

The Imagined World of Chihiro: A Psychoanalytic Study of Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

Athira A,

Post Graduate in English Language and Literature,

Guest Lecturer at Sree Ayyappa College,

Eramallikara, Kerala

Received: July 25, 2022

Accepted: November 6, 2022

Online Published: November 8, 2022

Abstract

Spirited Away, released in 2001, stands out as it can be seen as Miyazaki's attempt to funnel his anger towards modernization, how it affects the relationship between parents and children, the food fetishism, corruption of the society through capitalism, and last but not the least the sense of lost detachment that people, mostly children, face. This paper attempts a detailed study of the Anime and look into the character Chihiro, how she creates a fantastic realm as a means of escape from the real world and how she scopes with her traumatic memory through the magical journey that she takes.

Keywords: Trauma, Modernization, Capitalism, Detachment, Childhood, Memory and Fantastic reality

Contribution/Originality: Through Chihiro, this paper also adopts a psychoanalytic frame to look into Miyazaki, the creator of *Spirited Away*, to understand his ethos towards modernizing Japan.

Introduction

Spirited Away, released in 2001, is one of the most acclaimed anime that belongs to Hayao Miyazaki's world. Miyazaki is one among many things. He is an author, screenwriter, *Manga* artist, producer, director, and co-founder of *Studio Ghibli*. Miyazaki's world of anime is stocked with many traditionally rich and culturally loaded stories like *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Castle in the Sky*, *Spirited Away*, and so on. In most of the stories, Miyazaki's ecological consciousness is reflected through the characters and their reaction to the changing Japan. Miyazaki criticizes modernism erupting into Japan's soul and how it corrupts Japan's long-followed traditions. He recreates Japan's rich culture

and traditions by incorporating folktales and spirits and fusing them with rich, green background. Often environment when portrayed in fiction becomes unavailable to the audience as it is absent in the social order. That is to say, nature is often imagined as something that exists solely for human needs. In the so-called social order, humans assume the center position or to say humans presume the first rank in the order. Nature only gets articulated as a means to meet the living conditions of humans. Hence the distinction between the natural world and the human world rises. Miyazaki in many of his creations, pictures nature as something that we are contained in. The hierarchy often gets questioned in Miyazaki's world. He shows how civilization destroys the harmony of nature and his characters often find themselves resisting this. These characters are a reflection of Miyazaki himself, trying to raise his voice against the destruction of nature, traditions, and culture of Japan.

Psychoanalytic Approach

The movie starts with Chihiro and her parents relocating, which leaves Chihiro with a sulking, brooding face. She is seen holding a bouquet that is given to her by her best friend. The sudden departure from her familiar surroundings has an unpleasant effect on her. She is not mentally mature enough to process all this. In addition to it, her parents are seen as detached, and they are not providing her with enough care and attention that she craves for. This is evident when she says how her father gifted her with a rose when she longed for a bouquet of it on her birthday. Children can't understand or absorb a situation as adults can. They can't adapt quickly to changing environments. They sulk and resist these kinds of situations. It is up to the parents who have to put an effort to understand their feelings, and their emotions, and try to communicate with them calmly and caringly. The fast-changing world can be scary. Parents who are detached from their kids, running after opportunities, money, and materialistic things often leave scars in the minds of children. They too start to withdraw from the world. In the case of Chihiro, the change in her situation, and the lack of care from her parents leaves a deep scar on her mind. When she needs attention and reassurance from her parents, she is faced with hostility like her mother asking her to quit whining and behave herself. Emotional negligence during childhood can scar a child's mind and can trigger a traumatic experience in the child. As the movie progresses we see the fantastic elements unfolding through the eyes of the child Chihiro. The world filled with spirits, demons,

witches that we see in the movie *Spirited Away* constitutes the fantastic reality that Chihiro has imagined as an escape world from the real world.

In *Spirited Away*, we see Chihiro along with her parents reaching a tunnel. This tunnel symbolically represents the pathway into how Chihiro's mind works. Through Chihiro, Miyazaki is projecting his mind, and the world at the end of the tunnel is the world Miyazaki has created to reclaim the traditions of Japan. While Chihiro tries to heal her scarred mind through the fantastic journey, Miyazaki using this same journey tries to voice out his anger on modernism and its corrupting influence on people and traditions. Maybe the trauma of losing the childhood innocence that Miyazaki felt could be traced to Chihiro's journey and emotional maturation at the end of the journey as well. The journey could be seen as a coping mechanism for the fact that he has lost his childhood and by adopting the journey, he is trying to reconcile with that truth. Miyazaki himself says in an interview "When working on [*Spirited Away*] I frankly felt like I was lifting the lid on areas of my brain that I wasn't supposed to expose." More generally, he acknowledges, "When I'm creating a work I get the feeling that the general direction is always deep in my subconscious, in a place that I can't be fully aware of." (as cited in Napier, 207)

