



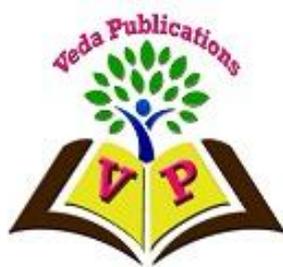
THE USE OF MYTH IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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ABSTRACT



Myths are symbolic representations of the innermost aspects of life and the spiritual underpinnings of the religions. Numerous mythological stories depict the journey of self, both inwardly and outwardly. Myths preserve that journey of ultimate destiny of every individual which reveals timeless truth. Mythologies of different cultures speak about the hero's journey both inwardly and outwardly which lead to spiritual growth. The hero departs from this world and goes through the wilderness of unconscious and returns to the society of being strong and self-aware in spirit. This research paper describes the set of concepts known as "The Hero's Journey" drawn from the depth of psychology of Carl G. Jung and mythic studies of Joseph Campbell. It tries to relate those ideas to contemporary story telling which evolve from our innermost selves and our most distant past. Joseph Campbell described the hero's journey as monomyth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Hero's journey is a hand book of life which gives instructions in the art of being human. It is not an invention but an observation. It recognizes a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling. This research paper deals about how monomyth, most widely known as the underlying plot structure is incorporated into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

Keywords: *Monomyth, Archetype, Departure, Initiation, Return.*

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In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell defines the monomyth as that single “consciously controlled” pattern most widely exhibited in the world’s folk tales, myths, and religious fables” (255 – 56). Its morphology is, in broad outline, that of the quest. The hero is called to an adventure, crosses the threshold to an unknown world to endure tests and trials, and usually returns with a boon that benefits his fellows (36 – 38). Already abstracted from numerous mythological sources, the monomyth has again been replicated many times over since (as well as prior to) its articulation by Campbell in 1949. This research paper deals about how monomyth, most widely known as the underlying plot structure is incorporated into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*.

Although agreeing with Carl Jung that “the changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description” (Campbell 246), Campbell’s analysis fills in this outline with an anatomy of the archetypal hero and descriptions of those specific incidents likely to occur at each stage of his adventure. The product of a virgin or special birth (Campbell 297 – 314), the hero may have been exiled or orphaned, may be seeking his father, and may triumph over pretenders as the true son (Campbell 318 – 34). He possesses exceptional gifts, and the world that he inhabits suffers symbolic deficiencies (Campbell 37). He does not fear death, and he is destined to make the world spiritually significant and humankind comprehensible to itself (388). If a warrior, he will change the status quo (Campbell 334 – 41). If a lover, his triumph may be symbolized by a woman and accomplishing the impossible task may lead him to the bridal bed (Campbell 342– 45). If a tyrant or ruler, his search for the father will lead to the invisible unknown from which he will return as a lawgiver (Campbell 345 – 49). If a world-redeemer, he will learn that he and the father are one (Campbell 349 – 54). If a saint or mystic, he will transcend life and myth to enter an inexpressible realm beyond forms (Campbell 354 – 55).

The adventure’s “departure stage” entails up to five incidents: receiving a “call to adventure” in the guise of a blunder that reveals an unknown world or the appearance of a herald character from that world; refusing the call; receiving supernatural aid;

crossing a magical threshold that leads to a sphere of rebirth; and being swallowed in “the belly of the whale,” a descent into the unknown that symbolizes death and resurrection that may involve an underground journey symbolic of a descent into hell (Campbell 36). The “initiation stage” includes up to six incidents: numerous tests and trials, including the hero’s assimilation of his opposite, shadow, or unsuspected self; meeting and perhaps marrying a mother-goddess; encountering a temptress; atonement with the father; apotheosis; and acquiring a boon (Campbell 36). The return stage also contains up to six incidents: refusing to return; magical flight from the unknown world; rescue from outside the unknown world; recrossing the threshold; attaining the power to cross the threshold freely; and the hero’s realization that he is the vehicle of the cosmic cycle of change (Campbell 37).

