



CULTURAL CONFLICT AND ISSUES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

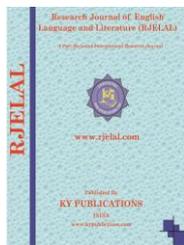
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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific woman writer of South Asian diaspora living in America. She wrote poetry, prose and fiction. The diasporic issues of identity homelessness, alienation, struggle for assimilation, separation, racial issues are realistically dealt in her fictional works. One can witness the cultural identity crisis experienced by second generation in Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*. Mrs. Gupta the protagonist of the novel, gifted as dream teller who tells the dreams of the local people, interprets their dreams and the effect on their lives. But the gift proves to be inescapable, caring her, to help many persons, but she has to remain distant from her husband and daughter. This novel clearly depicts the Indian American's experience of struggling with two identities or cultures. *Queen of dreams* marks a growth in Divakaruni's vision of immigration. The narrator focused on the conflict and crisis of survival of a Bengali immigrant family living in California at the beginning of new millennium. The Protagonist wants to spare her daughter Rakhi from the tales of her strange and painful past, in spite of her innate bonding with Indian life, Indian scenery and Indian culture. She married to Sonny, another Indianized American but fails to get desired contentment in her married life however her six year old daughter Jona remain a link between them. Besides of her fascination for painting, Rakhi in association with her father runs a Chaishop and this Chaishop becomes the meeting point for all distinguished immigrants. It provides a natural feeling of fraternity for the immigrants. After the death of her mother in a car accident, her father tries to make financial support to save 'Chaishop' from being closed, father also supports Rakhi in translating her mother's dream journals from Bengali to English to reconstruct the mystery of the life of her mother. The novel is structured as the post modern narrative and the narrator moves between past and present.

Keywords : diaspora, alienation, assimilation, separation, identities.

Queen of Dreams integrates an Indian American experience and the major problem faced by the emigrants in their search for individuality and a sense of emotional fulfilment. Mrs. Gupta can be considered as a highly dysfunctional in all aspects.

The marital relationship between Mr. Gupta and Mrs. Gupta is strained. The family somehow stays together without falling apart because of the love they have for their only daughter Rakhi. The second generation, Rakhi and her husband Sonny also leads

a broken life. This couple is divorced and their daughter Jona keeps shunting her parents. Rakhi earns her livelihood by running a small business and painting to satisfy her creative and artistic potentials. More over she also has to contend her loyalties between India and America. Divakaruni in her novels present a woman in a multi-cultural American society and the struggle of women in United States as to claim their identities and self works. It depicts increasingly through the struggle of Rakhi. The novel brilliantly claim and reveals the question of traditional identity, family and redemption through the characters. According to Viney Kirpal the lived experiences of these immigrant writers reflect the existential realities of geographical displacement, since "For modern or traditional, it is the eternal quest of man to seek, to put down roots some where, to possess some point of space to which he can relate emotionally or psychologically" (Kirpal 45).

The novel explores not only the question of identity of the diaspora but also racial issues. Rakhi, Mrs. Gupta's daughter frequently encounters the crisis of identity, which is tied to her inability to reconcile her parents' Indian identity with her American identity. She is born with a hyphenated existence – Asian American. During this time, Rakhi undergoes another crisis. She is the owner of the Kurma House, which sells Indian food adapted to American tastes, and the crisis comes in the form of a cafe called Java cafe, that is part of a popular franchise which is running successfully just opposite to Rakhi's tea shop, Rakhi gets fond of her Kurma house with the increasing number of Indian visitors there. Due to its Indian ambience to make it more homely, Rakhi sets the menu with tempting Bengali snacks and thus, gets more attached and involved in her newly-started business.

Rakhi observes the Indian clients coming to her cafe and notices their dresses. She notes that, "While some wear western clothes and some are in kurta- pajamas. Lined faces showing their age, giving hints about their living in alien land in many difficulties and less triumphs" (QD193-4). Rakhi feels that though they have adopted the western lifestyle, they still do not consider themselves as foreigners, which is ironic. They are her countrymen sharing the

same skin colour. Rakhi caught between two worlds of experiences, that of America and India, and connects her roots through these people. It becomes a therapeutic process for her. If identities continually morph, what seems constant is mutability in other words, as Avtar Brah suggests, such variable identities are "constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life, in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (183). Rakhi constantly negotiates her identity, connecting on the one hand with the Indian community settled in California, while adopting the culture and lifestyle of America.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* utilises the magic realistic mode. Mrs. Gupta through the female character an Indian immigrant who dreams the dreams of others to help them in their own lives. This gift of vision and the ability to guide people through their fates fascinates her daughter, Rakhi. They live peacefully without assimilating to the culture of their adopted land. Minority discourse is characterises not only by an eagerness to adopt and assimilate but also by a culture of protest and resistance. Culture is not merely an organisational principle holding together the members of a community. It is also a means of establishing its separateness from and resistance to other communities. As a second generation immigrant Rakhi adopts an American life style easily. It started as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one and she feels that she is in, "a land that seemed to me to be shaded with unending mystery" (QD 4).

