

Displacement And Identity Struggle In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Queen Of Dreams

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Abstract:

The present research article attempts to trace out the Displacement and Identity Struggle in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Queen of Dreams. Diaspora literature constitutes the problematic abroad life of immigrants. As an outsider, the diaspora community faces so many critical problems in their host land. Alienation, racial segregation, cultural conflict, and identity crisis are core issues faced by immigrants. Indian diaspora literature is an academic body of writing enhanced by Indian immigrant writers. Indian diasporic literature holds Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in high esteem. She has creatively projected the survival issues of immigrant women in her novels, and short stories. Divakaruni studied how Indian immigrant women balance their identity with Western culture. Indian immigrant's experience, contemporary America, history, fantasy, and the difficulties of immigrants living in an alien land are here major thematic concerns. Divakaruni's novel Queen of Dreams is the journey of a young Indian artist named Rakhi in California, United States. Surviving abroad, Rakhi perceives the conflict of hyphenated identity. She proclaims that as an immigrant, she is having a dual identity and she swings between 'real' and 'reel' world. Rakhi's two daughters survive as second-generation

immigrants in the United States who are not much aware of India and its culture. The novel deeply emphasizes on identity conflict, east-west conflict, cultural clash, assimilation, the pain of immigration, and belongingness.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Assimilation, Cultural Conflict, Belongingness, Immigrant.

Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an immigrant writer who teaches creative writing and lives in California. She is also a published poet, acclaimed novelist, and short-story writer. Critics praise her for her dramatic inventiveness and use of lyrical, sensual language as a gifted writer. (Los Angeles Times Book Review) As Sunday Telegraph rightly calls her, “a master storyteller,” she beautifully blends the chills of reality with the rich imaginings of a fairy tale. In her *Queen of Dreams*, she has woven a vivid and enduring dream - one that reveals hidden truths about the world we live in.

The immigrants uproot themselves from their native land and go abroad either by choice or out of necessity. They are forced to absorb the history and culture of that foreign land and to adapt themselves to the alien culture and society. Immigrants face challenges like living in a new country, being away from their roots, and feeling like they don't belong. While commenting about Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* Jopi Nyman lucidly observes: “Rather than searching for roots and authenticity, migrant writing constructs itself in the space of in-betweenness between different cultures, societies, and homelands. In this process, it reflects on both the old and the new and questions existing political and cultural binaries” (53). Chitra Divakaruni, along with other migrant writers, reflects the same in her writing.

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The diaspora experience includes a desire to re-envision and reconcile with the idea of home, rather than just a yearning for it. In *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Divakaruni portrays through the characters of Rakhi and her mother, who have “partial affiliations, disinterested identities, tactical belongings,” (27). Their sense of belongingness, which is constantly reinvented and relocated. The

novelist describes the cross-cultural impact on Rakhi's identity, which is partly Indian and partly Americanized, and in the process, Rakhi develops as a hybrid soul.

As Sudipta observes: "Chitra Divakaruni's literary landscape has been designed by a conscious effort to identify and integrate the psyche of the two cultures ... These writings reflect the hyphen, but they proudly accept the status of "Otherness" in the Diasporic consciousness" (172). The novelist skillfully weaves together the lives of a mother and daughter, balancing tradition and modernity to create a tale of the past and present. Though Rakhi moves and lives like an American still, she remains tied to her native culture and influenced by ancient customs and traditions. Her existential dilemma comes to a cessation when she learns to accept her diasporic part and finds a space for her in the alien soil.

Queen of Dreams; she also shows the common ground which lies in a world that is alien. Confrontation with the west for the discovery of one's own self is evident through the characters of Tilo and Rakhi. This search constitutes a quest for a satisfactory attitude towards the west, and for a realistic image of the east. The fusion of the western and eastern cultures is beautifully brought out by the novelist.

Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive* claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions and this connection has been ignored. She says:

Women in substance economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of a holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to social benefits and sustenance needs, are not recognized by the reduction, interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth. (23).

The concept of home and migration prevails throughout the novel. Rakhi's mother's attachment to her homeland makes her conserve her Bengali tradition in America. The alien ethnicity

fails to disrupt her traditional identity. The surrounding Americanness could not alter her identity. She tries to restore her Indian 'self' through her Indian way of living. Later when her daughter Rakhi recalls her mother's affectations, she says, "She put on the kettle and went to the pantry to get a packet of the Brooke Bond tea, wrapped in its thick silver foil, which she favoured. It was one of the few habits she'd carried over from India." (QD 81)

Rakhi's mother, with her special psychic gifts, receives lessons of a dream interpreter as a novice in 'the sand-filled caves' of India. She was told that if she marries Mr. Gupta in Calcutta, she may lose her ability to interpret dreams. The elders warn her that "Those you love the most, you'll help the least. You'll be defeated by the oneness of your blood." But she feels, "If love is strong and pure, it can overcome all barriers. That's the kind of love I'll possess." (QD 49) She is "prepared to follow him wherever his destiny led" them. (QD 151) 'His destiny' becomes hers. She is ready to violate all the rules to step into 'wifehood.' (QD 146) Her love ends in marriage, which brings her to an alien soil where she tries 'to preserve her gift' and her psychic abilities by gradually distancing her beloved husband, who is forced to think that his wife has no genuine love for him. Rakhi's father complains to his daughter after her mother's death, "She didn't love me, not really. She never let me get that close. The place right at the center of her – that was reserved for her dream ... She never shared that with anyone. Not even with you." (QD 8)

