Diaspora, Comparative Literature.

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Introduction

In recent decades, trauma has become a major field of literary research. Contemporary literature increasingly explores characters who feel emotionally distressed, displaced, grief-stricken, or divided within themselves. These are experiences that are often difficult to describe because trauma affects memory, emotions, and personal identity. Trauma survivors may not be able to express their pain directly. Their experiences may emerge in fragments, dreams, silence, or recurring emotional responses. This complexity can make it difficult for traditional realist fiction to represent traumatic experiences fully.

Many contemporary writers use other means to tell their stories and convey emotional realities beyond normal language. One literary mode used for this purpose is magical realism. Magical realism combines everyday reality with magical elements, making the extraordinary a natural part of daily life and enabling writers to express emotional and psychological truths through symbolic images, dreams, magical objects, and enchanted landscapes. "Magical realism becomes a narrative device to blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, allowing characters to face the tension between ancestral traditions and modern lives" (Karthikadevi et al. 570).

The connection between magical realism and trauma offers a useful narrative approach because it makes hidden emotional experiences visible. Magical realism deepens readers' understanding of emotional reality by representing psychological experiences in imaginative ways. Expressions of trauma, such as psychological wounds, broken memories, and repressed feelings, are often beyond rational explanation. Adams describes this connection in a passage that "carries the potential to respond sensitively yet productively to the issue of traumatic experience, enabling such experience to take its place within representation" (174). Trauma theory also helps explain why magical realism is particularly well suited to representing psychological suffering.

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not fully understood at the time it occurs. It returns later as memories of catastrophic events that haunt survivors through dreams, flashbacks, and recurring emotional distress. She defines trauma as "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon" (11). Trauma cannot be fully understood at the moment it happens and is therefore often represented indirectly rather than through direct narration. As Judith Herman also explains, trauma destroys a person's sense of safety, trust, and identity and may lead them to repeat aspects of an experience without recognising it. Herman states, "More commonly, traumatised people find themselves re-enacting some aspect of the trauma scene in disguised form, without realising what they are doing" (40). She argues that healing can begin only when survivors reconnect with themselves, others, and the past. Wendy B. Faris's theory of magical realism

provides an important framework for understanding these novels. She writes, “the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events” (7). This storytelling style is unique and offers opportunities to represent emotional truths that cannot easily be expressed through realistic description alone. *Dreams*, magical places, inherited gifts, and magical objects become symbolic representations of memory, identity, fear, hope, and healing.

Trauma is addressed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* through the story of Rakhi, an Indian-American woman struggling to come to terms with her mother’s enigmatic life and her own cultural identity. When her mother disappears, Rakhi finds a series of ‘dream journals’ that share hidden stories of migration, sacrifice, silence, and maternal love. *Dreams* in this novel are emotional spaces in which past and present come together and in which repressed memories surface little by little. Mrs Gupta records the dreams she receives through her dream spirit in a journal that preserves parts of her past. Although her circumstances limit her, she remains determined to continue her dream work. The novel shows her pain when she recognises the cost of maintaining this practice after marriage. “I knew then what I had to do . . . I awoke weeping . . . I knew now how much my link with the dream spirit meant. I couldn’t give it up” (178). These dream journals are symbolic records of Mrs Gupta’s memories, which help Rakhi reconnect with her mother and her Indian heritage.

Sarah Addison Allen’s *Garden Spells* explores trauma through the lives of the Waverley sisters, Claire and Sydney, who harbour emotional scars of childhood neglect, family separation, loneliness, and domestic abuse. The magical Waverley garden and house, enchanted plants, symbolic flowers, and inherited family gifts create a comforting space where emotional healing is possible. After a domestic crisis, Sydney returns home following a long absence. Her connection to her roots makes her feel safe, and she can still sense the magic of her grandmother’s kitchen. Its aromas and recipes offer comfort and help her recover. Allen describes this experience: “Sydney walked into the kitchen and froze. She’d just walked into heaven. And her grandmother was right there, in every scent. Sugary and sweet. Herby and sharp. Yeasty and fresh. Grandma Waverley used to cook like this” (54). Though years have passed, returning gives her a sense of belonging in a safe place and helps her heal.

Using magical realism, Allen shows how everyday activities such as gardening, cooking, eating, and caring for one another can express psychological healing through a sense of home and connection to one’s roots. These novels come from different cultural traditions, but they share many important themes. Both authors depict women dealing with emotional pain because of family relations, memory, silence, loss, and identity. Both reject the notion that healing means forgetting the past. Healing develops through remembering, understanding, forgiveness, and acceptance. *Dreams*, magical objects, gardens, flowers, and family traditions

become symbolic paths through which the protagonists rebuild themselves.

Analysis and Discussion:

Trauma and Magic Realism in *Queen of Dreams*. Dreams as Memory and Healing

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*, trauma is explored through dreams, memory, family relationships, and cultural identity. Instead of representing trauma through physical violence or historical disaster, the novel explores emotional trauma that arises through silence, separation, migration, and unresolved family relations. Divakaruni uses magical realism to turn these invisible emotional experiences into powerful narrative forms. *Dreams* become symbolic spaces where repressed memories, feelings, and histories gradually emerge.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent voice in South Asian American literature, articulates through her fiction a profound and multilayered exploration of the diverse dimensions of human relationships, particularly in relation to identity, ideology, and the preservation of cultural memory within diasporic and transnational settings. The novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni intricately represent female subjectivity, interpersonal relationships, and diasporic identity (Mishra 35).

