

**Search for Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
*Queen Of Dreams***

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Abstract

Identity is an intriguing concept in psychology and literature. An identity crisis is a period of serious personal questioning where an individual makes an effort to determine one's own value and sense of direction. The main focus of immigrant literature is often directed at the act of migration to another land, issues of rootlessness, nostalgia and longing. Immigrants undergo the plight of identity crisis, cultural dilemmas and displacement. In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni deals with identity crisis with the character of Rakhi. The struggle of Indian women in the US to reclaim their identity and self-worth is depicted increasingly through the struggle of Rakhi.

Identity is a very intriguing concept both in psychology and literature. Many medium and literary texts revolve around this concept. A number of themes in literature centre on identity. An identity crisis is a period of serious personal questioning where the individual makes an effort to determine one's own value and sense of direction. If an individual having satisfied all his needs and playing an important role in the society, his identity can be said to have been established.

The quest for identity contains the twin aspects of individual self and its relatedness to others. The search for identity is dealing with desire and reality in one hand and the other dealing with the east-west encounter. So the identity crisis can be divided in to two kinds- individual identity and cultural identity. Individual identity refers to qualities that make one person feel unique, differentiates him from others. It tells him who he is and how he relates to others, what ways he is the same or different from others in the world he lives in.

Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jumba Lahiri, the three diasporic writers have taken up the issues of identity as a subject matter in their works. While Divakaruni deals with the theme in more intense manner than Mukherjee, Mukerjee taken up the matter more seriously than Lahiri. Mukherjee and Divakaruni centre their attention on women striving hard to achieve their position as an individual and female. Divakaruni exposes the abusive aspects of marriage shown through domestic violence and patriarchy.

Readers can identify the cultural identity crisis experienced by the second-generation immigrants in Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*. In this novel Rakhi's dilemma of America-born Asians whose divided identities make it difficult for them to locate and place themselves. They do not know when, where and how to relate and belong. Rakhi who has always considered America as her home is made to recognize her real identity that is Indian not American. She does not find it appropriate to put a flag outside her Chai House just to tell that she is an American which of course she is as she is born here.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni deals with Indian American experiences and focuses on characters balancing two worlds, particularly Indian immigrants struggling for a peaceful life in America. While depicting the common experiences of the Indian diasporic community, *Queen of Dreams* synthesizes an Indian American experience. The major problems faced by the immigrants are those of their search for identity and a sense of emotional fulfillment.

The struggle of Indian woman in the US to reclaim their identity and self-worth is depicted increasingly through the struggle of Rakhi. By representing the experiences of Indian women in the US, she has taken account of the need to interpret to her community predicament the alienating Americans. The novel brilliantly claims out the question of cultural identity, family and redemption. It is satisfying as well as consolatory.

Having imbibed the American culture by birth and Indian culture through blood Rakhi trapezes between the two cultures. Tossed to and fro, Rakhi does not know who she actually is or where she actually belongs to. Born and educated in America Rakhi perceives America as her home, and she wants to be accepted on her own terms.

After the death of her mother in the mysterious car accident, her father volunteers to help resuscitate the chai House into an Indian snack shop, a 'chaer dokan', as it would be called in Calcutta. The intermingling of two cultures is strongly felt in the new emergence of the resplendent coffee shop under the banner 'kurma shop'. The success of the 'Chai House' and its survival was so crucial to Rakhi because the trustee ship of her daughter Jona depended on it.

Rakhi's mother advised them, before she was killed in an accident, to do something "authentic" at the chai house to meet the challenge from Java. Doing authentic is interpreted by Rakhi's father Mr. Gupta, who actively involves in the affairs of the chai house after his wife's death, as returning to the pure native preparations of food and service. As a result they started

making pure Indian dishes for the customers of the Chai house specially a Bengali dish called Kurma which was thought to be authentic and unique. Rakhi's father also gives the Chai House its new name after it, the Kurma House, to mark the authenticity of the Indian dish and to accentuate the difference between the Chai House and Java.

Rakhi desperately wants to succeed as a painter or as a lucrative shop owner. Rakhi as a diasporic subject is compelled to live in a perpetual state of tension and irresolution because she is unable to serve her ties with the imaginary homeland though she has accommodated into the host culture.

The violence unleashed in the American society on account of the bombing of the world trade centre takes a great toll on the lives of the immigrant. Branded as terrorists for keeping the shop open they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. Being a very good friend to rakhi, Belle advised her when Rakhi is in the need of advise and console her in her bad days. 'It's a soulless world out here, Rikki. No one wants people like us, with our enriching and impractical liberal education' (QD 159). Belle asked her to put a flag in their shop on that terrible night. But Rakhi told;

'Bella, I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I'm American! I'm American already. I love this country-hell; it's the only country I know. But I'm not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby'(QD).

As this terrible event disturbs Rakhi's search for identity and as vicious attack on her friends and family puts their very concepts of citizenship at stake and they get threatened. Obscene words are healed at them.

"looked in the mirror lately? One of them spits. You ain't no American! Its fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson" (QD 267).

Ruminating over these words Rakhi reflects "But if I wasn't American then what was I?" (QD 271). All the built in feeling of being American is lost on that day of great loss to many people as they realize, "And people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of stranger who lost a sense of belonging" (QD 272). Rakhi, thus, suffers from multiple stresses and is forced to construct a gender identity where she has to locate herself.