Rakhi's mother has remained a mystery to her husband and daughter as well. Rakhi, while growing up, views her as a 'secretive, stubborn, unreliable' mother. (QD 8) But from childhood, Rakhi is greatly attracted to her mother's mysterious nature as an interpreter of the dreams of strangers. Her mother reveals her consciousness of the Indian tradition through her cooking, housekeeping, and even in her dressing. She buys her child's disturbing dream, though she very much wants her to be like her. Rakhi's mother emerges as a strong persona out of her alienation experience in exile. Living in exile from her native society, most of her ambitions go unrealized, but her original self as a dreamer and helper of the needy shines at its full. She proudly proclaims to her dear daughter, "I dream the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives." (QD 7)

Rakhi's mother compromises her conjugal life for the sake of being a dream teller and rises to the level of a guardian angel not only to her daughter but also to many suffering souls. The mystery around Rakhi's mother is unveiled and unraveled to her through her mother's Dream Journals which were written in Bengali and read to her by her father. I shared the secret life and the psychic experiences of the mother in India and abroad with the daughter and to the husband only after her death. As a mother, she is ready to do everything possible to help her daughter but Rakhi is reluctant to bring her problems to her because her mother never talks about her sorrows.

Through the first-person narrative, Rakhi, an artist, entrepreneur, single mother, and expectant divorcee, narrates her tale. Through the Dream Journals, her mother's life story unfolds before the eyes of the reader. To Rakhi, India is a land of 'unending mystery.' But her mother convinces her young daughter that India is not that mysterious but "just another place, not so different, in its essentials, from California." (QD 4) Her motherly instinct is aware of Rakhi's curiosity to know about her native land as one who is brought up in California. She comforts her confused daughter who is reared 'in between' two different cultures. Rakhi declares: "At home, we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture." (QD 7) As an artist she tries to reflect India through her paintings "Most of her paintings had been about India – an imagined India, an India researched from photographs, because she'd never traveled there." (QD 10) Rakhi longs to visit her ancestral land and thinks, "before I die I would like to go to India." (QD 83)

Rakhi runs a Chai House with her cherished friend, Belle alias Balwant Kaur, who was also her roommate during her freshman year at Berkeley. They shared such a chemistry that they confessed to each other "how Rakhi sometimes feels too American, and how Belle would live to shed the last vestiges of her desi-ness." (QD 15) Rakhi, though an Indian who is born and bred on American soil, reflects Indianness in her modest dress and manners. Belle teases Rakhi that she is getting old and is outrageously old-fashioned when Rakhi comments about the dress of the youngsters there. The 'unfathomable' Rakhi keeps her mother's old dupatta and wears it with her modern attire during her art exhibition in the prestigious Atelier Gallery. She chooses to

preserve that and informs her 'unfathomable' mother that "because it's from your other life." (QD 95) Belle with her 'sequined halter-top mini and double-pierced naval' serves as a sharp contrast to Rakhi. Rakhi in turn teases Belle as one who does not know to make roti or any Indian food and never wears a salwaar kameez but bothers much about them now when their business is at stake due to their new enemy store 'Java.' There has been a sharp drop in customers after the new café offered student discounts.

Java is the fastest-growing café chain in the country, which has captured sixty-seven percent of the U.S. market. It becomes a threat to their Chai House which is successfully established and earned a reputation by their five years of toil. The Chai House, feels Rakhi, "is her sanctuary, the one place she has made her own." (QD 47) She feels, with their homemade cookies, custom-ordered coffees, their hand-finished furniture, and their bulletin board chronicling their customers' lives, their customers allow them into their lives just as they have invited them into theirs. But later, when there is a drop in their customers, she asks herself, "Have we wasted our time in creating a refuge when all people want is a stop-'n'-go?" (QD 86) Even the Chai House is decorated with her paintings of Mughal gardens and many Indian artifacts like her mother's hand puppets made from silk saris. Rakhi's mother supports and helps her with the money she needs for the store and encourages her to be an independent woman. She wants her daughter also should have something to give her a sense of self and 'something to fall back on, if necessary.' (QD 28) Rakhi thinks that her mother has sensed her daughter's marital gap earlier through her clairvoyance.

Rakhi permeates in her a sense of tradition which is manifested through her mother's lifestyle and upbringing of her. Rakhi accepts Belle's wildness whereas her Punjabi parents are "bewildered by their daughter who refuses to let them pull her back into their safe Sikh nest." (QD 16) When Belle grows her affection for the turbaned Jespal and decides to settle with him, one could vividly espy the Indianness inherent in the American-styled Belle.

