

The Price of Female Power: Conditional Agency in *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*

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Abstract

Chitra Divakaruni's novels *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Queen of Dreams* (2004) present female protagonists endowed with supernatural abilities—Tilo as a Mistress of Spices, runs a Spice store in Oakland and Mrs. Gupta as a dream interpreter living in America, helps people by interpreting their dreams. Though both females are having extraordinary skills but their powers are administered by a system that demands sacrifice, discipline, and emotional detachment. This paper explores the concept of 'Conditional Agency' which refers to a paradoxical state in which individuals appear empowered but operate within constraints that limit the scope and authenticity of their autonomy. In this context, power becomes contingent upon compliance, and transgression results in loss or punishment. In these novels this conditionality is clearly visible by the rules governing Tilo's practice of spice magic and the emotional boundaries imposed on Mrs. Gupta's dream interpretation. This study explores that how these females despite of having special powers are restricted by outer agency and how their transgression invites trouble for them.

Keywords: Agency, conditional, dream, female-power, literature, spices

Introduction

The prime concerns of contemporary diasporic literature are issues of identity, cultural conflicts, nostalgia of homeland, racial discrimination, shifting gender roles, human relationships, and work life balance issues specifically focussed on females. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with her commendable style of presenting these concerns occupies a significant position in diasporic landscape. Though she writes about immigrant issues but her focus is to present women skirmishes, internal as well external and their pursuit to create balance between duty and desire. Divakaruni says "Women, in particular, respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet in real life" (Softky, 1997) ^[9]. Divakaruni's female characters are empowered, confident and ready to take any challenge in life, but in *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* writer has given them some extraordinary mystical powers also—Tilo, owner of a spice shop in Oakland, heals people with the help of spices and Mrs. Gupta, a dream interpreter living in America helps, people by seeing their dream and warn them beforehand about any danger in their life. Both females have extraordinary skills but their powers are administered by an agency that demands sacrifice, discipline, and emotional detachment. A deep probe into the life of these characters from the concept of 'Conditional Agency' show that female power is never free absolutely and there are always some conditions that controlled this power. The protagonists, Tilo and Mrs. Gupta, abide by some strict codes that regulate their behaviour, emotions, and desires. Their powers are not their inherent right but a conditional privilege, granted only so long as they adhere to prescribed norms.

Conditional Agency in *The Mistress of Spices*

Tilo, Mistress of Spices, born as Nayan Tara, has some special powers since childhood, power to see things that

others can't see and with the help of this power she helps her village people to find their lost articles. She can also presage dangers and calamities. As her name becomes famous far and wide, sea pirates attacked her village and took her with them. They ransacked more wealth with her extraordinary skill and call her Bhagyavati. She managed to escape from their clutches and reached a mystical spice island with the help of serpents. On island Nayan Tara met an ageless old woman whom she calls 'the first mother'. She learnt the skill to control spices and their healing properties. She can "speak with the spices, even the most dangerous, quickly to arrogance and impatience" (41). 'Old One' gave new name to every girl and according to their learning she sent these girls at different places to help human kinds. When Nayan Tara turns came, she insisted to choose her name and place for work. She chooses her name, Tilottama (Tilo) "a mistress of spices" (03), and to work in Oakland. When the Old One asked 'Do you know what it means?' Tilo replied, "Yes, First Mother. *Til* is the sesame seed, under the sway of planet Venus, gold-brown as though just touched by flame. *Til* which ground into a paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver, *til* which fried in its own oil restores luster. I will be Tilottama, the essence of *til*, life-giver, restorer of health and hope" (42). The Old One is happy for her but worried too because Tilo is rebellious and impatient by nature. Old One told her to follow some rules before taking the role of a spice healer and said firmly that "You are not important, No Mistress is. What important are the store and the spices" (5). Old one stated some rules for Tilo which are as follows:

- She is not allowed to touch other people.
- She is not allowed to leave the store.
- She is not allowed to indulge in other's personal life
- She's not allowed to look her reflection into the mirror.
- She is not allowed to use the power of spice for her own desire.

