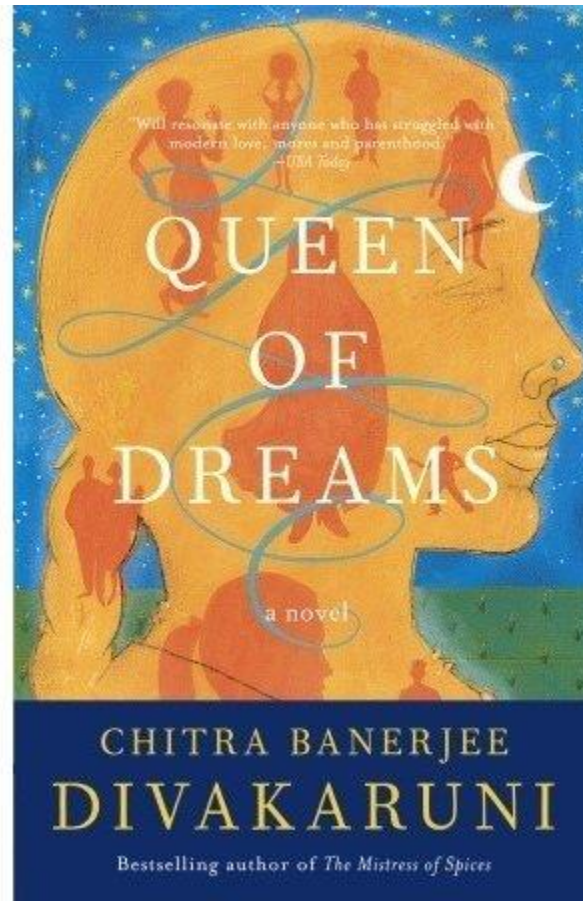


Sense of Uprootedness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

P. Selva Mari, M.A., M.Phil.



Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the remarkable novelists in Indian Writing in English. Divakaruni is a South Asian woman writer who deals with various oppressive issues confronted by women. She is one of the founders of Maitri, which is a free, confidential, referral non-profit organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area that primarily helps families from South Asia facing domestic violence, emotional abuse, cultural alienation and human trafficking and continues to serve on the advisory board. The novel *Queen of Dreams* clearly brings out the

multifaceted problem of identity and rootlessness through her characters. The protagonists in *Queen of Dreams* have constant identity crisis and suffer from exile, alienation and embarrassment largely born of cultural prejudices throughout the novel.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Alienation, Domestic violence, Emotional abuse, Oppression of women

Introduction

Indian writing in English refers to the body of writers in India who write in the English language and whose mother tongue is usually one of the numerous languages in India. Indian writing in English means the projection of the cultural patterns of India. Their works reflect the political, economic and spiritual elements that constitute the mind of India. The Indian English Fiction has had a brilliant growth during the dawn of the millennium year and the writing in all genres of literature has gained momentum, particularly the Indian English novelists, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and others are some of the notable writers of Indian writing in English who promoted the conventional method of writing.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Indian writing in English has had many noted writers of both genders. In due course, the women writers have outnumbered the men writers and the awareness of women's writing and their specific problems portray the realities of women in different dimensions. During the 1990's India had become a popular literary nation, because a number of women authors emerged at this period. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi have used realism as the main theme of their novels. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning writer. She is an Indian novelist who is settled in America. Divakaruni, is not just a voice among the Diasporic writers of the time, but an author infusing the essence of multiculturalism in her writing, and she blends beautifully her Indian heritage and her immigrant encounters of isolation and approval.

Divakaruni deftly handles the tribulation and misconception related to cultural barriers. Her focus is on the diasporic Indian women caught between two opposing worlds. The women who either live abroad and/or happen to be visiting India are caught between two opposing

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forces. They think more rationally, but they mentally retain some of the Indian traditional beliefs. They are torn between old and new values. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones.

Queen of Dreams

The novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the American reality which is the source of the American Dream, fears and anxieties that the Americans are vulnerable to, and the immigrant Indian's response to the emptiness and loneliness that haunts the inhabitants of this modern wasteland. It generates some issues regarding the identity-crisis of an individual, who being away from the homeland tries to negotiate with the culture and tradition of the host land. *Queen of Dreams* is a novel about three generations – immigrant mother Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi, a single mother in Berkeley who has grown up in the United States, and her unquestionably American daughter, Jonaki.

