

Re-Mapping Identity, Culture and History through Literature



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Vision of immigration and struggle for identity in the novel "Queen of Dreams"

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author, poet and a Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Her works include *Sister of My Heart*, *Oleander Girl*, *Palace of Illusion* and *One Amazing Thing*. Her works were largely set in India and the United States, and often focussed on the experience of South Asian immigrant. She wrote for children as well as adults and had published novels in multiple genres including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, myth and fantasy. She has won many awards for her works and journals.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* integrated an Indian American experience and the major problem faced by the immigrants in their search for identity and a sense of fulfillment. Mrs. Gupta was the protagonist of the novel. The marital relationship between Mr and Mrs. Gupta was strained. The family stayed together without falling apart because of the love they had for their only daughter Rakhi. In the next generation, Rakhi and her husband Sonny also led a broken life. This couple had divorced and their daughter Jona kept pushing her parents. Rakhi earned her livelihood by running a small business and painting to satisfy her artistic potentials. She also had 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 was depicted through the struggle of Rakhi. The novel revealed the question of traditional identity, family and redemption through the characters. The novel explored the question of identity of diaspora. Rakhi, Mrs. Gupta's daughter frequently encountered the crisis of identity, which was tied to her inability to reconcile her parents' Indian identity with her American identity. She was born as an Asian American. During that time, Rakhi underwent another crisis. She was the owner of the Kurma House, which sold Indian food adapted to American tastes, and the crisis came in the form of a cafe called Java cafe, that was a part of popular franchise which was running successfully opposite to Rakhi's tea shop. Rakhi was fond of Kurma house with the increasing number of Indian visitors there. Due to its Indian ambience to make it more homely, Rakhi set the menu with Bengali snacks and thus got more attached and involved in her newly-started business.

Rakhi observed the Indian clients coming to her cafe and noticed their dresses. She noted 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" (Divakaruni 193). Rakhi felt that though they had adopted the western

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lifestyle, they still did not consider themselves as foreigners, which was ironic. They were her countrymen sharing the same skin color. Rakhi caught between two worlds of experiences, that of America and India, and connected her roots through these people. It became a therapeutic process for her. Rakhi constantly negotiated her identity, connecting one hand with the Indian community settled in California, while adopting the culture and lifestyle of America. Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* utilised the magic realistic mode. Mrs. Gupta, through the female characters of an Indian immigrant interpreted the dreams of others to help them in their own lives. This gift of vision and the ability to guide people through their fates fascinated her daughter, Rakhi. They lived peacefully without assimilating to the culture of their adopted land. Culture was not nearly an organizational principle holding together the members of a community. It was also a means of establishing its separateness from and resistance to other communities. As a second generation immigrant Rakhi adopted an American life style easily. It started as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture was a highly difficult one and she felt that she was in a land that seemed to be shaded with unending mystery.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* explained that the multiple oppressions were not confined to only one class or community, it was universal and large due to the individual and community's lack of response and participation in its own native culture. The soft but firm voice of Divakaruni had forced the world to recognize her, not as a marginalised Indian woman writer but as an important voice in the mainstream of world literature. Her novels were 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 had articulated 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 pileup meticulous details and information as she recaptured the history in most aesthetic sense. The common aspect of all her novels was the journey from subjugation to emancipation through conflicting issues. The novel was not only the matire issues of diaspora but also revealed the cultural collisions and speaks of the importance of transnational linkages in the globalised world.

The novel was concerned with the real issues confronting the second generation of present day Indian – American community. The Chai House turned 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 would teach Belle and her to brew tea with coffee the right way, and he'll cook the snacks himself. He listed them on a sheet of paper: pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana. The Chai House, where much of the action in the novel took place, was a coffee shop in Berkeley, California. The shop was jointly owned by Rakhi and her liberated Sikh friend, Belle. But contrary to the conventional belief took place was an inert and dead place, the Chai House was presented as a living entity

sensitive to its environment and capable of dialectical relationship and progress. As a space proper, it drew at its level the mental perceptions and the “lived” existential experienced it together into a coherent ensemble. In her mental processes we see Rakhi thinking of it in terms of kinship which claimed as much of her care and attention as her daughter, Jona, who reflected that without her they might not survive. In the background of magic and fancy, Divakaruni dealt 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 retained their right to self growth and self affirmation against the eternally imposed limitations.

Divakaruni’s novel portrayed the possibility of establishing a bicultural identity in spite of Mrs. Gupta’s initial refusal to transmit her culture. Generally there was 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. Infact, they were not able to disown their native culture fully. *Queen of Dreams* ran along parallel lines where on one side Divakaruni narrated the ethical, moral and psychological complexities of Rakhi’s life, while on the other side, she unfurled the world of dreams experienced by Mrs. Gupta who left behind her on account of her secret life in the form of “The Dream Journals”. Rakhi unearthed the journal after her mother’s death in a traumatic road accident. The journals were in Bengali which she had never learnt. But her father promised 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 discovered herself coming 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 she was unable to do justice to both her relationships in life and her dream world. 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’s novels dealt with the theme of East-west encounter through individual relationships and experiences. Its central characters were Indian immigrants in America who belonged neither to India nor to America. The novel thus was a psychological study of the problems of alienation and rootlessness. Divakaruni infused a woman’s point of view in the depiction of Indian immigrant lives. These pictures were 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.

Work Cited

Divakaruni.Chitra Banerjee.Queen of Dreams.New York:Anchor Books,2005.Print.