Tilo agreed to these conditions and become the mistress of spices. She has magical powers; eyes to see the inner suffering of others and by using this skill she gives suitable

spice to the people come to her store .Old One trained her that ‘different spices may help us with different troubles, and for each person, there is one special spice (71). Tilo rubs sandalwood powder on the palm of Haroun to give him relief from his haunting memories. She also gives a black pepper spice to Daksha to make her firm to say ‘no’ as her family follows the patriarchal system. She gives Kesar and Gita’s grandfather almond powder to sweeten their words and thoughts; lotus root powder to Hameeda to enhance love. The Old One also warned her by giving reference of the girls who declined the rules, hence suffers: “The disobedient, at the last fell and was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives. Seven mortal live of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted leprous limbs” (41). After the completion of her training on the spice island she passed through the Shampati’s fire and transformed into an old woman’s body. Her real ‘self’ is hidden under the veil of an arthritic old body as she will own her ‘Spice Bazar’ in Oakland. She will work there as a healer and cures the pain of people who come to her with their problem. Tilo’s Spice Bazaar is described as a perfect place by writer in following words:

Perfect-fitted between the narrow-barred door of Rosa’s Weekly Hotel, and Lee Ying’s Sewing Machine and Vacuum Cleaner Repair with the glass cracked between the *R* and *e*. Greece-smudged window. Looped letters that say SPICE BAZAAR faded into a dried-mud brown, inside, walls veined with cobwebs where discolored pictures of the gods, their sad shadow eyes hang. “Metal bins with the shine long gone from them, heaped with *atta* and *Basmati* rice and *masoor dal*. Row upon row of video movies, all the way back to the time of black-and-white. Bolts of fabric dyed in age-old colors, New Year yellow, harvest green, bride’s luck red” (04).

Tilo is driven by her own instincts towards spices. When Tilo meets the ageless Old One for the first time on the island, the Old One takes Tilo’s hands in hers and tells that “you were the one in whose hands the spices sang back” (32). The old one examines each girl hands before accepting them as her pupils and she finds Tilo’s hands perfect for the spices. Tilo expresses her joy: “My hands too light, too hot, too damp and freckled as the back of golden plover. Palms where at midnight thorn- purple would burst into bloom” (33).

Tilo disguised in the body of an old woman, appears wise and experienced. She wears old cotton sarees with dull colours in order not to catch anyone’s attraction. She opens her store from morning till evening and attends to customers who come to her shop to purchase things and also share their problems with her. She bends a little to listen to her costumes and gives them spices according to their need. Her gestures are completely professional and her eyes are curious to know others’ problem. She uses her knowledge and the healing magical power of spices for the benefit of others to cure them. She understands spices as they speak to her:

I know their origins and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true name it was given at the first when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat is seen in my blood. From *amchur* to *Zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper, they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers (03).

Tilo is well versed with the songs of spices and by using her powers she becomes their mistress. She knows their secrets as she tells:

Vanilla beans soaked soft in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against an evil eye. And here another; A measure of pepper at the foot of the shaped into a crescent cures you of a nightmare (03).

Tilo’s duty is to serve people without getting attached to them physically or mentally. However, owing to her stubbornness, she breaks the rules laid out at the onset, one after another. She touches Mrs. Ahuja’s (her client) wrist, allows Haroun to kiss her hand, goes out to meet Geeta (another client), buys a mirror for herself and most the forbidden act she indulges in is to love with a Native American, Raven.

Tilo has all the powers to command spices, and she uses them fully. Everything is going smooth but eventually driven by her impulsive feminine self, she gets attracted by a Native American and breaks one rule after another She overlooks the rules laid by the old one and crosses the boundary of her spice store, explore the outer world. She acts like a common woman. She falls in love with Raven and to fulfill her desires. She listens to his life story, feels his pain, giving herself to ‘human love’ and wishes “like any woman that this would never stop” (219). She uses the power of spices to fulfill her desires and evokes their power to make her beautiful. She calls *makaradwaj* (king of spices) in the inner room and say:

‘Make me beautiful, *makaradwaj*, and such beauty as on this earth never was, beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine. For one night so that his skin dazzle, his fingertips be branded with it for always. So that, never again will he be with another woman, without remembrance and regret’. She is not ashamed of her act as she says, ‘I will not pretend repentance, I will not act shame. I will say to you with my head high that this is my desire ...’. She believes in her action and desires as she says, ‘Each desire in the world is different, as is each love’ (261).

