

Exploration of Diasporic Sense and Sensibility in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

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Abstract

Exploring diasporic sense and sensibility has always been a challenging venture. There is an everlasting confrontation between cultural and religious differences when it comes to Immigrant Literature. Decoding the differences beyond its boundaries would be anchoring in assimilation of two worlds and two cultures. Staying away from one's country for different reasons will be accepted by immigrants physically but their unconscious mind reminds them of their nostalgic past which is deeply connected with their homeland. As an immigrant, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself is well aware of all such complexities of mind and Immigrants' approach to the newly adopted country. She has explicated diasporic sense and sensibility in all her works, especially in *Queen of Dreams*.

Queen of Dreams (2004) is about the settlers of a Bengali family in America who struggle to mingle with the new land's awaiting challenges to have a safe and fearless livelihood. Divakaruni has delineated how Indian immigrant women attempt to reconstruct their identity by encountering multiple cultures and experiences through her protagonists. She has defined the identity of Mrs. Gupta- first-generation Indian Immigrant mother, Rakhi, second- generation American-born daughter and Jona, third- generation American-born daughter. They are torn between their past and present life and their dilemma in adopting the new land's life-style that results in finding new ways and hope to lead a prospective life.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*, Diaspora, Immigrant Literature, identity, multiple cultures and experiences.

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anchoring in assimilation of two worlds and two cultures. Staying away from one's country for different reasons will be accepted by immigrants physically but their unconscious mind reminds them of their nostalgic past which is deeply connected with their homeland. As an immigrant, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself is well aware of all such complexities of mind and Immigrants' approach to the newly adopted country.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prize-winning novelist, is a leading figure in South Asian-American women Diasporic literature. Most of her novels including *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Oleander Girl* (2012) are used to explore female's suppression regarding diasporic identity and familial bonds- intricate, intertwined, and intimate in all stages of life in an alien land. In general, irrespective of gender, every person has to interlock their identity with their past roots. Divakaruni has explicated diasporic sense and sensibility in *Queen of Dreams* meticulously. Barry describes *Queen of Dreams* that "uses the past to read the present, revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose to emphasise or suppress of the past" (*Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* 178).

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Having the first-hand experience of the Indian diaspora, Chitra Banerjee presents the Indian female diaspora and the reasons of estranged relationships, complexities of mind, the plight of immigrants, and their tremendous steps to reconcile with an adopted country. They are having an urge to create an identity amid in cultural and religious differences. Making an effort to merge with utterly new surroundings would be resulting in the reconciliation of misunderstanding, mistrust, depression, estrangement, longing for one's own country, economic, cultural, social and political differences. Going through all these difficult phases is an acid test to the immigrants in the process of amalgamation at their beginning level.

Rakhi, the protagonist of the novel *Queen of Dreams* always aspires to attain a unique identity like her mother Mrs. Gupta, a dream interpreter who is the first- generation immigrant. Especially Rakhi faces many struggles to find her Indian root and true identity after her mother's death. She does not know anything about her Bengali Indian culture as she has been brought up in America. The thought of her own country is in her imaginary world as if she

fantasies to visit India and communicating with Indian people. Rakhi admits, “I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she has grown up in — just as she never spoke of her past” (QD 58). Rakhi is also longing to connect with Pan-Indian culture because as an Indian Immigrant, she wants to create her memories with her rootedness.

Amalgamating with the new milieu, initially, immigrants are perplexed to respond to hybrid ethnic identities such as Socio-cultural norms, ethnoreligious affinities, economic issues and re-negotiation of their identity. There is no place for personal desire during the process of cultural negotiation. Their state is well- explained by Agnew as “Cultural differences, or the sense of being an outsider or a foreigner, can make the individual feel alienated and heighten the feelings of sadness, nostalgia, and create a longing for home” (66). It is evident in the case of Mrs. Gupta who never shared her memories and felt alienation though she is a dream teller. She has experienced double marginalization because of her gift she isolated herself from her family and as a first- generation immigrant; it is very difficult to adopt the alien soil and she cannot dream at all.