Mrs. Gupta, a First-Generation Indian Immigrant in America

Mrs. Gupta, a first-generation Indian immigrant in America is the *Queen of Dreams*. Her job consists of interpreting other people's dreams and warning them about the imminent danger and problems. Mrs. Gupta, the 'queen' of dreams, retains much of her Indian roots. She was to promise never to marry, though she could live with a man, because only then, "In the eye of the Great Power then my spiritual essence would not be joined to his". (QD 176) So rejecting the ceremonial wedding in the temple, she legally weds Gupta making him deeply displeased and making him feel they were not really married. To let the dream-spirit invade her, she is forbidden to squander her body in search of physical pleasure. Later, the couple leaves for the United States, where the young dream-tellers' powers leave her almost completely. Unable to dream, Mrs. Gupta loses her identity and sinks into depression.

Handful of Earth from India as Gift

Mrs. Gupta's aunt had given her a gift – a pouch with a handful of earth collected from the walkway in front of the caves, "ground that centuries of dream-tellers had stepped on". (QD 176). She had wondered how it would be of any use to her in America. In California, Mrs. Gupta feels increasingly alienated from her talent. Dreams do not come to her. She begins to

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experiment with the red dirt, a gift pouch. At first, she scatters a little in her garden. It makes her flowers bloom, but does not help her dream. Then she mixes it in her food, but it gives her cramps. Finally, she places the pouch of red dirt under her pillow, and her sleep “was filled with the colors and scents of home” (QD 177), but her husband wakes up with a headache, complaining that “his sleep had been filled with terrible images, blood and rubble and dying animals” (QD 177). She realizes that in order to have her dreams, she will have to stop sharing her husband’s bed, “for dream tellers cannot squander their nights as ordinary women do”. (QD 178) To her dismay, however, the red earth in the pouch becomes less each time she uses it. By now she recognizes her mistakes and realizes that she must break off all ties with her husband and find a way back to the caves. Shortly after, however, the dream-teller discovers that she is pregnant with Rakhi and cancels her plans.

Author’s Own Immigrant Experience

Divakaruni has poured out her immigrant experience in her fiction which deals with assimilation that takes place in different situations. For instance, Divakaruni refers to changes her food and dress habits. Divakaruni’s characters reflect the paradox of being caught between two conflicting cultures, the Indian and the American. Thus the immigrants get assimilated when they are exposed to many new things in the new world. In *Queen of Dreams*, Belle who is a friend of Rakhi bitterly complains that Rakhi is not dressed properly. Belle says “you’re getting old ... besides, they probably think you’re the outrageously dressed one. Outrageously old fashioned, that is”. (QD 25)

Mrs. Gupta’s Attire and Life Style

Mrs. Gupta dresses herself as Indians do, either in a saree or salwar kameez. She usually restricts herself within the confines of her house and only ventures out to pass the message of her dreams to her clients. To her, her identity is not as great an issue as she maintains most of her Indian culture and tradition. She adjusts and accommodates expediently though her sense of uprootedness does disturb her peripherally. Mrs. Gupta remains tender, accepting most of the changes and adapting to them, not so much affected by it. She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter. Her unfathomable past and her clandestine working of the present are brought to light

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through her dream journals posthumously. Her dream journals are her only nostalgic reminiscences of her past life in the caves with the elders which actually establishes her cultural identity.

No Faith or Trust in the Myth of America

Mrs. Gupta does not buy herself any myth of America, and her journals sharply resurrect the long forgotten Indian myths, beliefs, tradition and culture and even dreams which are so essential for existence. The pivotal point of the whole novel rests on the words of Mrs. Gupta as she elucidates the dream and interprets the meaning of it. Instead of reminiscing about her past in India she is stubbornly reticent about it. She hides her past in an attempt to prevent her daughter from experiencing an inevitable split between her Indian and American identities.

Rakhi against Mental Trauma, Cultural Alienation and Identity Crisis

In Rakhi, Divakaruni has tried to fuse the feelings of an immigrant who has an oriental past trying to live up to the expectations of an occidental culture. The character grows from questioning many aspects of what is happening around her in a state, where she is ready to accept the reason behind all happenings. Rakhi raises her voice against mental trauma, cultural alienation and identity crisis of the dislocated people from their homeland India. Rakhi's terrible sense of alienation and homelessness create the impetus that forces Rakhi into the necessary changes to get her life back on track. She attempts to acculturate herself to an alien country. This results in the erasure of the painful, unpleasant incidents with her husband and her family from her mind.