Divakaruni presents dreams as a means of healing connected to a hidden world. Mrs Gupta states, "A dream is a telegram from the hidden world" (34). Mrs Gupta explains that whenever she feels distressed or overwhelmed, or needs guidance, she looks to dreams in her hidden world for help. She describes a space of her own, a world where dreams arrive like telegrams and help her heal. Through this image, the novel suggests that simple things can help people heal when they face painful memories instead of pushing them away.

Rakhi, the protagonist, is an Indian-American woman trying to come to terms with her identity and her conflicted relationship with her mother. Rakhi feels emotionally distant while her mother is alive, believing that her mother is more committed to her mysterious dream work than to her family. Miscommunication causes loneliness, rejection, and emotional insecurity. But when her mother disappears, Rakhi discovers a trove of dream journals that changes her understanding of the past. These journals become a link between memory and healing, allowing Rakhi to uncover feelings hidden for years. Rakhi's mother's ability to enter the dreams of others is a metaphor for the emotional truth that human suffering often exists beneath the surface of everyday life. *Dreams* thus become a language in which hidden emotional truths can finally be understood.

This narrative technique is closely related to Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. Caruth argues that trauma is seldom understood at the moment it happens. It returns later in dreams, memories, and recurring emotional experiences. "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Rakhi's understanding

of her mother follows this pattern. While her mother is alive, Rakhi does not understand the sacrifices, fears, and love behind her silence. Only by reading her mother's dream journals does she slowly reconstruct her mother's emotional world. Trauma in the novel thus emerges as knowledge that unfolds slowly rather than through immediate understanding.

The dream journals also serve an important symbolic function. They carry family history, maternal love, and cultural memory across time. Although Rakhi's mother is physically absent, her voice continues to guide her daughter through these written dreams. The journals are more than personal diaries; they serve as emotional archives that connect past and present. Through them, Rakhi learns about her mother's life and about her own cultural roots and family history. In this way, magical realism turns written memories into living conversations between generations.

Queen of Dreams ultimately shows that trauma cannot be completely wiped out. The dream journals of Rakhi's mother, Mrs Gupta, shape her understanding and give her a new outlook on life. Her attachment to her mother is expressed in the words, "My mother, secretive, stubborn, and unreliable, couldn't hold a tune to save her life. I wanted to be just like her" (8). Healing comes through remembrance, empathy, acceptance, and emotional growth. *Dreams* become symbols of hope instead of fear, and magical realism becomes a literary language through which invisible psychological wounds are expressed through meaningful stories of resilience and renewal.

Trauma and Magic Realism in *Garden Spells*: Garden as Memory and Healing

The childhoods of Claire and Sydney Waverley in *Garden Spells* are marked by profound loss and emotional neglect. After their parents died, both sisters grew up without the steady affection and guidance most children need. This absence left them with wounds that still shape them as adults. Claire copes by retreating into a carefully ordered world—her garden, her kitchen, and her solitude. Allen gives the garden life and presents it as an active guardian and healer. The garden protects them and cares for their welfare. Whenever Claire faces trouble, the garden tries to warn her. This is reflected in a passage from the novel: "Something was about to happen, something the garden wasn't ready to tell her yet" (5). It shows how the garden responds to emotions and decisions as it guards and supports the Waverley sisters. Allen presents the garden as an important source of healing.

Claire keeps her emotions under control, managing pain through routine rather than confronting it. She eases her pain through the relief she gains from tending the magical herbs. She trusts that gardening heals her frustrations. The novel describes this routine:

On those nights in the summer, Claire would garden by the light of the solar-powered footpath lamps, weeding and trimming the night bloomers—the moon vine and the angel's trumpet, the night jasmine and the flowering tobacco. These weren't a part of the Waverley legacy of edible flowers, but sleepless as

she often was, Claire had added flowers to the garden to give her something to do at night when she was so wound up that frustration singed. (3)

The enchanted Waverley garden stands at the emotional centre of the novel, offering more than a beautiful backdrop; it offers emotional support and guidance. The novel describes its warning: “The garden was saying that something was trying to get in, something that was pretty and looked harmless but would take over everything if given the chance” (35). It is a living, almost sentient space where healing can happen. When the characters are overwhelmed, they return to the garden, not to escape their problems, but to find calm and reflection. The garden absorbs their worries and encourages moments of reconciliation, reminding them that healing often happens in familiar, nurturing spaces. Family traditions, recipes, and inherited plants connect past generations to the present, showing that facing and embracing family memories—rather than denying them—is key to overcoming old hurts.

The garden becomes Claire’s source of healing, filling the empty spaces in her life and offering companionship. Allen describes this in the novel: “She’d been working alone in the garden for so many years that she realised she missed having someone there. It reminded her of gardening with her grandmother. It was never meant to be a solitary job” (37). The passage shows Claire responding to the emotional wounds of childhood through the magical garden her grandmother left behind as a place of protection and healing.