Divakaruni's novels deal with the theme of East-west encounter through individual relationships and experiences. Its central characters, are Indian immigrants in America who belong neither to India nor to America. The novel thus is a psychological study of the problems of alienation and rootlessness. The night before Mrs. Gupta had left Calcutta, her aunt had given a pouch with a handful of earth collected things as a gift from the walkway in front of the caves.

ground that centuries of dream tellers have stepped on you' ll need it where you're going. I did not ask her what she meant. I was angry with her still, and disappointed at what she'd chosen to give me my

going away. It was not until later, when I found myself in California with all the dreaming gone from me, that I realized the importance of the gift. (QD176).

The novel *Queen of Dreams* clearly says that the multiple oppressions are not confined to only one class or community, it is universal and large due to the individual and community's lack of response and participation in its own native culture. This soft but firm voice of Divakaruni has forced the world to recognise her, not as a marginalised Indian woman writer but as an important voice in the mainstream of world literature. Her novels are a celebration of the strength of women, not her weakness. In a language of emotion and meticulous metaphor using images provided by the woman protagonists, the novelist has articulated the many-sided pathos and rebellion of contemporary Indian woman, not only in India but also in the new world. *Queen of Dreams* act as a bridge between transformation and migration and pile up meticulous details and information as she recaptures history in the most aesthetic sense. The common aspect of all her novels are the journey from subjugation to emancipation through conflicting issues. If the oppression of the Indian women, their education, and the effect of Westernisation are the development of their culture. The novel is not only the mature issues of diaspora but also reveal the cultural collisions and speak of the importance of transnational linkages in the globalised world.

Rakhi attempts to define her identity after knowing about India and its cultural heritage. She longs to have her mother with her when her life is shaken by new horrors. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, her family members and her friends deal with dark new complexities about their acculturation. The ugly violence visited upon them makes the reader to view those terrible days from the point of view of immigrants and Indian Americans. They are punished just because of the colour of their skin or the fact that they were a turban. As their notions of citizenship are questioned, Rakhi's search for identity intensifies she is haunted by her experiences of racism. During the struggle she finds unexpected blessings of the possibility of new love and understanding for her family members. The novel *Queen of Dreams* is

concerned with the real issues confronting the second generation of today's Indian – American community.

The Chai House into an Indian Snack shop, a chaer dokan, as it would be called in Calcutta. They're going to model it after the shop the father worked in so many years ago, with a few American sanitary touches thrown in. He'll teach Belle and her to brew tea with coffee the right way, and he'll cook the snacks himself. He lists them on a sheet of paper: pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana. (QD 165)

The Chai House, in Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*, where much of the action in the novel takes place, is a coffee shop in Berkeley, California. The shop is jointly owned by Rakhi, the protagonist of the novel, and her liberated Sikh friend, Belle. But contrary to the conventional belief takes place is an inert and dead place, the Chai House is presented as a living entity sensitive to its environment and capable of dialectical relationship and progress. As a space proper it draws at its level the mental perceptions and the "lived" existential experiences it together into a coherent ensemble. In her mental processes we see Rakhi thinking of it in terms of kinship which claims as much of her care and attention as her daughter, Jona, she reflects that "without me they might not survive, my store and my daughter" (QD27). In the background of magic and fancy, Divakaruni deals in her novel *Queen of Dreams* the post modern issues like racism, terrorism, painting dreams and the conflict of dislocation and relocation affecting the life and sensibility of immigrants. The characters retain their right to self growth and self affirmation against the externally imposed limitations.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* portrays, the possibility of establishing a bicultural identity in spite of Mrs. Gupta's initial refusal to transmit her culture. Generally there is a great conflict in the mindset of the characters in her novels, to disown their traditional culture of their motherland completely or to alienate from the new. In fact, they are not able to disown their native culture fully. As Klarina Priborkin has put it, "Divakaruni's approach to ethnic identity is condiment with the view of

South Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience" (South Asian Review 2015).

Queen of Dreams runs along parallel lines where on one side Divakaruni narrates the ethical, moral and psychological complexities of Rakhi's life, while on the other side, she unfurls the world of dreams experienced by Mrs. Gupta who leaves behind her on account of her secret life in the form of "The Dream Journals". Rakhi unearths the journal after her mother's death in a traumatic road accident. The journals are in Bengali, an Indian language, which she has never learnt. But her father promises to help by translating them. This gives both father and daughter a chance of understanding the turmoils of Mrs. Gupta who had always been an enigma to them. Rakhi discovers herself comes after going through the Dream Journals, it is clear that Mrs. Gupta was not satisfied with the choices she had made in life. She tells that was unable to do justice to both her relationships in life and her dream world. Soon her community in order to be with Mr. Gupta. But she was unable to be happy in her marital life because to dedicate herself completely to it would mean the loss of her abilities. Divakaruni infuses a woman's point of view in the depiction of Indian immigrant lives. These pictures are authentic due to the first hand experience of the writer who herself is a part of Indian diaspora. The cultural bearing of her motherland and the experiences of the land of migration both mingle and find a fine and balanced expression in her fiction.

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