



Archetypal Resonance and Literary symbolism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

A. Rajamani¹ & Dr. M. Sagaya Sophia²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-Time), PG & Research Department of English
Kalaingar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (A) Pudukkottai
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu

²Research Advisor & Assistant Professor of English, PG & Research Department of English
Kalaingar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (A) Pudukkottai
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

People and places may differ, and times may differ, but the planet remains the same, and humanity is the same. Across history and throughout the ages, archetypal patterns and motifs have been used in literary genres to reflect universal similarity. In order to emphasize the universality and oneness of human nature, literary artists use archetypes in their works. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a notable writer of creative writing, draws on universal patterns and images, especially in her fictional works. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* contains many archetypes like an innocent, a caretaker, a hero, a subjugated woman, and many more. By combining archetypes into her story framework, Divakaruni promotes universality among all people.

Keywords: archetypes, a proto-feminist hero, power of foreseeing, inevitable fate, friendly beast, Shampati fire, loss of identity, loneliness, spices, Natural and Supernatural Human, mentor, American way of life.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni marks a milestone in Indian English scenarios with her captivating narration, which reaches readers worldwide for her realism and imagination. She transfers her skill in literature effectively in stories, essays, and so forth. She cleverly carries the themes in her works, such as the positives and negatives of the existence of those who miss their countries to live abroad and the realities of women living in multicultural contexts. This paper aims at exploring the archetypes buried

in *The Mistress of Spices* without bringing them to the limelight.

Discussion

The term “archetype” refers to any story element that repeatedly emerges in stories from one culture to the next throughout the universe to signify some universal aspects of human experiences. Notably, archetypes can be found in all works of literature because the archetypes are derived from universal or nearly universal cultural and psychological myths.



Hence, it is easier to tell a story using archetype symbols and patterns; every work of literature has its archetypes relating to situations, settings, symbols, and characters. In literary criticism, the term archetype denotes “recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals.” (Abrams 12).

Archetypes build certain patterns in literature and such patterns or ideas continuously retain in the literary works from the birth of literature. Not limited to any particular time or space, the literary stories stamp the universal human characters and their experiences. Consequently these things are ever repeated in the literature to be archetypes whether the writers have intentions to employ or not. It is surprising that Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* has no exception and it sustains archetypes, the universal uniqueness, even though the story moves through the unknown era like time travel. The characters and the story settings is well enough to picture the universal sameness, the archetypes. It is identical to quote P. Valli Deivanai from *Voices of the Displaced*: “*The Mistress of Spices* is a realistic novel. Not only is the contemporary urban America palpably rendered on every page, but the characters are much more than stick figures ciphers pushed away. They are fully presented, physically and psychologically, and contain the strength, weakness and quirks all humans do” (167).

People of all generations might be exposed to the type of heroes or superheroes depicted in oral folk tales or written literary works. Moreover, the heroes are shown to be very strong with knowledge and wisdom; they do many good things, even risking their lives for the betterment of human society; have some tragic flaw in their fate that may cease their good names and powers; but, finally, transformed to be very strong with more knowledge and wisdom. Throughout the book, Tilo (the protagonist) is an incarnation of universal human nature, with all difficulties and victories.

In her work *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni artistically employs archetypes (patterns and images). Start with Tilo, who plays various archetypal roles, including proto-feminist or superhero, initiator,

caretaker, and lover. Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, is a proto-feminist heroine with various supernatural skills, including the art of spices, which she learned on the spice island. She begins her archetypal role as a child who believes in hope and optimism and has extremely high dreams and aspirations. She also believes in putting in hard works and taking positive actions. Tilo is named “Nayan Tara” (the Star of the Eye), and she is born into a poor family in a small village during the dry season. However, her parents are saddened by the addition of another girl child to the family, and they are concerned about the dowry debt they have to pay when she marries since the girl child has long been stereotyped as the bringer of bridal debt. On the other hand, she possesses a wide range of foresight abilities. She foresees everything by being Nayan Tara (the Star-seer), and her fame spreads throughout the surrounding villages and cities, as well as the opposite sides of the mountains, the result in crowds running to her to hear of their fortunes.