Comparative Analysis: Magical Realism as Trauma and Healing Narrative

While Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* and Sarah Addison Allen’s *Garden Spells* are grounded in different cultural traditions, both novels explore the connections between trauma, memory, identity, and healing through magical realism. “Trauma is a marker for revealing excess of wounds, and trauma caused by others and the wounds always threaten the identity of the subject” (Seon 105). Divakaruni writes from the perspective of the Indian diaspora, where migration, cultural displacement, and maternal silence shape emotional experience. “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the famous South Indian writers. She has concentrated on many areas such as diaspora, immigration, alienation, frustration, cultural clashes, myth and miracles” (Karthikadevi et al. 570).

Allen, by contrast, sets her story in the American South, where family history, community, domestic relationships, and inherited traditions shape individual identity. Despite these cultural differences, both authors employ magical realism as an effective narrative device to render emotional experiences that are hard to express through conventional realism.

One of the most important shared features of the two novels is how they conceive trauma as an emotional and relational experience rather than a single catastrophic event. Neither novel focuses on war, natural catastrophes, or political violence. Rather, both authors deal with the long-term psychological effects of childhood neglect, family separation, silence, grief, loneliness, emotional

misunderstanding, and personal loss. The characters' suffering stems not from an external historical event, but from broken relationships. This approach corresponds to Judith Herman's view that trauma is usually caused by prolonged violations of trust, safety, and emotional connection.

The central female characters also experience trauma differently, but they go through a similar process of healing. *Queen of Dreams* centres on Rakhi's cultural identity and her mother's silence. Her emotional turmoil stems from years of misunderstandings and emotional distance. The character of Claire Waverley in *Garden Spells* is shaped by childhood neglect, family instability, and domestic abuse. Both women have different experiences, but each of them slowly learns to confront instead of fleeing from the past, and so overcomes her emotional pain. Healing comes from understanding, accepting, and restoring relationships, not from forgetting painful memories. Memory figures prominently in both novels. Cathy Caruth claims that trauma returns in repetitive memories, as it cannot be fully understood at the time of its occurrence. Divakaruni shows this idea through dreams and dream journals. Rakhi learns about her mother's repressed feelings only by reading these journals. The journals are symbolic archives of family history and cultural memory. Allen offers a different but equally meaningful perspective on memory. The Waverley home, the enchanted garden, the family recipes, and the magical customs keep emotional experiences alive across generations. In both novels, memory is central to healing, as the characters learn to reread the past rather than be held captive to it.

Magical realism connects the two authors' approaches. Both authors weave supernatural events into daily life without questioning their existence. But the magic is different for each writer, depending on their culture. Divakaruni explores emotional suffering and diasporic identity through dreams, spiritual visions, and supernatural dream journeys. Allen describes psychological change through enchanted gardens, magical plants, symbolic flowers, intuitive gifts, and extraordinary domestic rituals. These magical elements differ but serve the same narrative function: expressing emotional truths that traditional realism cannot easily convey.

The representation of women also offers an important point of comparison. Both novels reject the image of women as passive victims of suffering. Instead, the female protagonists become active agents in their own emotional recovery. Rakhi rebuilds her identity by confronting her mother's secret life and embracing her cultural heritage. Claire overcomes emotional isolation and develops a new sense of self through acceptance. Their stories show that healing requires courage, self-awareness, and emotional resilience, not outside rescue. This feminist perspective is intensified by magical realism, which portrays women's intuitive knowledge and emotional intelligence as strengths, not weaknesses.

The symbolic objects in both novels also function as important therapeutic tools. In *Queen of Dreams*, the dream journals preserve maternal memory and

hidden emotional truths, enabling Rakhi to reconnect with both her mother and her cultural identity. In *Garden Spells*, the magical apple tree, enchanted flowers, family recipes, gardening, and unusual plants serve a similar purpose. These objects do not magically erase trauma; they prompt reflection, communication, forgiveness, and emotional growth. These symbols are instances of magical realism, where everyday objects become clear symbols of psychological healing.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis shows that magical realism is not merely a decorative literary style. It is also a useful narrative device that allows the writer to convey emotional suffering in imaginative, but psychologically believable, ways. *Dreams*, magical gardens, enchanted objects, supernatural gifts, and symbolic landscapes bridge memory and healing. Magical realism does not offer an escape from reality, but it helps readers understand emotional truths that are hidden from them in real life.

This study shows that magical realism is not merely an artistic technique that is used to entertain readers. Rather, it functions as a powerful mode of storytelling that makes unseen emotional pain visible and intelligible. “The literary trauma theory, which facilitates the transmission of traumatic psychology through the philosophy of language, enables the analysis of the emotional, psychological, and sociological connections between the literary text and its author” (Doğan 1013). Reading *Queen of Dreams* and *Garden Spells* through trauma theory and magical realism shows how literature can express psychological pain that conventional realism struggles to convey. Both novels use symbolic imagination to turn trauma into stories of hope, resilience, reconciliation, and emotional healing.

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