The stages of the Hero’s Journey can be traced in all kinds of stories, not just those that feature “heroic” physical action and adventure. The protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey, even if the path leads only into his own mind or into the realm of relationships. The way stations of the Hero’s Journey emerge naturally even when the writer is unaware of them, but some knowledge of this most ancient guide to storytelling is useful in identifying problems and telling better stories. Christopher Volger condensed these seventeen stages into twelve stages in his book *The Writer’s Journey*. Here in observing the heroic journey Christopher Volger’s condensed model of 12 stages of heroic journey is followed illustrating each by utilizing the experiences of protagonist of the novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*.

The Mistress of spices begins by introducing us to HERO (Tilo) of this novel. Her ORDINARY WORLD is that of a girl who has supernatural powers and is identified by villagers for her supernatural powers. Her OUTER PROBLEM is transformation of identity from Tilo to Maya; her INNER PROBLEM is trying to find a world without boundaries. The quest to find that world inspires her to CALL TO ADVENTURE. Serpents suggest her not to go for adventure. It is worked as REFUSAL OF CALL for the story. She shows no RELUCTANCE or fear at this level — She’s not the reluctant kind of hero. Her MENTOR



is First Mother who gives training to become mistress of spices to heal the people. After getting training in an island by First Mother, she CROSSES THE THRESHOLD and enters unknown land with many constraints to do service only to Indians. While she is curing the ailments of her patients, TESTS, ALLIES, and ENEMIES play out in conflicts between Tilo and Spices, the forces of Restriction. THRESHOLD GUARDIANS in the form of Raven abound as she draws near to the INMOST CAVE and the beginning of an elaborate, multi-leveled ORDEAL. Tilo and Raven harvest some REWARD from their death-and-rebirth experience and she becomes Maya. They are bonded, supporting each other in the struggle to find earthly paradise. THE ROAD BACK is finding that there is no earthly paradise. After earth quake she RETURNS to Oakland to service to the without any constraints.

The Ordinary World of most heroes is a static but unstable condition. The seeds of change and growth are planted, and it takes only a little new energy to germinate them. *The Mistress of Spices* narrates the quest of the protagonist Tilo. She is born in a lower class family as a third girl child and is felt burden by her parents as another dowry debt. As the cows run dry at the time of her birth she is fed with the milk of ass which helps her in getting the sight and words sooner than others. Being neglected by her parents she leads a very careless life. When born she is named Nayan Tara - The star of the eye, star seer, and also the flower that grows by the dust road. However, when she realizes her unknown powers and helps the villagers in solving their problems and finding their lost things she is given luxurious presents as a matter of gratitude and her household wins recognition. A girl who is once neglected is now chosen to be the best. Once she was last for anything but now she is the first for everything. Even the family members enjoy the luxury life brings by the fame of her exotic powers. She too has grown proud and willful. But this does not last long. Her fame spreads far and wide. By her powers she can draw to her whoever she wishes - a lover to her side or an enemy to her feet. But when used imperfectly and without control can bring destruction beyond imagination.

The attention of Nayan Tara's parents now diverts to her due to the superfluous income earned in the form of gifts, but she feels discomfort in her first identity. "I would turn my face into my pillow to escape the emptiness opening like a black hand inside my chest. I would focus my attention on my discontent until it glittered sharp as a hook, and then I would cast it out over the ocean in search of my pirates" (Divakaruni, 17). This stage is started when Nayan Tara was out of boredom and discontentment, sent a calling thought with a gold hook over the waters to free from this attention as this greed of her parents fills her mind with contempt. Though she enjoyed the gifts given by the villagers and luxurious life in the village, she was vexed with the limited world. Her longing to know her inner self gave a **call to adventure**.

Although the Hero may be eager to accept the quest, at this stage she will have fears that need overcoming. Second thoughts or even deep personal doubts as to whether or not she is up to the challenge. When this happens, the Hero will **refuse the call** and as a result may suffer somehow. When Nayan Tara sends a calling thought with the gold hook over the waters, pirates come in search of her and takes her away killing her parents and destroying the village with fire, so as to gain more and more riches with her exotic powers. Then only she learns the truth that 'The Spell is greater than the Spell maker, once unleashed it cannot be countered'. They bind her and carry her away on to their deck of the ship, she is extremely miserable and desolate as she has failed to defend herself and her parents and the village with her magical power. She is said to have failed to make them to take their heels.