Everyone must behave according to their fate, whether normal humans in their everyday lives or extraordinary creatures with amazing powers in their supernatural existence. Life becomes a toy in the hands of power for Tilo, the poor girl. Tilo, the last-born girl child, grows up with the capacity to overthrow her family’s other children, including the males, and she rises to prominence wherever she goes due to her talents. Nayan Tara (the star-seer), who can look into the future of others, has forgotten to foresee her fate. Despite living a happy life with her amazing abilities, Tilo is not immune to fate’s call. When her fame spreads to other parts of the country, it also brings bad luck into her life. She is a “Flower That Grows by the Dust Road” (MS 9).

After hearing Nayan Tara’s skills, hungry sea pirates attacked her tribe one day. She usually does not believe in the presence of pirates because she has never seen anyone like them in her life, in or around her village, but she is forced to believe in the existence of the ruthless pirates this time. They appear at the most inopportune time, with the most heinous bad impulses in their hearts: “They raided and pillaged and burned, and when they left they took the children. Boychildren to make into more pirates, and girlchildren . . . for their evil pleasures” (MS17).



The pirates have arrived and set fire to the entire village by that time Tilo is preparing her daily supper with her family at dusk. They carry her through the burning villages, and she yells out all the charms she knows till her throat becomes sore; everything becomes futile and the head pirate takes her with him under a new name “Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck,” (MS 19). Tilo, the great good-luck charmer, has worried over her new fate and her new nakedness in the grips of her doom as: “Father, sisters, forgive me, I who had been Nayan Tara, who had wanted your love but only won your fear. Forgive me, my village, I who in boredom and disappointment did this to you” (MS 19).

If people cannot modify their destiny, they must accept the undesirable developments in their lives. Tilo, who could foretell others’ ill fate, is unable to modify her terrible luck, and she is forced to live an uncomfortable existence as pirates’ queen, bewildered by her thoughts and by carrying heavy wounds in her heart as:

. . . I lived as queen, leading my pirates to fame and glory, so that bards sang their fearless exploits. I carried this secret pain that branded itself onto each chamber of my heart. This pain, the other face of which was the truth I had learned so hard: the spell is greater than the spell maker; once unleashed, it cannot be countered . . . I Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, bringer of luck and death, my cloak dragging in salt dust like a torn wing . . . I will never forget them, this pain and this truth, I told myself. Never” (MS 19-20).

Evil could triumph for a limited time, Bhagyavati’s (Tilo’s) dark, miserable life begins to shine in the form of sea snakes, and they come to rescue the damsel Tilo by providing care and love when she is in distress: “Snakes. Oldest of creatures, closest to the earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast. Always I have loved them” (MS 21). Tilo’s fate brings death not just to the pirates but also to herself. When a giant hurricane approaches the horizon, the sea serpents save Tilo’s. Surprisingly, mysterious sea-serpents appear from nowhere to save her: “coming from someplace deep and slow, the centre of the ocean perhaps, the ship vibrating with it and my heart also. And their heads

held still above the spinning water, the calm glow from the jewel each wore on its crest. Or was it the glow from their eyes that held me so” (MS 22). The minute Tilo inquires the giant serpents why they have spared her life, they cannot respond; and, of course, as kindhearted creatures, they did it out of love. The sea serpents warn against Tilo’s ambition to reach the spice island because reaching the island is too dangerous. However, the aspiring Tilo intends to go there and rejects the sea snakes’ warnings and offerings. Tilo is ready to turn away the offers and the love of the friendly serpents, which invites anger from her life savers (the serpents). She abandons her redeemers, her loving serpents, to face fate’s next challenge.

In the fateful journey, Tilo is ready to take her next paradigmatic role as an initiate on the spices’ island, and she dives into the midnight sea in pursuit of her heroic adventure. When Tilo is stranded on the island, the Old Woman appears with her students and takes her hand to uncover the truth about her. She discovers that Tilo has reached the island with the same ambition as many others do, to become the mistress of spices. As it is common on the spice island during the process, each novice must accept a new name given by the First Mother to go to different places and accomplish different duties. Tilo, on the other hand, independently has derived her new name “Tilo” from “Tilottama,” which represents both the spice “sesame seed” and the fabled disobedient beautiful dancer “Tilottama.” She gains a new perspective on her role as a redeemer to resolve the dilemma of the distressed as a result of her psychological maturation on the spice’s island; with her new name, she with the essence of “Till,” the life-giver, the restorer of health and hope, continues to pursue her goal. During the journey, her senses lead her to Oakland City; she disguises herself as an elderly woman and travels to Oakland, California, to operate a spice store. Tilo moves from initiator to caretaker in order to alleviate the suffering of the disturbed. She begins to solve the difficulties of the dispersed individuals one by one, gradually ignoring her parents’ rules (the old woman and the spices), by being the hero or caretaker, she is indifferent about her own personal gain and loss and it is apt to quote here the lines from Women’s Writing in