In the process of seeking quest and thirst for identity shatters familial bond. Mrs. Gupta concentrates only on creating her own identity as a Bengali diasporic dream- teller yet she does not care for her family and their feelings. Mr.Gupta tells Rakhi about her relationship with family after her death,

‘Year later after she died, my father would say, “Not true, she didn’t love me, not really, she never let me get that closer, the place right at the center of her – that was reserved for her dreams, gods or demons, whoever they were, she never shared that with anyone Not even you,...and I would be forced to admit that he too was right”. (QD 8)

Mrs. Gupta’s dream journal is the only thing that can be associated with the memories of her family members. She can be remembered only by the dream journal even after her death. From Rakhi’s childhood itself, she undergoes alienation in her house. When Rakhi is eight years old, she asks her mother “Why don’t you sleep with dad? I kept asking, or at least with me, like Mallika’s mother does? Don’t you love us?” (QD 6) and her mother answers that though she loves them, she can’t sleep with them because she is a dream teller and she cannot concentrate if someone is in bed with her” (QD 7). As a child, Rakhi is confused, whether her mother loves them or her profession of the dream interpreter.

Growing up as an introvert and pessimist results in distorted familial relationships due to a lack of concern of her parents on her. Even she keeps herself away from her husband Sonny and daughter Jonaki. Though Rakhi and Sonny are separated, her husband is willing to help her after her mother’s death. At that time, Rakhi realizes the importance of family which is the paramount strength and support at times of trials and tribulations. As a third-generation Indian

American, Jonaki never questions about her ancestral history or she never shows any interest in knowing that nostalgic past of her grandparents. But Jona inherits her Indian grandmother's magical gift of dream telling. Both Jona and Rakhi never fully understand the potential of this gift. But it goes to the third-generation Indian American who does not know the traditions in memories associated with it.

An Americanised version of Indianness plays an inevitable role throughout the novel. Gupta's family finds it difficult to come out of the Indianness even though they are comfortably settled in America. To keep their Indian identity, they have owned a chai House (tea shop) in Berkeley, California. They never want to forget their past and they always cherish to be a part of Indian culture and tradition. Mr. Gupta experiences his nostalgic feelings through Indian food and music which are a pivotal part and parcel of living aids of any human's identities. Wenying explains Food as an identity in his work *Eating Identities: Reading food in Asian American literature* as "food and eating occupy a significant place in the formation of [South] Asian American subjectivity" (8).

Regarding Rakhi, she struggles with the mixed feeling of insecurity and individuality with the notion of exploring her true colour. Though she is not able to experience her Indian identity, she tries to express it through her paintings in an alien space.

The turmoil between the ethnic outsiders and insiders in migrant communities is a worldwide conflict in all countries. The innocent immigrants are being tortured by natives in many ways though consciously or unconsciously. It is quite evident when the Americans have brutally attacked Rakhi and her father and they try to explain to them that they are born and brought up in America. Their reply is the naked reality of immigrants is not accepted yet they try to mingle with natives. Patriots never allow them to talk and spits on their faces and said, "You ain't no American! It's fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country" (QD 267).

Another major incident, the 9/11 tragedy makes Rakhi and her family feeling insecure about their existence which questions their safety as they are really in their own nest or not. When the storm strikes, the results of the disaster instigate them to comprehend their root is not in America. They are severely injured due to the racial attacks on Muslims and other brown-skinned people by American people. This terrible incident demolishes her self-confident and she undergoes a period of self-doubt on herself. She questions "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?". The statement, "You ain't no American" ceaselessly rings in Rakhi's mind. After that incident, they come across,

Since the assault at the Kurma house, she'd been too afraid to go anywhere alone at night. Things she'd hardly noticed before – a group of people waiting at an intersection, footsteps behind her as she walked to her car,

someone asking her if she had the time – loomed in her mind, throwing out monstrous shadows. Just thinking about them made her breath fast and shallow. (QD 299-300)

Rakhi's ardent words are an instance of her perspective on America is very positive, "I don't have to put up a flag to prove that "I am American! I'm American already. I love this country" (QD 264). But they have been stigmatized as Indian- American Diasporic people which cannot be changed though they want to shred off the label. Yet they find all possible ways to adopt into the new soil by accepting the reality as it is.

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