She breaks the rule led by her first mother but she loves her spices too and she expects that they (spices) will understand her as their existence on this earth is very old. Tilo knows very well the consequences of her action. She remembers the Old One’s words, “look well mistresses, grown rebellious and self- indulgent fails her duty and must be recalled. The warning is sent to her and she has three days only to settle her affair. “Then Shampati’s fire blazes for her once more. But this time entering she feels it fully, scratch and sear, the razors of flame cutting her flesh into strips, screaming, she smells her bones shatter, skin bubble and rust” (56-57).

The Old One states to the mistress clearly before they leave that spice land that once you occupies a place of mistress you cannot leave that place and if a mistress is rebellious and self-indulgent, fails to perform her duty then Shampati’s fire blazes once again to consume the guilty and her flames cuts their flesh to strips. Mistresses’ Old Mother tells them to be honest in their work and execute their work well and if they fail, would be called back to the island for learning again. The good point is this that Tilo surrenders herself to spices and chants to call Shampati fire but the fire doesn’t come. The spices say that they have forgiven her because of her true dedication and redemption. At the end, when she takes a new body and name i.e. Maya. She understands that true happiness lies instability and making others happy.

As a human being, she also has some desires but she is bound to exercise her powers in the given conditions. Her feminine urge arise to see that Native American but controlled by the agency she cannot expresses this. As soon

as she crosses the line she is punished by agency. It is only because of her true services to humanity she earns the prize of a new life as Maya.

Conditional Agency in *Queen of Dreams*

The novel *Queen of Dreams* explores “the psychic connections and hidden truths dreams can reveal about our inner and outer worlds” (Baucer1993). Mrs. Gupta, the dream interpreter says “A dream is a telegram from the hidden world” (34). She is an orphan and a slum dweller in childhood but she has the ability to interpret dreams. Her aunt recognizes this talent and took her to the elder’s caves where she can learn more about this art of dream telling. Her powers are conditional –she is bound by some strict codes as stated:

- Celebacy/Renunciation of romantic and sexual desires.
- Crossing water is also prohibited.
- Emotional detachment from kin.
- Secrecy and isolation.
- Service for others, not self-gain.
- Surrender to the dream, even if it is death.

As a girl she never thought about marriage or man; being someone wife is not fancy for me. During my learning she went to Calcutta with a group of twenty four girls. This trip was to understand disembodied dreams and interpret them. There she met a man who sang a song for her. She fell in love with him and decided to marry. This action of her was not accepted by elders, but because she was a good learner, they gave her a choice by offering her three options:

- To live the rest of her life in a cave and be a teacher. This was the safest choice because she would not have to suffer and the elders would erase all the memories of that man from her mind. She would be happy and contented in the cave.
- The second choice given to her was to give up her talent and live an ordinary life like any ordinary woman. Elders of the cave would have helped her to erase all the memories of the cave and their teachings. It was also a safe choice but not a good one.
- The third choice was that she would be allowed to keep some of her powers so that she could help other people and could also live with the man and she will leave India, never come back in caves.

She took up the third choice which was a difficult one. Mrs. Gupta did not realize at that time the consequences of her choice. Mrs. Gupta married in court though it displeased her husband as he wished a conventional marriage in temple. She crossed sea and came to America after marriage. Her aunt gifted her pouch of the earth “from the walkway of the caves” (176) as a parting gift to help her to evoke dreams in an alien land. Elder Samyukta’s words kept ringing in her ears “All of you, she said, are blessed because you possess the gift of dreaming, but unless you know what the dream is, whence it comes and what its purpose can be, the gift is useless” (208).

Mrs. Gupta as a devoted wife took care of her husband and cooked “his favourite dish” (33) but she never disclosed her ‘real’ identity as she thinks that “many people feared the dream tellers, many thought us unnatural” (282). She loves her daughter but remembering one of the restrictions, allowed Rakhi to come very close to her. Mrs. Gupta is passionate about her work as a dream teller, “I dream the dreams of other people,” she said ‘So I can help them live

their lives’ (07). She practises her profession secretly and sleeps alone as it is the prime requirement of this profession. She was told by her teacher that by sleeping alone your body will always be your own. No one will invade it except your dreams spirits-and to be invaded by them is a blessing” (146-147) and “A man kiss will suck your life force from you. You will have nothing left to offer the dream god... you live to spend the rest of your life bereft’ (147).