When her father wants to explore the tunnel, Chihiro resists this. She makes angry faces and asks them not to go into the tunnel. When she is left with the choice to wait in the car all alone, she is reluctant to do so, hence following them. She tries to cling to her mother's hand because she feels frightened. This action is met with another detached response from her mother saying not to cling to her. In Chihiro's case, the reassurance that a child needs, the protective care that a child craves, and the reassurance of safety while holding the hand of a parent are absent. The scene where Chihiro's parents start to consume food greedily reflects Miyazaki's take on the food fetishism of modern Japan. Through this scene, he is trying to criticize Japan's idea of sustaining its economy by adopting the western culture of excess, trying to capitalize on each and everything like establishing vending machines, fast food outlets, creation of dams, and building skyscrapers at the expense of nature. Miyazaki through this particular scene where Chihiro's parents consume food from a mysterious food outlet with no one there to serve food, thinking that they can pay for their actions with credit cards and money, shows how modernism has corrupted not only the exterior of Japan but also the souls and minds of the people. They have no respect for other

people's boundaries and they think they can get away from anything with money. When they turn into pigs, basically beasts, Miyazaki is showing the beastly sides of a human. For Chihiro, this is her worst nightmare coming true. Losing parents is one of childhood fears. Here in Chihiro's fantastic creation of the mind, she reimagines her worst fear of losing her parents by turning them into pigs, a condition which can be reversed, unlike death.

The modern world puts a lot of pressure on children. Parents too expect a lot from their children. Children often find themselves unable to live up to the high expectations, which will result in further detachment from the side of the parents. Children sense the disappointment of their parents, which invariably adds to their trauma. They will withdraw from the real world more and more. In Chihiro's case, she is presented as an ordinary girl, nothing outstanding or unexpected. In her fantasy realm, she is found working hard to reverse the spell on her parents. A child's hardship in meeting the expectations of his/her parents could be paralleled with this. By trying to reverse the spells and change her parents back, she is trying to live up to her expectation. Hence, she imagines them as having turned into pigs. The worst fear of the loss of parents, in her fantastic realm, becomes something that can be reversed. Susan Napier calls this an 'intimate apocalypse'. In the movie, we see Chihiro herself exclaiming 'I am dreaming, I am dreaming. Wake up. Go away, disappear.' (Miyazaki, 2001, 0:08:31) and attempts to wake up by knocking her head. This shows how much she is immersed in her imagined world. Her body becomes transparent and she starts to fade. This could be interpreted as Chihiro transferring to the real world from her imagined world. Haku provides her with food from the fantastic realm and says she has to eat it if she does not want to disappear. By consuming the food, she chooses to remain in this imagined world, her way of escaping from reality. Haku can be conceived as a creation of Chihiro's mind. The longing for care and companionship is fulfilled through Haku. She sees a friend in Haku. This could be seen as her way of coping with the fact that she left her friends back when they got transferred to this new place. In this new, strange place, the need for a friend has led her mind to create one. It is Haku who proffers the idea that if she wants to save her parents, she has to get a job at the bathhouse.

Portrayal of Japanese Culture

Bathhouses are a part of Japanese culture. By using bathhouses, Miyazaki is reminiscing the diminishing Japanese culture. In this movie, the bathhouse becomes the place where the exhausted spirits come to wash away the pollution of the world. The bathhouse can also be compared with the working of capitalism. The bathhouse is owned and controlled by Yubaba. Yubaba is a witch who controls and enslaves people. She does this by taking away people's names. Yubaba lives at the top of the bathhouse. How the bathhouse is built stands for the social hierarchy as well as indicative as to how capitalism works. The top of the bathhouse is occupied by Yubaba who stands as the source of corrupting force, the sole wielder of capitalism. She lives in an extravagant style, a room emanating the presence of modernism. Below her stands the bathhouse where spirits come to relieve themselves from exhaustion and indulge in the carnivalesque atmosphere. It should be noted that only spirits are allowed inside. These spirits offer money and gold in return for the service. Only these elite spirits get scented soaps, exquisite food, and excellent hospitality from Yubaba. These spirits indulging in the laps of luxury could stand for the bourgeoisie class. Below this stands the quarters of the servants or slaves of Yubaba who work in the bathhouse. At the lowest rung are Kamaji and the soot spirits. Kamaji is the boiler man who works relentlessly for the working of the bathhouse but receives no appreciation. Without Kamaji and the soot spirits, the boiler won't work and it could jeopardize the working of the bathhouse. These workers are just slaves, who do not have names as Yubaba has taken their names away from them. As long as they can't remember the names, they can't be set free. Through the depiction of the bathhouse, Miyazaki is showing Japan how capitalism can enslave people. For this purpose, he has adopted several Japanese mythical characters and traditional places.