As Rama Nair puts it, "acculturation and adoption of changes in external behavior begin early but assimilation or the ability to react instinctively and emotionally to a culture is a far slower process. Breaking away from one's ethnicity and absorbing a new couture is the only way of survival" (Nair 82). Rakhi adoption to America starts as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one. Yet, living as an immigrant after her immense possibility

of creativity and she is empowered enough to create new narratives of belonging and identity as according to Nair:

“Through assimilating and acculturation an Indian immigrant woman in America can create an identity for herself. But this is an identity that is constantly evolving being open to change and perpetual motion (QD 83).

However, Rakhi’s problem of complete assimilation to the host culture and tradition is complicated and complex. Though born in a America, America does not offer her the passport of being an American. Yet, the stamp of a true American is seen in her. Her resilience of spirit while facing odds in life and accepting challenges creatively reflect the individualistic trait of the American. She makes acculturation her strength, as towards the end of the novel she learns to appreciate Indian instruments produce music that is not purely Indian but an American mix. She moves from here to a deeper philosophy of life which equips her to set right her strayed life with Sonny, her husband, in the dance hall. “on the web of the world where Sonny and she have touched orbits once more” (QD 307). Paring the way for an integrated family life, very much similar to that in an Indian setup.

By adopting American ways, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life, although temporarily she suffers a setback due to doubts about her sense of belonging and identity. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, on the other hand, chooses to adopt, to keep herself Indian to the core on American soil, to merely adjust to the American ways for a cause- a cause that is important to her, a high cost that she is willing to pay in order to preserve the power of dreams that enable her to reach out to people around her, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems. Her stance of adopting, though it breaks her normal home life, becomes the channel of building up the homes of all and scenery.

Rakhi attempts to divine her identity, knowing little of India but drawn inexorably into sometimes painful history she is only just discovering her life is shaken by new horrors. In the wake of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 she and her friends must deal with dark new complexities about their acculturation. The ugly violence visited upon them forces the reader to view those terrible days from the point of view of immigrants and Indian Americans whose only crime was the colour of their skin or the fact that they wore a turban. As their notions of citizenship are questioned, Rakhi’s search for identity intensifies. Haunted by her experience of racism, she nevertheless finds unexpected blessings the possibility of new love and understanding for her family.

She tries to locate the difference in her “reflection in the glass-the brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with darker circles under them, the black crinkles of my hair. It’s familiar and yet, suddenly, alien” (QD 271). She feels as if she is misfit into both the identities Indian and American. Rakhi suffers because of her racial identity.

The Chai House, on the other hand, looks for a typical ethnic sensibility in its customers. Rakhi's reflects that at the Chai House we insisted that "our customers allow us into their lives just as we've invited them into ours. That our shop stays with them even after they leave it" (QD 95). When transcoded in terms of the problematic of the "other", the chai house presents us with new complexities of identity and acculturation of Indian American community at the beginning of the new millennium in America.

Rakhi feeling too American and seeking out a more authentic Indian identity is a manifestation of her love and loyalty torn between her imagined homeland and the country of her birth. However, a careful analysis of the novel reveals that Rakhi's obsession with India is only for its myths and mystery intertwined with her mother's unspoken past. In her real self and things concerning day-to-day life and loyalty weigh in favour of her birth country. The sight of the remains of her mother in an urn taken for scattering in the river make her profess the hidden American identity inside her, wrapped in enticing India.

The harsh reality strikes her only when her family and the tea shop become the target of the brutal attack by self-possessed patriots who doubted them as non-Americans. Rakhi's feelings about being treated as a hostile alien are poignantly delineated. Identity crisis after September eleventh attack not only disturbs the life of Rakhi and the Indian immigrant community but also the entire immigrant community who develop a strong sense of exile and homelessness.

Sonny brings in copies of e-mails that are being circulated by Indian organizations. The notes caution them not to go anywhere alone. Don't wear your native clothes. 'what native clothes? She wonders, looking down at her pants'. Put up American flags in prominent locations in homes and business place. When she listens to the president's military plans, she feels a need for prayer, but she doesn't know toward which deity, American or Indian, she should aim her supplications. She grows almost accustomed to suspicious glances on the street. A couple of times people cross over to the other side, so they won't have to walk near her. How is it, she wonders, that one can become, overnight, both so frightening and so vulnerable.

In a tragic way of aftermath of September eleventh pushes Rakhi into maturity and new vision for herself Indian becomes little more than a myth after the terrorist attack on the world. She and her family know and love and yet it is also the key to their past and present lives. Now, Rakhi and her friends are forced to deal with dark new complexities about their acculturation. It is the only way to escape the status of an outsider. The act of acculturation usually involves a conscious creature of one's identity in order to merge with the main stream.

The process of acculturation is successful only when it follows the painful erasure of the cultural hangovers. In *Queen of Dreams* the Indian-American community encounters severe identity crisis because of the too much of ethnic characters with them. Towards the end, Rakhi begins to question her most basic assumptions and motives, the true nature of love and capacity to forgive, to rekindle her love for her husband and her family and eventually her own immigrant community.

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