English: India and Australia: “Progressively, step by step, as she becomes interested in their sorrows, she starts as if to put ‘herself out of herself’ through communication, and warm and loving relations are established” (MS 79).

Tilo, as a caregiver, constantly shows kindness and generosity to needy people by attempting to protect them from their never-ending crises; as a result, she is ready to offer her life and power for their sake by solving their issues one by one. Lalita is the first person who can get the caretaker’s attention. Lalita was a skilled tailor in high school but could not continue her sewing job due to her marriage. Ahuja married Lalita in India by sending his old photo to hide his age; in America, when she discovers the truth, he abuses her daily. Tilo gives Lalita some “fennel,” a Wednesday spice associated with average and middle-aged people, to aid her in decision-making: “Fennel, . . . give you mental strength for what must be done . . . Fennel cools the temper as well,” (MS 104). Finally, the bewildered Lalita is inspired by the healer Tilo and decides to return to India and live a happy life with her parents by pursuing her aim as a seamstress without bothering about the traditional societal customs of a married woman who is forced to be a slave to her husband until her death.

Another unhappy person, Jagjit, is constantly bullied by his classmates and unable to make friends at school. He is an immigrant youngster who repeatedly gets insulted for his native tongue. Tilo, the caretaker, who feels a motherly love for the small boy, primarily because of his estrangement at school, helps him to find the strength to make new friends and eliminate his adversaries by offering him cinnamon, “Cinnamon friend-maker . . . to find you someone who will take you by the hand . . . destroyer of enemies to give you strength . . .” (MS 40). Tilo, the caretaker, later witnesses the anguish in Ratna’s life caused by her husband; her husband Ramasamy has left her after twenty years of marriage to pursue his new pleasures with another lady; to solve Ratna’s dilemma, Tilo provides her “fenugreek” to bring her husband back to her: “I fenugreek who renders the body sweet again, ready for loving” (MS 47).

Furthermore, Tilo, the caregiver, relieves the pains of Daksha, a nurse, who suffers greatly both physically and mentally due to her hard work at

home and the workplace. She has no one to listen to her feelings as an ordinary human; Tilo gives her “black pepper” (MS 81) to express her resistance to the uncompromised situations, as well as “Amla” (MS 81) to tolerate her uncured hurts. Tilo delivers “peppercorn” to Raven, the lonely American who could not get his past burden out of his heart: “peppercorn has the ability to persuade you to reveal your secrets” (MS 149). She gives “asafoetida,” to cure Raven’s mind and to win his affection: “Asafoetida stuff, which is the antidote to love” (MS 74).

Tilo always tries to solve the difficulties of immigrants without considering the ramifications, she says “I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream” (MS 28). Tilo is spared from the “shampati fire” when she jumps into it to purge herself of her disobedience against Spice’s commandments. Unexpectedly, the spices bless her to live the life of an ordinary human being as she wished. Instead of going with Raven to visit the earthly paradise, she wishes to serve the people troubled by the earthquake. As a caregiver and foreseer, she understands that there is no such thing as an earthly paradise in reality, but she decides that she may achieve it by assisting the depressed. Tilo’s heroic trip as a caretaker from the spice’s island to Oakland could be linked to Doris Kezia’s statements about Mrs. Gupta’s heroic expedition in Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams*, whether by choice or necessity:

. . . Mrs. Gupta, on the other hand, chooses to adapt, to keep herself Indian to the core on American soil, to merely adjust to the American ways of cause—a cause that is important to her, a high cost that she is willing to pay in order to preserve the power of dreams that enable her to reach out to people around her, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems. Her stance of adopting, though it breaks her normal home-life, becomes the channel of building up the homes of all and sundry (Doris Kezia 59).