Rakhi, Mrs. Gupta's daughter is an American by birth and grows up with a feeling of belonging to her land of birth. She is a young divorcee and a struggling artist. Rakhi, born to Indian parents, is a second generation migrant in America in this novel. Rakhi, in this sense, fits into the concept of second generation immigrant being born to Mr. and Mrs. Gupta whose country of origin is India. Failing to have any first-hand experience of the ancestral land, Rakhi suffers from a confusion regarding her belonging. Though Mrs. Gupta took the utmost care to educate Rakhi purely in an American way, she could not cope with the American life totally and therefore, intends to know about and experience the Indian way of life. Her identity crisis stems

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from her confused sense of belonging. Divakaruni fosters an interest in such stories as in one of her interviews, the author says:

... I share an interest in the lives of the second generation – the children of Indian ancestry who are born in America. How do they relate to India? How are they different from their parents? (Chakaravarty 197)

Rakhi in Pursuit of Her Roots

As belonging is ‘interwoven’ with the notion of home and a ‘determinant’ of an individual’s identity, Rakhi, as a second generation migrant is quite concerned with that. Her sense of belonging and identity is interconnected with her search for roots in India, her ancestral homeland where her parents were born and brought up. Rakhi in Divakaruni’s novel is a daughter, a mother of a girl child, owner of a coffee shop and a passionate painter. All these identities do not truly define her due to her willingness to have knowledge about her ancestral root. Since her childhood, she had a craving for a clear vision of her parents’ bygone days in India, a place which she could not visit despite having the will to do so.

Rakhi has grown up in America amidst American schools, culture and tradition. The reason behind Rakhi’s passionate desire to go back to her roots is not merely the yearning of an immigrant. Her craving is intensified because of the fact that her parents deliberately turned down any scope of discussion about India with her. As a child, Rakhi was also interested in story-telling, one of the favourite activities of children. But she was disheartened as the bed time stories were not told by her mother, but by her own self. The stories Rakhi told grew out of her imagination, but they failed to provide her with her mother’s identity or her ethnicity.

Constituents of Culture

Culture, which includes food habit and language, makes up some of the constituents of diaspora. However, Rakhi’s mother did not let her identity as a dream-teller come out as an obstacle between her role as a mother and a wife. Even in her choice of cooking, Mrs. Gupta maintained Indian culture. Rakhi says, “At home we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture”. (QD 7) However, the more Mrs. Gupta wanted Rakhi to maintain distance from the life of a dream-interpreter, the more Rakhi showed curiosity

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to know about that identity of her mother, because she felt that she would be able to solve the problem of her quest for roots and belonging, by being a dream-interpreter:

As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be an interpreter. But when I turned twelve, I grew obsessed with the idea. I saw it as a noble vocation, at once mysterious and helpful to the world. To be an interpreter of the inner realm seemed so Indian. (QD 35)

Live in a Perpetual State of Tension and Irresolution

Rakhi is compelled to live in a perpetual state of tension and irresolution because she is unable to sever her ties with the imaginary homeland, though she has adjusted with the host culture. To her, assimilation into the host culture does not fully restore a sense of equilibrium. The trauma of the mother's life as an orphan remains largely unspoken and even in her journals she does not tell much about her childhood. Living as an orphan in the slums, facing hunger and deprivation, the mother is saved by her talent of dream-telling: "It afforded me some protection in that place where orphans were used in cruel ways". (QD 230) Rakhi's discovery of herself comes out of her discovery of who her mother actually was. Rakhi desires intensely to know India, and also wishes for a closeness with her own mother, a closeness that has always been to her, out of reach because of her mother's profession of being a dream-teller: 'My mother always slept alone'.

Role of Dream Interpretation

In western cultures, dream interpretation is a science, practiced by the psychologists. In the Indian culture, dream interpretation is a gift. This gift is possessed by Mrs. Gupta and she relishes the gift. She does not want to share her secrets with her daughter, Rakhi. American culture is natural to Rakhi, but she wants to analyze her mother's gift. Rakhi is fully tuned to American culture. She is shocked to see her mother's behavior as a dream interpreter. At one time Rakhi wants to analyze and at another time she feels happy that she has not learnt the ways of her mother. This brings out the insecure feelings in Rakhi. For a second generation Indian-American like Rakhi, the sensation of being in-between is particularly accentuated. Conflicts typically arise from the cultural clash between American individualism and Indian communitarianism. The value system and culture of the second-generation is unclear.

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The dreams support Mrs. Gupta to have a sense of belonging, but Rakhi has nothing. She feels that it's her birth right to know about India, they hide it more and reveal less. Her conception about India, therefore, is coloured with the brush of her imagination only. While speaking about the Indian migrants, Salman Rushdie in his essays "Imaginary Homelands" says that "our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of mind."