Chihiro convinces Yubaba, who has captured her parents (in the form of pigs), to give her a job in the bathhouse so that she can save her parents. But this is done at the expense of her name. Chihiro's name is changed to Sen. Evolution of Sen from an ordinary girl to a more competent girl starts from the bathhouse. The process of coping with her scarred memories starts in the bathhouse. She works hard and helps a spirit by unclogging the pollutants attached to its body. The trauma of emotional separation from her parents, her known surroundings, and friends is projected into another character, No Face. No Face is seen standing outside the bathhouse, alone in the rain.

Chihiro invites No Face to the bathhouse. But it turns out to be disastrous. No Face is seen constantly trying to attach to Sen emotionally. No Face starts to consume delicious-looking food at first and then starts to show cannibalistic frenzy by swallowing the workers in the bathhouse. No face becomes enormous and at one point, tries to consume Sen too. This could be interpreted as the scarred memories that she somehow tried to contain within her starting to emerge out of her control. No Face as the emotional trauma that she somehow tried to contain in her mind, eventually tries to consume her. Sen trying to escape from it could be interpreted as her trying to escape from her trauma. But in the end, Sen herself contains No Face. She gives No Face a magic dumpling because of which No Face vomits out all the food, the living beings consumed, and something like black bile. This could be read as Sen confronting her trauma, and making peace with it. The vomit becomes the abject, symbolically standing for the scarred memories. These memories become the other that she has processed. As No Face remains no longer a threat, we can see Chihiro and No Face embarking on a journey.

The purpose of the journey that she now takes up is to give the golden seal back to Zeniba. Zeniba is the twin sister of Yubaba. From Zeniba, Haku who got metamorphosed into a dragon tried to steal the seal and during the process he got deeply wounded. Sen gives a part of the dumpling that she has been saving for her parents, but despite her efforts, Haku is not recovered fully. She embarks on the journey to Zeniba to return the seal and request her to forgive Haku for his actions. She takes the magical train, above the glittering sea. Here we can see how Sen has matured emotionally, from an ordinary, sulking girl to a more understanding, compassionate, selfless girl putting others before her. Even though this happens in the fantastic reality that she has created in her mind, her emotional maturation, beyond her age, is seen. The train stands symbolically for the loss of innocence of childhood and Sen's serious take on this mission, reflects Miyazaki's way of facing the fact of losing childhood innocence.

She not only forms a bond with Haku but with Zeniba too. She calls Zeniba, the granny. Sen completes her mission of returning the seal. Zeniba says to her that anything that happens, is ever forgotten, even we are unable to recall it at the moment. This is a powerful statement and a reminder that memories whether pleasant or unpleasant, will always be there. But with time, we tend to cope with it, it becomes a part of us. The traces of the memories will always be there even

when we are not able to recollect them. Zeniba's place is a simple abode, a Miyazaki way of retracing the simple life of Japan stands in stark contrast to Yubaba's luxurious place. Zeniba's words can also be analyzed from Miyazaki's point of view of changing Japan. That is the memories of past Japan will remain forever, irrespective of whatever changes that might happen. The exterior of Japan might change, but the old Japanese traditions, values, and culture will never change. Sometimes it will be hard to recollect it or restore it from the modernized version, but the memory will always remain. It is a strong message from Miyazaki to the world - to look back to its roots and try to conjure the soul of Japan.

When Sen takes leave from Zeniba's place, we see that No Face remains with Zeniba. This clip of No Face (as traumatized self of Sen) leaving her elucidates that she somewhat processed the trauma through the journey and the tunnel shown before becomes the passage to the phantasmagoric world that she created. Towards the denouement we see that Sen by answering a question posed by Yubaba, she is successful in reversing the spell that has been cast on her parents. In the fantastic realm that she created, she did reverse the spell by working hard and thereby rescuing her parents. If she is an ordinary girl in the real world, struggling to get her parent's attention, in the world that she has created, she completes her mission of rescuing her parents and living up to the expectations weighed on her shoulders.

In the end, we see Chihiro crossing the river alone and when she enquires about her parents to Haku, he says they are waiting on the other side. When Chihiro crosses the river, we see Haku's parents waiting for her and asking her not to wander alone or else she will get lost. The fact that Chihiro's parents have no recollection of what happened to them seems to corroborate the fact that indeed it was Chihiro's imagination. We see that after emerging from the tunnel, she seems a bit lost and confused, which points out that she is unsure if she has fully revived from the fantastic world that she has created. The feeling of unknowing, yet the consciousness that something happened, remains with her.

Conclusion

Spirited Away, released in 2001, stands out as it can be seen as Miyazaki's attempt to funnel his anger towards modernization, how it affects the relationship between parents and children, the food fetishism, corruption of the society through capitalism, and last but not the least the sense of

lost detachment that people, mostly children, face. Through the character of Chihiro, we can see how a child constructs their own fantastic reality as a means of escape. The transition from childhood to a mature self is traced in this movie. Another important feature of this movie is the use of many mythical characters from Japanese folktales like Kamaji, Haku as the spirit river, soot spirits, and so on. This could be seen as Miyazaki's desperate attempt in reclaiming the past of Japan.

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