Not only in literary works but also in our daily lives, we can witness the real caretakers trying to alleviate the sufferings of fellow human beings. Divakaruni is one of such caretakers who founded the organization “MAITRI” for South Asian Women to liberate them from patriarchal society’s oppression,



particularly from their sufferings in foreign lands. Tilo, the protagonist created by Divakaruni, is not entirely an imaginary figure but a depiction of the caretakers in society, similar to Divakaruni.

Love can conquer everyone; the self-sacrificing and caring Tilo also becomes a victim to love when she loses her heart to the lonely American, Raven. In her heroic pursuit after fulfilling the needs of the depressed people as the caretaker, Tilo takes the archetypal role of a lover to satisfy her desires as well as the desires of the lonely American. When the spices are ready to offer Tilo more beauty to give more joy to the lonely American in exchange for love, she cannot choose from her love for the spices and her love for the lonely American. Finally, she resolves to choose the lonely American instead of the spices and likes to provide him the maximum happiness he requires. Pure love forces her to go for any extreme. Like the other common women, she also wants to possess the lonely American only for herself.

The love for the lonely American makes Tilo choose him against the spices. After satisfying the lonely American, she makes the flame on her because she is not ready to live with him by disobeying the sacred spices and the first mother. Unexpectedly she is saved alive by the lonely American because she gains the spices' blessings in return for her equal love to the lonely American and the spices. Then she decides to go with the lonely American to witness the actual earthly paradise where she can achieve the American's affection as well as can do service for the common people who are harmed by the earthquake: "Raven, do you hear a sound?" "Only the wind in the girders, love. Only your heart beating. Let's go now" (MS 317).

True love with care is the most expensive gift of God that every human being wants to possess in life. The true love of Raven drives him to kill his life at the time of the earthquake for the sake of his lady love: "Please God, let her be OK. If someone has to get hurt, let it be me" (MS 308). Thus, Divakaruni emphasizes the importance of true love through Tilo and Raven, who are ready to suffer for one another in the long run of the worldly life of modern times where people do not have time for genuine love and care apart from the time they wish to expand

more prosperity and authority without considering compassion and care for the fellow human beings, here it is apt to quote Tilo's words: "No one has ever been willing to suffer in my stead before . . . I guess that's what love is" (MS 308-309).

Tilo has received mercy from the spices and the first mother equally even though she has been breaking the rules of the spices and the first mother because she does everything out of pity and love for the sufferers, she even enters into the "shampati" fire out of her equal love for the spices and Raven; thus, by prioritizing the happiness of others over her own, she becomes the embodiment of self-sacrifice in human society as the spices say: "Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also" (MS 305). Finally, her love for her fellow man gives her a new life in Oakland under the new name "Maya," where she can share her love for Raven and compassion for the other victims.

The Mistress of Spices never fails to portray the archetypal character "mentor". Whether it is a normal human life or a life filled with supernatural abilities, everyone needs a "mentor" who is a saviour or redeemer, a guru or sage, a sensible or wise man; who is filled with knowledge, insight, and wisdom, and who serves as a teacher or mentor to the hero on his or her adventure. The mentor archetype is created by the authors in every work of fiction to explain the purpose and objective of the hero's birth, as well as, to make judgments about whether the hero is on the right path or not, in order to assist the hero in the heroic pursuit. In Indian English literature, one can easily visualize the use of mentor archetypes such as an old wise man or woman who serves for the welfare of human society. Divakaruni is no exception to this type, as she aptly uses an Old Woman called "First Mother" as the mentor of the protagonist Tilo in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* to make Tilo's heroic quest fruitful.

The Old One, the teacher of spices' power, instructs her novices about the spices' power of goodness and the possible harmful nature of the spices as it is the mentor's obligation to impart the merits and demerits of the powers to her pupils. She



meticulously explains the natures and powers of each spice to Tilo as she foresees the upcoming trap for Tilo in the form of love. She reminds Tilo of her self-obedience against the rules of a mistress of spices, as she is well aware of Tilo's lethal desires. When Tilo loses her heart to Raven, a lonely American, the words of her old mother sound the caution bells in her head. As a result, she wishes to rescue Tilo from the impending disaster by informing her of the probable consequences of breaking her rules.