Moves to Understand India

Rakhi wants to be familiarized with India by collecting books on India, Bengali CDs and even by nourishing the wish to visit India. "But it never worked out". (QD 82) This search for origin in India also appears when she chooses Sonny as her life partner. Both of them were of Indian origin, though Sonny, like Mrs. Gupta, never spoke about his "past - parents, hometown, high school, habits". (QD 70) The only means by which Rakhi can associate her feelings with India is her paintings. "Each day that passes without painting has hollowness to it, a sense of waste?" (QD197)

The only satisfactory means by which Rakhi feels close to her root and feels a sense of belonging are the dream journals of her mother, which Mrs. Gupta left behind posthumously. Mrs. Gupta's mysterious death struck Rakhi with a shock, but the dream journals emerged as a sigh of relief. The journals helped to establish the cultural identity of the mother and served as the sole nostalgic reminiscence of the past life as a novice in the caves where she had taken training as a dream-interpreter. While translating the dream journals, Mr. Gupta tells the stories of his past life of struggle in India. Like the mother's journals, the father's stories contribute towards the unraveling of some parts of Rakhi's basic quest for ethnic belonging, mutuality and continuity thus helping her to reconstruct her sense of ethnic identity.

Sonny's failure to interpret his wife Rakhi's mental state correctly indicates the couple's basic inability to communicate, which results in further alienation. Sonny's dismissal infuriates Rakhi and they have a fight, yet she never gets to the main reason for their separation. The gap of silence Rakhi intentionally creates between herself and Rakhi's husband parallels her detachment

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from her mother, which Rakhi has experienced throughout her life. This dysfunctional pattern of communication replicates itself with Rakhi's daughter, Jonaki, who inherits her grandmother's dream-telling talent. When Rakhi finds out that her daughter can predict the future by seeing other people's dramas, she realizes that just as she did not know her mother, she does not know her daughter as fully as she thought she did. By helping her daughter recognize and exercise her talent, Rakhi facilitates the construction of Jonaki's identity as a dream-teller, thus amending the mistakes of her relationship with her own mother and creating a harmonious balance between the past and the present.

Dream Journals

After Mrs. Gupta dead, Mr. Gupta starts translating the dream journals written in Bengali into English so that Rakhi is able to understand them. He even narrates stories of his past and quenches Rakhi's thirst for India. Mr. Gupta even proves his talent in cooking and then in singing old Indian songs, and these help them to rebuild their faith and determination. The Chai House is given a new look, a novel Indian perspective and this changes the scenario. Rakhi also comes to know about her father's unique characteristics as a singer, cook and most importantly as a guide and adviser. Thus all complaints of Rakhi against her father tend to be sidelined, the father and daughter happily co-operate with each other to re-build their Chai House which was at stake, because of the appearance of Java that offered their customs Native American dishes, Mrs. Gupta advised Rakhi and Rakhi's friend Belle to be authentic to attract customers.

However, the word could not make any sense to Rakhi at that time and she could understand the depth of this word only after her mother's death, when her father made every possible effort to usher in the Indian food, culture and tradition in the Kurma House:

They have decided to transform 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. (QD 165)

The Kurma House serves as an emblem of her ethnic identity, a place to which she can feel a sense of belonging and a means through which she can come closer to her roots. The

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stories about India, the attire of the Indians who used to come and gather in the Kurma House from varied backgrounds, their oneness in sharing thoughts and feelings, enjoyment in playing Indian instruments and singing Indian songs – all fascinated Rakhi with a strange satisfaction. The Kurma House in the novel thus becomes the only meeting place for a few diasporic communities in California. In Divakaruni's novel it is observed that the young and the veteran immigrants are emotionally connected to the Kurma House. It is their emotional bonding that drives them to help repair the Kurma House when its kitchen is burnt accidentally.

Diaspora Community in America - Torn Between Two Identities

The diaspora community in America suffers the effects of the new political crisis. There is an aura of hatred and fear mixed with a sense of insecurity due to the racial riots in the aftermath of 9/11. Although it is not open violence to non-Americans, but to a large extent a concealed distrust for the diaspora, and Rakhi observes how she has suddenly become an outsider in a land that she was born and brought up in. After this harrowing experience Rakhi feels that all people who lose their loved ones in such racial struggles lose their sense of belonging in a foreign country.