The pirates' chief names her Bhagyavati, Bringer of luck. She becomes Bhagyavati Sorceress; pirate queen, bringer of luck and death. Later on, her days on the deck are painful and harrowing. As a pirate queen she reviews her life and wants to know her longing and sends a calling thought over the water again. As a result a typhoon comes in the water she is released and saved by the serpents of under water. Serpents are the oldest creatures and the dearest to the Earth Mother. They have perfected the art of invisibility, if they do not wish, one can never see them. Serpents tell her about the



Island of spices, the place where if she reaches would lose everything, sight, voice, name and perhaps self. Though they could see the spice glow under her skin - the sign of her destiny, they offer her to become sarpa kanya. Serpents warn her not to go to the island of spices. They predict the following about her future life when they discover that she is determined to become a Mistress: "She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps even self" (Divakaruni, 24).

At this crucial turning point where the Hero desperately needs guidance he meets a **mentor** figure who gives him something she needs. Old mother helps her to continue protagonist's quest and gave new life to her. Here under the guidance of First Mother she renames herself as Tilottama- It means Life giver, restorer of health and hope. Tilo is the sesame seed of which the flower is so small and straight that mothers pray for their children to have a nose shaped like it. It is golden brown in color under the sway of planet Venus.

The Hero is now ready to act upon his **call to adventure** and truly begin her quest, whether it is physical, spiritual or emotional. She may go willingly or he may be pushed, but either way he finally **crosses the threshold** between the world he is familiar with and that which she is not. Tilo crosses first threshold by entering Shampati's fire and chooses Oak Land as her destination. Tilo spends decades learning the delicacies of the spices and after the training when she and other girls are about to leave, they are given new identities; indicating that the past is being relegated and new persona are being forged.) The Old one teaches Tilo to look into the heart of others but she doesn't teach her to read the future as it kept her away from hoping and trusting the spices fully. After leaving India, she steps into the unknown world.

Now comes the most challenging phase of the hero's journey, **initiation**, which involves dealing with the dark side of life to find self-awareness and achieve peace of mind. The first stage is the road of trials, which means wrestling with one's demons. This phase of the journey challenges the adventurer's deepest held beliefs and most cherished notions of life. Once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and **Tests**,

makes Allies and Enemies, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World. The First Mother transforms Tilo into an old woman so that she can serve as a healer of her community – a woman who will be free from male gaze and being an elderly woman anyone can confide her. Tilo loves spices, knows their origins, what their colors signify, their smells and even their true names. As a 'life giver and restorer of health', the mistress confronts very complex situations at times. Lalitha, Ahuja's wife, before her marriage hopes to have a shop of her own - Lalitha Tailor works as the cloth she touches with the needle blooms, and most of all she wants a baby to make everything right for her feelings. When she goes for a checkup and found everything right with her, she requests her husband too for a checkup, who in turn beats her mercilessly, with which Lalitha gets fed up and with the help of a helpline found in a magazine, gets over from there taking her things and the jewelry and decides not to go back to him.

Haroun who runs shikaras for tourists in Srinagar, escaped to America when rebels broke out in their place. For some days he worked under Kapadia but luckily found another kashmiri who helped him to become a owner of his own cab. It is for him the mistress breaks some rules which drives her to destruction. She gives a lotus root that will make Haroun and Hameeda the widow, love each other.

Geeta, though daughter of an Indian family but brought up in the American land strives for independence. But her grandfather who hailed to America only to be with his son always longs to go back to his native land India. Tilo tries to unite the grand daughter and the father and the grandfather who broke away from their ties when Geeta wishes to marry an American.

Jagjit, meaning the world conquerer, was a sikh boy who at the beginning of the novel, was a boy who holds the sare ends of his mother has been completely changed as spices started working against him. Tilo tries her best to restore him by the end of the novel. Tilo gives him money, to make him start life anew for which Jagjit says, "Tell her I'm going to give it my best shot" (Divakaruni, 109). He is going to use power and not be used by it.