Mrs. Gupta does not like to talk about her work, but when Rakhi persists, she answers her query about her unusual sleeping practice of sleeping away from her family. Mrs. Gupta tells Rakhi that Mrs. Gupta’s work does not allow her to sleep with anyone as dreams do not come to her when someone else is in bed with her. However, she loves her family, and meticulously does other jobs of her home. Her family understands the significance of her work. Mrs. Gupta needs solitude for her work. She attends her client’s calls when her husband and daughter leave home for office and school respectively. Mrs. Gupta’s doesn’t prefer to meet her clients personally but connect with them on phone only, and once their task is fulfilled there is no further connection. She does this because “it would be awkward, dangerous even...” (43) and her clients also do not want to reveal their identities. Mrs. Gupta even forgets everything about that particular customer. There is only instance when she has a face to face interaction with a lady client, and counsels her about having a baby. Mrs. Gupta, with the help of her power, can see the growing cancerous cells in her body and suggests her to go to a doctor.

Mrs Gupta’s life journey from an orphan girl who lives in slum to an accomplished dream interpreter is beautiful but painful also. She has to sacrifice her emotions for this vocation. Her behaviour makes her an enigma for her family. All her life she lived with a emotional burden. It is only after her death that Rakhi and Mr. Gupta discover her real identity through her dream journals that have all the records of her life, her pains, her conflicts and her desire to be queen of dreams. She struggles hard to make balance between her duty as a wife and mother and her passion to help people by dream reading. This exhausted her completely in her own words, “I’ve tried a virtuous life, but unsuccessfully, caught as I am between two worlds that define virtues in an opposed way. I’ve often been impatient, and angry, and restless. I’ve regretted the choices I made and blamed them on others. Worst of all, I’ve not loved anyone fully, not my husband or child nor the suffering souls that have come to me for help. Try as I might the core of my heart remains mouldy and desolate. Even the dream spirits have not been able to fill it. My only hope is the messenger, will he ever come? (209).

Mrs. Gupta wants to be recognized as a dream teller and does not want to be like an ordinary woman in the household. Initially, new place and married life responsibilities kept her busy but soon she realized that these things can no more hold her attention and her natural instinct arises again. She craves for dreams but now it is beyond her reach. One day she slept alone on the floor with the earth pouch under her pillow she has a dream. She, at once, realized that what cost she needs to pay for retaining her gift. If she wants dream in her life then she have to sleep alone. She chooses her dreams “... For a dream, tellers cannot squander their nights as ordinary women do” (178). Dream telling demands private space, because of which she starts sleeping alone in the sewing room. Mr. Gupta did not like this decision but he supports her. Mrs. Gupta also

makes a special effort to make her husband happy, other than sleeping with him. She explains the reason for not sleeping with him in her words; "I can't dream if someone is in bed with me" (07). Mr. Gupta takes refuge in alcohol. He never says directly anything to her but his gestures hurt her. She remains very vigilant in her practice and ensures that there is minimal disturbance because of her work. She slips the pouches, bottles, cracks, in the walls, not visible to her husband and daughter (43). Mrs. Gupta keeps her daughter Rakhi away from all this practice. Rakhi wants to be a dream teller like her mother, but Mrs. Gupta dissuades her by telling that being a dream teller is not as glamorous as it appears. This work demands strict discipline and sacrifice. A dream teller life is not normal. It is only after her death Rakhi and Mr. Gupta discover her true identity through her dream journals. Mrs Gupta writes all records of her life, her pains, her conflicts and her desire to be queen of dreams. Throughout her life she hides her "real" self from her family members. In pursuit to be Queen of dreams her life break in fragments. She gets angry at herself, repents that she never loves anyone fully, not even her husband or her daughter. She confesses: "I wished to be a good wife, but could not give him: my body, to which my soul was yoked" (296).

Conclusion

In both novels, Divakaruni dismantles the myth of empowered femininity by presenting the tale of Tilo and Mrs Gupta. The underlying price they pay for exercising their supernatural powers is very high. They spent their life in pain and suffering; sacrificing their emotions for the sake of others. Their life journey is a saga of discipline, sacrifice and emotional burden. As far as they live according to the given conditions by agency everything is good but as they cross the line they lose powers and their self is fragmented. They are punished by that controlling agency. Hence "the price of female power" is not merely sacrifice—it is the transformation of agency into a conditional, negotiated space shaped by discipline, loss, and resistance.

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