Rakhi feels herself torn between her two identities. She has imbibed the American culture by birth and Indian culture by ancestry. She feels the pulls of both the cultures in her veins but fails to understand where she really belongs to. After the terrorist attack, the identity of an immigrant in America suffered from a different kind of experience. It can be noticed in the novel that people had started asserting their patriotic and nationalistic feelings after the devastating attack by putting up banners that announced PROUD TO BE AMERICAN or GOD BLESS AMERICA. Rakhi, a second generation migrant has in her heart, a quest for roots in the culture and tradition of her ancestral homeland and she aspires to belong there but at the same time, she has accepted her life and livelihood in America.

9/11 and After

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni portrays the real agony of the immigrants who were treated violently after the incident of 9/11 through her fictional characters. The Kurma House which was rebuilt with so much affection, care and effort was to be shut down just for the fact

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that it was run by a South-Asian community. A group of people claiming themselves to be patriots, carrying baseball bats, chains and switchblades broke into the Kurma House alleging that Rakhi and his group were celebrating the calamity of the Americans and so branded them as terrorists. They did not only cause damage to the shop, but also vented out their hatred for the entire South-Asians in general by using abusive language and using violent means. Jespal, the lover of Belle who is Rakhi's best friend, tried to appease them saying: "We haven't done anything wrong. Those men in here were mourning. We're Americans, just the way you are. We all feel terrible about what happened". (QD 267)

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 immigrants. Branded as terrorist for keeping the shop open, they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. But obscene words were hurled at Jespal and he was beaten black and blue. His ethnic appearance as a Sikh with turban and beard impelled the perpetrators to unleash more torture on him:

Looked in the mirror lately? One of them spits. You aren't 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)

Rakhi, thus, suffers from multiple stresses and is forced to construct a gender identity where she has to locate herself. The ethnic identity in which Rakhi seemed to have so much interest, stood as an obstacle against her peaceful existence in America.

Thus, the aftermath of 9/11 racial riot brings Rakhi's broken family together. The family moves towards success and stability in life. Through Rakhi's character Divakaruni tries to portray the struggle she had to meet with during her stay in the country where it was not very easy for the settlers to live as freely as they were doing before the 9/11 event. Rakhi starts questioning her belonging to India or to the place where she has been born and brought up. Divakaruni brings this dilemma in Rakhi's subconscious extremely well.

Adaptation and Assimilation

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Rakhi's adaptation to America starts as early as her birth, but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one. Yet, living in an immigrant offers her immense possibility for creativity and she is empowered enough to create new narratives of belonging and identity. 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" (Kezia 59). Though born in America, it does not offer her the possibility of being an American. Yet, the stamp of a true American is seen in her. Her flexibility of spirit in life and accepting challenges creatively reflect the individualistic trait of the American.

Rakhi makes acculturation her strength, as towards the end of the novel, she learns to appreciate Indian instruments which produce music that is not purely Indian but an American mix. 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. Caught between two cultures, her identity is suddenly at crisis. Throughout she has tried to justify herself at the best possible manner and throughout she has faced criticism and cruelty. She wanted to be like her mother – a dream interpreter but it is her daughter who inherits the quality and she wanted to belong to India by knowing about the past of her mother, but her mother never exposed herself to her and she broke-off her relationship with her husband at one stroke; later the situation forces her to reconsider and she wanted to be a part of America and America disowns her. At this juncture she realizes that her life revolves around her family and close friends only. This gives her peace of mind as she tries to hold on to her individuality: the identity that she had lost comes back to her in a different way. It is family that gives one an identity naturally and one need not seek for it.

Towards the end, Rakhi begins to question her most basic assumptions and motives, the true nature of love and the capacity to forgive, to re-ignite her love for her husband and her family, and eventually her own community. The dynamics of some of Rakhi's important relationships are changed in the phase between her identity crisis and acculturation. The characters in this novel are in search of their true image, torn between the traditional values they have absorbed from childhood and the new values which they have been introduced to during

their immigration. This is a confrontation with the occidental ethos in order to discover one's own self.

The terrorist attack for Americans is a revelation of the destructive power of hatred, it also sparks in the Indian immigrants a new faith in their Indian values and inspires them to search for their past, for their roots. As Rakhi goes through her mother's dream journals after the latter died in a road accident, she discovers her mother's long-kept secrets and sacrifices, and her past in India. This enables Rakhi to confront her fears and to develop a new bond with her ex-husband Sonny and her father with the help of her daughter Jonaki. The negative forces of terrorism in her adopted country thus contribute to Rakhi's growth and evolution as a more mature and confident individual and she emerges as a stronger person at the end. She loves India but at last she has adapted to American life.

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