Daksha was a nurse on AIDS ward. "Daksha to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to



say." (Divakaruni, 80) She was tired due to the demands of work and home. Tilottama mended her problems with the aid of her, black pepper so that she "can learn to say No, that word so hard for Indian women" (Divakaruni, 81).

The bougainvillea girls are the Indians of the upper strata who have turned and who use their Indianness as a sort of curio. They look out for cardamom and want help "— because we don't know what it looks like" (Divakaruni, 272).

Tilo meets Lonely American. He usually comes on Friday evenings. The time when she first him the real nature of her womanhood is revealed. She is very much attracted by him. Though she was warned by the spices she likes to have him, losing control over herself and even the spices. When the American touches her hand she cannot describe it in words. This touch goes through like a blade of fire. Yet, so sweet that she wants the hurting never to stop. Though she snatches her hand as obedient to mistress' the sensation stays. Unknowingly she waits for him and enjoys his company as a natural girl. He found that power lies in nothing but money at the center of the world. He understood its strange logic and its language which brought him power and its solidity and enjoyed it but without anybody to share his success or feelings and so his golden life lost its glitter. He tried every physical thing to gain happiness but nothing gave him satisfaction. On one of his dreams he tried to kill himself from a hill top but was saved suddenly by a raven. Though he does not understand this dream he feels that his happiness lies in going to the earthly paradise. It haunted him for a while and slowly he returned to normal life considering it to be the fever hallucination. But it has been repeating now-a-days as he met Tilo—the old woman in the spice *bazaar* on some one's advice. He invites her to accompany him to find out earthly paradise.

When the hero enters that fearful place he will cross the second major threshold. Heroes often pause at the gate to prepare, plan, and outwit the villain's guards. This is the phase of the Approach. Approach covers all the preparations for **entering the Inmost Cave** and confronting death or supreme danger. As a Mistress one should not touch others but Tilo has crossed this rule many times, once she

touched Lalitha to console and comfort her, later she was touched by the American when her finger was cut while she was cutting kalojire for Haroun. She tries many times to offer kalojire to protect haroun from the evil eyes but every time she fails. One night when haroun found the American in the store and asked Tilo to send him away, Tilo rejects saying she can take care of herself. From then she fails to meet haroun and he too never met her. As a Mistress of spices she must feel other's pain and leave her own passions behind, but from the time she was attracted by the American, spices start working against her as well as the persons to which they were used As a result of which Geeta was separated from her family. Feeling responsible for these actions Tilo tries to meet Geeta and tries to unite her with the family members. In this process she stepped out of the store – breaking another rule of mistress' So as to meet Geeta she tries to prepare clothes of American style out of khus khus seeds but fails as spices do not cooperate her. Then she went to sears and takes all the worldly items with a want but puts away everything again and takes a pair of American clothes to wear to Geetha and also a mirror - the most forbidden thing for mistresses.

The Ordeal in myths signifies the death of the ego. The hero is now fully part of the cosmos, dead to the old, limited vision of things and reborn into a new consciousness of connections. The old boundaries of the Self have been transcended or annihilated. At the climax of the story First mother appears that night and warns her saying "if you try to help outside the protected walls turns on itself". Tilo then decides not to see outside even out of window. That day when mirror was delivered to her she covers it with a picture and sets to a nail for which the spices speak to her saying "Why not Tilo, our foolish mistress for what then did you buy it". Tilo feels very happy and says to herself over and over "Spices trust me, give me a chance. In spite of America, or in spite of love, your Tilo will not let you down". But she once again steps out of the store to meet haroun and provide him kalojire. Meanwhile American meets her and offers her a white dress which settles on her like the petals of lotus. And in his company she tastes a bit of wine too. By the time she met haroun and returned back to the store she



had a message revealing that "Shampathis fire is calling back and she has been left only three days for decision".