As a dislocated soul, she is still cherishing the American Dream of possibilities and promises, but to her dismay, life is not so promising. Her love life ends in divorce when Sonny fails to

protect her at his club. She hates it when Sonny, the number one DJ of a popular nightclub, upsets the routine she has worked so hard to establish for Jona (Jonaki), her six-year daughter, and herself after their separation. She bothers much about her business, which helps her take her Jona into her custody.

Rakhi's mother advises Rakhi and Belle to be different from their business competitor 'Java' who is trying to steal their customers. She wants them to 'create special attraction, something that means more to people than money.' She adds that they 'need to find something authentic to offer your customers, something that satisfies a need in them that's deep and real.' (QD 48) She feels theirs is not a real Chai shop 'but a mishmash, a Westerner's notion of what's Indian.' But Rakhi takes it offensive and accuses her mother "And whose fault is it if I don't know who I am? If I have a warped Western sense of what's Indian?" (QD 89) Here the author vividly portrays the immigrant ipseity, rootlessness, in-betweenness, and dilemma through the mouth of the protagonist.

She feels frustrated and lonely after her mother's unpredicted death. Mr. and Mrs. Gupta meet with an accident on their return home from their daughter's art exhibition. Rakhi's mother dies in the accident whereas her drunken father survives with his broken bones. Her father's illness gives her a new perspective on her parents. Rakhi now could decode her daughter's dreams and gifts as a dreamer which she inherited from her mother as herself. She not only resuscitates the Chai House with the tastes and smells of her ancestral land, but also the relationship between her father and herself. She reconnects with her father who willingly contributes to her Chai House as a chef and the riots help her reconnect with her husband on friendly terms. Her father's 'pakoras,' 'rice puddings,' 'Sandesh' and 'gawjas' bring back their customers. Even Sonny directs his friends there. The Chai House becomes Kurma House and also a meeting place for many people of Eastern origin and Rakhi's father entertain them with old Hindi songs. Soon many music lovers join him with their musical instruments. Though there are a few South Asians, their audience is mostly a mix of various races. At last, Rakhi admits the fact that she has her space in the Kurma House among the variegated unison of races.

She faces obstacles fitting in as an immigrant in America, despite being a citizen. Though Rakhi is absorbed into the alien soil and its way of life, realizes to her shock that her attachment to the American culture is only shallow and superficial. Rakhi feels like an outcast after the terrorist attacks in New York and the locals' brutal attack on immigrants. Her mother, on the other hand, is upset about being disconnected from her community and its lifestyle. It is appalling for her not to be accepted as an American. The four young men who broke into the shop at night are not ready to heed the words of Jaspal. He tries to make them understand the immigrants' sincere feelings and says, "StopWe haven't done anything wrong. Those men in here - they were mourning. We're Americans, just the way you are. We feel terrible about what happened." To Rakhi's dismay, one of them shouts, "Looked in a mirror lately? You aren't no American! Its fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country..." (QD 267)

Later she can comprehend her place on American soil. After the violent attack on them and their shop, Rakhi, questions herself, "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?" Reaching home she looks at her reflection in the glass which makes her realize the reality of being an exile in an alien land. "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 ponders over the grieving people who have lost so much on that terrible day, "And people like us, seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of strangers, who lost a sense of belonging." (QD 272) When people expressed their sorry for the things that happened to her and her shop welcomed her presence in their community, she could only feel more resentment for being treated as a guest. "I was born here, she wants to tell them. How can you welcome me?" (QD 275)

While reading her mother's journals she could search not only her mother's roots but also of hers. She could reconnect with her ancestral ties through her reading. Rakhi attempts to reconstruct her position through her diasporic experience and relocates her to the alien soil where she was born and bred. Rakhi considers America her home, while her mother does not. Though Rakhi's is an Americanized part, her parent's past, their life in India, and the memories of her mother's story recreate her as a hybrid

soul. She reflects her persona, which is an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. She skillfully balances both the Indian and American ways of life.

Conclusion:

In *Queen of Dreams*, the authoress maintains a fine balance to the several loose ends of the novel in a contented and holistic realization of the narrative idiom. The final revelations in dream journals justify the guilt of her mother and help to understand the real nature of her own relationship with her mother. She also redefines the nature of her relationship with Sonny. The novel ends with a twine note of self-defense and self-justification. It is a complex novel covering the multilayer of human sensibility beyond the terrains of caste, gender, race or national consideration. However, the end of the novel suggests that Rakhi who had suffered racial attack, will create yet another identity for her new environment. Though she does not feel fully at home in America, she knows that it is her home, the world for which she is responsible, which, she is born into and which is everywhere around her. Hence, she decides to stay and explore the challenge of belonging, despite disappointments, broken expectations and unease. This awareness, however, reinforces the notion that Rakhi's identity is forever evolving in relation to her surroundings, as the in-betweenness of an immigrant is a space of possibilities. The author projects India from the perspective of an expatriate and an immigrant. India is presented in the novel as a part of memory, as a third-world space, and as a fragment of nostalgia. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores well the theme of surpassing boundaries in *Queen of Dreams*.

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