



## Archetypal Forms in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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### Abstract

Archetypes give literary texts a durable imaginative structure through which individual lives acquire wider human meaning. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* draws upon recurring figures, symbolic actions, and mythic situations in order to present exile, desire, suffering, care, and renewal. This paper studies the novel through an archetypal approach and argues that Tilo moves through a series of archetypal roles: gifted child, captive, initiate, healer, lover, and self-sacrificing heroine. The paper also studies the First Mother as guide, teacher, and moral authority. These patterns lend the novel symbolic depth and connect immigrant experience and women's lives to a broader human order. Divakaruni adapts archetypal material to a modern social world marked by migration, loneliness, violence, and emotional hunger. An archetypal reading therefore clarifies the relation between the magical and the social in the novel and brings out its ethical concern with compassion, duty, and shared human vulnerability.

**Keywords:** archetype, Tilo, First Mother, healer, exile, desire, self-sacrifice, immigrant experience.

## 1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies an important place in Indian Writing in English because her fiction brings together migration, memory, women's lives, and emotional conflict with unusual imaginative force. *The Mistress of Spices* stands among her most widely discussed novels. Through the story of Tilo, a woman trained in the hidden properties of spices, Divakaruni joins magic, pain, longing, and ethical choice.

This paper reads the novel through the concept of archetype. In literary criticism, archetypes refer to recurring character types, symbolic patterns, and narrative designs that appear across myths, folktales, rituals, dreams, and literary texts. Abrams defines archetype as "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" (12). Such patterns matter because they connect an individual text to a larger field of human experience.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni develops Tilo through a sequence of archetypal roles. She begins as an extraordinary child, passes through captivity and initiation, enters a life of service, and later confronts desire, guilt, sacrifice, and renewal. Alongside her stands the First Mother, who gives the novel its mentor figure. An archetypal reading therefore offers a fruitful way of studying the novel's symbolic design and moral vision.

## 2. Discussion

Archetypes give form to experience by placing personal struggle within patterns familiar across cultures. Divakaruni uses this method with care. Her novel belongs to the modern world of immigrant America, yet its action repeatedly returns to structures familiar from myth and folktale: the gifted child, the fall into danger, the sea journey, the sacred apprenticeship, the forbidden bond, the ordeal by fire, and rebirth under a new name. Through these patterns, the novel gives Tilo's life wider resonance while preserving the pressure of her immediate social world.

The novel first presents Tilo as Nayan Tara, a child marked by unusual powers of foresight. She belongs to the archetype of the wonder-child, a figure set apart from ordinary life by uncommon vision. Yet Divakaruni gives this figure a troubled social place. Her gift brings fame, fear, and estrangement. P. Valli Deivanai writes that *The Mistress of Spices* is "a realistic novel" in which "the contemporary urban America [is] palpably rendered on every page," while the characters are "fully presented, physically and psychologically, and contain the strength, weakness and quirks all humans do" (167). This insight suits Tilo's early life as well. Her powers raise her above the ordinary, yet her emotions remain deeply human.

Her life soon enters the archetype of captivity. The pirate attack tears her away from family and village and pushes her into a world of violence and forced transformation. Divakaruni gives this episode a harsh mythical intensity: "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" (MS 17). The gifted child becomes the abducted victim. She receives the new name "Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck" (MS 19), yet this title carries pain rather than honour. Her lament gives the emotional centre of this fall: "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). The passage brings together guilt, loss, and helplessness and gives her transformation the force of symbolic death.

During this phase, Divakaruni also stresses the limits of human power. Tilo can foresee the destinies of others, yet her own fate remains exposed. Her words as pirate queen carry that bitter knowledge: "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" (MS 19–20). This statement gives the novel one of its central insights: power carries boundaries, and destiny exceeds individual will.

Another archetypal shift occurs through the appearance of the sea snakes. In many mythic narratives, animals function as guides, protectors, or emissaries of hidden knowledge. Tilo's bond with the serpents carries this symbolic charge. She says, "Snakes. Oldest of creatures, closest to the earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast. Always I have loved them" (MS 21). Their intervention during the storm marks them as protective beings, creatures linked to rescue and transition. When she sees them during the hurricane, the scene acquires visionary force: "their heads held still above the spinning water, the calm glow from the jewel each wore on its crest" (MS 22). The sea, the storm, and the serpent together create the atmosphere of a ritual passage.

Tilo's arrival at the spice island introduces the archetype of initiation. Here she enters a sacred order governed by rule, discipline, and renunciation. Her new name marks a second birth, and her training places her within a vocation larger than personal desire. The island functions as a space of inward formation where magical knowledge and ethical discipline become inseparable. Tilo learns that the spices possess power, but she also learns that service demands self-command. Her later life as Mistress of Spices grows directly from this training.

In Oakland, Tilo takes on the archetypal role of healer and caregiver. Her store becomes a place where immigrants, women, children, and the lonely bring their hidden wounds. She listens, interprets, and prescribes. Through this structure, Divakaruni joins magical practice with social care. A line from *Women's Writing in English: India and Australia* describe this movement well: "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). The phrase explains how Tilo's vocation depends upon sympathy and self-giving.

Lalita's story makes this aspect of Tilo especially clear. Lalita suffers abuse within marriage and faces the emotional ruin produced by deception and patriarchal control. Tilo gives her fennel with the words: "'Fennel,' . . . give you mental strength for what must be done . . . Fennel cools the temper as well" (MS 104). The spice works here as symbolic medicine. It stands for clarity, courage, and decision. Tilo's role as caregiver lies in this combination of listening and enabling.