Before issuing commands as the mistress of spices, The Old One gives every novice a present, and she offers Tilo a knife with the warning, "To keep you chaste", (MS 51). She offers Tilo a knife because she foresees Tilo's mind and her future disobedience. As a caretaker and mentor, she wants to protect her novice's life from the impending hardships; nevertheless, Tilo is unwavering in her goal, the old mother allows Tilo to disguise herself as an old lady to hide the tempting beauty of her youth, moreover, she utters the words of caution as:

Look well Mistresses. Once in a great while a Mistress, grown rebellious and self-indulgent, fails her duty and must be recalled. Warning is sent to her, and she has three days to settle her affairs. Then Shampati's fire blazes for her once more. But this time she feels it fully, scorching and searing, the razors of flame cutting her flesh to strips. Screaming, she smells her bones shatter, skin bubble and burst' . . . 'The spices decide. Some Mistresses are allowed to return to the island, learn and labour again. For some it is the end, crumbled charcoal, a last cry dangling in the air like a broken cobweb' (MS 56-57).

Similar to the words stated in the work *The Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*, the old mother's instinct urges her to safeguard Tilo from all dangers especially against her extreme beauty which has the potential to advance many dangers toward her: "...act of motherly undertaking that the first mother transforms Nayantara, the young woman into an old woman, Tilo, who can serve as a healer of her community---a woman who will be free of male gaze and in whom every member can freely confide" (SumanBala 208).

Mother is an unmatched symbol of love and care in this whole universe. The old mother showers her unbiased love to Tilo though she is not her own

child. Because whether it is a real mother or motherly character both have the same virtues of love and care. It is noteworthy to state the words from *Women's Writing in English: India and Australia*: "In her 'exile' on the island, though still subject to rigid rules of the Old One when trained in using charms to master the spice in order to be capable to help others, she nevertheless experiences motherly affection of the Old One...which she could have experienced in her family, 'at home' (Jaydeep Sarangi 77). Tilo, who reminds of the old mother's childhood days, is edging closer to disaster by breaking the sacred rules one by one; therefore the old mother tries her best to rescue Tilo from the doom. "Hasn't that always been your trouble Tilo, you who think you know best, who choose to forget that the highest motives lead fastest to doom. And are your motives so high, or do you Geeta because you see in her forbidden love an image of your own" (MS 128).

As a mentor, the old mother recognizes that Tilo's assistance to Geeta is motivated by her love for Geeta and her grandfather and the resemblance of her forbidden love with Raven, so she cautions Tilo about her dangerous motive. : "...Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate" (MS 140). If there is no other method to remedy the flaws of the children, the elders always try to correct them by telling their faults and penalties; as a result, the elderly mother has chosen her faults and punishments as the last attempt to save Tilo from her doom:

Tilo time is short let me tell you what I should have earlier. Before I became First Mother who I was. Like you a Mistress. Like you rebellious... like you recalled. I too was forced to throw myself into Shampati's fire a second time.' She lifts her burned-white hands... 'But I did not die... Maybe you too will be allowed to come through. I will put my last powers to it, intercede on your behalf. Pull you back to the island. Tilo to be Mother for the Mistresses to come' (MS 236).

The old mother's heart experiences extreme pain over her helplessness when Tilo has chosen Shampati fire, the fire of cleansing from sins, to come out of mistakes. Later she regains the satisfaction when the spices offer Tilo both her life and love, the beautiful Tilo for Raven's love and service minded Tilo to



do service for the sufferers. Divakaruni arouses the interest among the readers through the character, the old mother, who plays the dual role of mentor and mother.

Conclusion

Thus, by employing archetypes in her story accidentally or intentionally Divakaruni gives the complete picture of the characters. The story is built around imaginative settings however it retains the archetypal patterns shared by the human beings devoid of whether the time is past or present or future. In addition it emphasizes the importance of preserving human values to maintain a good society with compassion, love, and even with dedication in order to overcome the evil desires that persist in the universe. And it is apt to quote here Morton Marcus' interview with Divakaruni about her opinion of the name "Maya" from Restructuring conventional Equations: "...Maya is what makes the world human and vulnerable. Raven's mistake is that, like all of us, he's looking for a gated community. Our concept of earthly paradise is to be separate. I believe we have to look at the problems around us and address them, not turn away. You cannot have personal happiness

without caring for the larger good" (Gur Pyari Jandial 122).

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