In some ways, the **return** to society, the final phase of the hero's journey, is just as difficult if not more so than deciding to start the search, for society does not often embrace those who return and are now self-aware and comfortable with who they are. The hero now takes possession of the treasure she has come seeking, her **Reward**. It might be a special weapon like a magic sword, or a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land. Sometimes the "sword" is knowledge and experience that leads to greater understanding and reconciliation with hostile forces. A hero may be granted a new insight or understanding of a mystery as her **Reward**. She may see through a deception. Seizing the Sword can be a moment of clarity. She experiences 'self-awareness' and is able to 're-define' herself. Finally she does have a 'sense of identity' but it is a result of her own ability to come to terms with herself rather than an outside miracle changing her life. She finds inner harmony and happiness as her own terms. Tilo is forced to choose between the supernatural life of an immortal and the modern life of an ordinary mortal. She is a woman with magical powers; she is portrayed as a living, breathing reality.

The Road Back may be a brief moment or an elaborate sequence of events. Almost every story needs a moment to acknowledge the hero's resolve to finish, and provide her with necessary motivation to return home with the elixir despite the temptations of the Special World and the trials that remain ahead. Tilo then tries to dispose of the commodities of the spice bazaar. In the second last night she asks the spices to give her such a beauty for one night in such a way that after spending with her he would never be with another woman without remembrance and regret. On the last day of sale she got plenty of money as nothing could be given free. As she grew young and beautiful because of the spices she introduces herself as the niece of the old woman. Meanwhile she gave the money to jagjit saying "use power, don't be used by it" and advises him to go to kwesi to learn the martial arts with the money she gave. As she had no time and no other way she uses red chillies to cure Haroun. But changes

her mind at the last minute and offers lotus root to hameeda for passionate love. She brings back the pack of red chillies without giving them to Haroun but the spices ask her as they have been roused they must work their power and something must be destroyed. Though mistress sings the chant of appropriation and asks to travel the path of forgiveness they reveal that as she had played without understanding the forces everything around her will be destroyed. She says, 'if destruction is a must then start with me,' to which they reply it is not hate but their duty. Tilo then makes love to the American and their desire has been satisfied. Writing a note and placing it near the paste Tilo asks the American to drop her at her place and come back in the morning.

In **Resurrection** phase the hero is transformed by these moments of death-and-rebirth, and is able to return to ordinary life reborn as a new being. Returning to the store Tilo collects all the left overs in the store and made a pyre in the centre of the room and sprinkles sesame all over to protect her through journey and invokes words but nothing happens. She fears if she has been doomed to live as old woman without power and livelihood and plans to end herself from climbing the red gold girdens of the bridge, but finally decides to accept the decree of spices. She willingly accepts it and firmly believes that she had not sinned but acted out of love. She recollects the story of Shiva - halahal - Tor one to be happy another must take upon the suffering'. She is ready to take whatever burden they lay but needs one hour of sleep saying so she lies down.

When Tilo heard Raven, she was in confusion whether she was dead or alive but spices speak to her saying that as she accepted the punishment in mind without battling that was enough for her and no need to undergo any physical punishment. Now she was neither like the old mistress nor like the young lady of the last day. But a moderate woman-just as Raven imagined her to be.

Raven suggests the name of Maya which means many things -Illusion, Spell, enchantment - the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day.

The hero Returns to the Ordinary World, but the journey is meaningless unless she brings back some **Elixir**, treasure, or lesson from the Special



World. Sometimes the elixir is treasure won on the quest, but it may be love, freedom, wisdom, or the knowledge that the Special World exists and can be survived. In search of earthly paradise Tilo and Raven crossed a tollbooth she heard about the destruction of the earthquake caused in Oakland. Looking into the water she recollects the destruction caused by her in the village during her childhood. She feels the responsibility and decides to go back to Oakland instead of with Raven. In the end she realizes her freedom should help people.

The Mistress of Spices is an aesthetically sophisticated, metaphysically profound novel as well as adventurous masterpiece, among other reasons, not because it merely borrows the monomyth's superficial plot structure, but because it likewise incorporates the monomyth's theme of transcendence. It develops this theme by fantastically elaborating the central death-and-rebirth motif that reinforces this theme in the monomyth itself while similarly replicating the monomyth's fractal pattern-within-pattern internal structure—which is also the structure of that matrix of thought, proceeding through transcendence, that leads to enlightenment and that the monomyth symbolizes—in its own internal structures of disguises-within-disguises, agendas-within-agendas, and reasons-within-reasons.

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