Jagjit's case extends the same pattern into the immigrant child's experience of humiliation and exclusion. Bullied at school and alienated by language, he carries the pain of cultural displacement. Tilo responds with protective tenderness and gives 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). The words suggest companionship, courage, and resistance. Through Jagjit, Divakaruni places the immigrant child within the wider field of archetypal suffering and protection.

Ratna and Daksha enlarge this caregiving structure further. Ratna suffers abandonment after long years of marriage, and Tilo turns to fenugreek: "I fenugreek who renders the body sweet again, ready for loving" (MS 47). Daksha carries the burden of labour at home and outside it, and Tilo responds with black pepper and amla. These episodes show that the spices function as symbolic extensions of emotional, psychological, and bodily repair. Tilo does more than dispense magical substances. She enters the affliction of others and searches for means of relief. Her own declaration, "I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream" (MS 28), gives a striking summary of this role. She becomes a figure through whom immigrant sorrow receives language and care.

The novel then carries Tilo into another archetypal role: the lover. Her relation with Raven draws her toward intimacy, desire, and ordinary human attachment. Raven represents companionship and bodily presence, and through him Tilo confronts her own longing. This phase complicates her life of service and discipline. The caretaker now enters the field of personal desire, and the conflict between vocation and love begins to govern her inner life.

The spices themselves register this conflict. Tilo gives Raven peppercorn because "peppercorn has the ability to persuade you to reveal your secrets" (MS 149), and she also gives asafoetida, "the antidote to love" (MS 74). These details create a subtle irony: the healer who ministers to others becomes vulnerable to the very force she attempts to regulate. Love enters her life with full intensity and tests the discipline she has learned on the island.

Raven's love also gives the novel some of its most moving lines. During the earthquake, his prayer expresses an ethic of self-offering: "Please God, let her be OK. If someone has to get hurt, let it be me" (MS 308). Tilo responds to this experience of being loved through sacrifice with the realization, "No one has ever been willing to suffer in my stead before . . . I guess that's what love is" (MS 308–309). These lines give emotional clarity to the lover archetype and connect desire with vulnerability, devotion, and shared pain.

The ordeal of Shampati's fire carries this movement toward its highest symbolic point. Fire in myth often signifies judgment, purification, and passage. Tilo's readiness to accept punishment gives her the stature of a sacrificial heroine. The spices finally spare her bodily destruction because inward acceptance has already completed the trial. They 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). The passage grants Tilo moral elevation through her willingness to bear pain for love, duty, and compassion.

The novel ends with a form of rebirth. Tilo receives a new life under the name "Maya," and this transformation gathers her earlier selves into a fuller identity. Her relation with Raven continues, yet her commitment to the suffering around her also remains. Her words at the close give this renewal its direction: "Raven, do you hear a sound?" "Only the wind in the girders, love. Only your heart beating. Let's go now" (MS 317). The final movement joins intimacy with forward motion and prepares a life in which love and service may exist together.

Alongside Tilo, the First Mother embodies the mentor archetype. She serves as teacher, guardian, law-giver, and spiritual guide. Her authority comes from experience and from a deep knowledge of both power and danger. She instructs her novices in the properties of spices, yet her guidance extends beyond magical knowledge. She teaches restraint, obedience, and inward clarity. Before Tilo begins her work, the First Mother gives her a knife "To keep you chaste" (MS 51). The gift is practical, symbolic, and prophetic. It indicates protection, discipline, and the foreseen danger of desire.

Her great warning about the fate of rebellious mistresses gives the full weight of the mentor figure: "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" (MS 56–57).

This passage gives the First Mother the stern authority of the ritual instructor, the one who knows the law and the cost of violating it. Yet her role carries maternal feeling as well. Suman Bala writes 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" (208). Jaydeep Sarangi similarly remarks that Tilo, even in "exile" on the island, experiences "motherly affection of the Old One" (77). These readings help clarify the dual force of the character. She is both mentor and mother.

The First Mother's advice grows more urgent when Tilo's attachment to Raven deepens. She warns her, "Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate" (MS 140). Later, she speaks from her own history of rebellion and suffering: "Like you a Mistress. Like you rebellious... like you recalled. I too was forced to throw myself into Shampati's fire a second time" (MS 236). This confession lends her role

emotional gravity. Her authority rests upon ordeal as much as wisdom. Through her, Divakaruni presents female guidance as something earned through pain, memory, and responsibility.

Taken together, these archetypal patterns illuminate the design of *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo moves through the roles of wonder-child, captive, initiate, healer, lover, and sacrificial figure. The First Mother stands as guide, disciplinarian, and maternal protector. These forms give the novel a symbolic architecture that strengthens its treatment of women's lives, immigrant sorrow, emotional need, and ethical action.

### 3. Conclusion

*The Mistress of Spices* derives much of its imaginative and emotional force from its use of archetypal forms. Through Tilo, Divakaruni presents a heroine whose life passes through gift, suffering, discipline, care, desire, sacrifice, and renewal. Through the First Mother, she develops the figure of the mentor whose authority joins wisdom with maternal concern. These forms give the novel symbolic density and widen its treatment of exile, love, duty, and compassion.

The novel also shows how archetypal structures remain active within a modern social setting. Immigration, loneliness, abuse, cultural estrangement, and emotional hunger receive expression through figures and patterns familiar from myth and folktale. Tilo's final renewal affirms a life directed by love, responsibility, and care for others. Divakaruni thus offers a vision of humanity in which compassion and ethical commitment retain enduring value.

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