

# SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on the search for identity with various sections like self - identity, search for home and nostalgic experience. Identity crisis or search for identity has received an impetus in the Post-Colonial Literature. Indian English fiction deals at length with the problems, rising due to multi-culturalism and intercultural interactions. Man is known as a social animal who needs some a home, love of parents and friends and relatives. But when he is homeless, he loses the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crisis. Identity is the most appealing fervour of the dispersed societies in an established institution. In the current scenario, everyone wants to move to western countries for a better perspective. Those immigrants lose their sense of belonging and they search for their identities and finally land up in hybrid identity i.e. fusion of two or more cultures. They are in the state of in-betweenness, only very few of the immigrants are successful in adopting the new culture.

**Keywords:** In-betweenness, nostalgic, search, identity crisis.

Indian Writing in English is the product of two worlds, the Indian and Western world. A recurring theme in many of the novels of the women writers of recent years is an exploration of a woman's identity, the study of herself. Many of the Indian women novelists depict the desire and the dream of the Indian women in western countries. Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni expose the cultural suffering by Indian women in western countries. Lisa Lau comments about identity in South Asian Literature:

Identity is one of the most common themes in South Asian literature, and in many cases the search for self – identity is portrayed as confusing, painful and only occasionally rewarding .... Women writing in South Asian writer with a sense of attempting to make their voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations, diasporic women's writing has different characteristics.... Women of diaspora, instead almost always, without exception, testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities. (252).

The Modern diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. The other class comprises those who have been breed since childhood from outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement whereas those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English literature.

As an Indian immigrant to the United States of America, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, tries to come out from stereotypes and uses her past experiences and the desire to communicate the plight of Indian women in America, as the driving force behind her writing. Her writings constitute an attempt to re-connect her, emotionally and physically to her immigrant status. She has explored the force of tradition of her native country as well as the challenges faced by the immigrants in her adopted country. Divakaruni turns to her inner consciousness to develop a new narrative, which highlights not only the oppressive force exerted over

women in both their native and non-native cultures but how transposed traditions survive and mutate on foreign soil.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific woman writer of South Asian diaspora living in America. The diasporic issues of identity, homelessness, alienation, struggle for assimilation, separation, racial issues are realistic deals in her fictional works. She is not only a novelist but also a poet. The main theme of her poetry is about the experience of the immigrants. She shares her own immigrant experience in her writing. She uses the fictional autobiography as the form of writing and her writing raises an interest in reading and moves readers emotionally; readers also share his or her experience of emigration in the fiction. She voices for the problems of immigrants through her writing. She also refers to the change of food, language, dress and cultures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's characters in the novels reflect the paradox of being caught between two cultures, the Indian and the American. She has made her women break their silence and articulate for freedom and strive to acquire a free identity and also develop female bonding among them. She also insists on the fact that women should face their problems boldly and have a self-identity in their lives. Her novels are a celebration of the strength of women, not her weakness. They are detached from their native homeland for various reasons, though they physically accept; mentally retain their nostalgia for homeland. Her protagonists make new adjustments in their new surroundings and for this they reinvent themselves. Their physical distance from their home and their encounters with new ways of life are conferring upon them a kind of double vision which enables them to look both objectively and nostalgically at their own culture and the alien culture into which they seek to integrate.

In the review of literature, a brief discussion of the postcolonial study and the Indian-American diasporic experience is followed by an exploration of more specific scholarship on the writings of diasporic Indian women writers in English. Within the diasporic literature, immigrant psychology and identity formation is a theme frequently explored and literature connected with this also is reviewed in this study.

In this novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004), Divakaruni depicts the Indian American experience of struggle with two identities or cultures. She attempts to bridge the gulf between an American-born daughter and an Indian immigrant mother. The mother is gifted with the ability to interpret dreams. The daughter yearns to understand her mother's behaviour and her work. Rakhi, an American born Asian struggles to identify herself. She does not know when, where and how to relate and belong. Mrs. Gupta, a first-generation Indian immigrant in America is the queen of dream. She says "A dream is a telegram from the hidden world" (QD-34). She retains much of her Indian roots. She never wanted to get married. But according to the society she could not live without a man. So she got married to Mr. Gupta. She rejected the traditional wedding ceremony and legally weds him. To let the dreams invade her, she forbids her body in search of physical pleasure.

She says "my life is nothing but a dream" (QD-19). Later they move to the United States, where all her power leaves her. She loses her identity and gets into depression. She realizes that to have her dreams, she needs to stop sharing her bed with her husband "for a dreams tellers cannot squander their nights as ordinary women do" (QD-178). She interprets other people dreams and warns them about the imminent danger and problem "I dream the dreams of other people" (QD-7). Mrs. Gupta dresses as Indian either a Saree or Salwarkameez. She usually restricts herself with the confinement of her house and only ventures out to pass the message of her dreams to her clients. She also maintains her culture by mostly cooking Indian food. Rakhi says, "At home, we rarely ate anything buy Indian" (QD-7). She neither fully assimilates nor fully denies the culture of the hostland, just adapts the life around her, without transforming or changing herself completely. She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter. Rakhi, a young artist and divorced mother living in California is an American by birth and grows up with a feeling of belonging to her land of birth "a land that seemed to me be shaded her unending mystery" (QD-4).

She considers America her home and is made to realize her real identity in India and not in America. She runs a tea shop named the Chai House to earn a living and to provide her six year old daughter Jona. Rakhi observes the Indian clients coming to her café and notices their dresses. She notes that "while some wear western clothes and some are in Kurta- pyjamas. Lined faces showing the age, giving hints about their living in an alien land in many difficulties and fewer triumphs" (QD-193-4). She feels that though they have adopted the western lifestyle, they still do not consider themselves as foreigners, which is ironic. She connects her root through these people. The Chai House was later renamed as the Kurma House with the few sanitary courts of American which shows the fusion of east and west. She is motivated by her mother's words of encouragement. "Women need something of their own to make them independent" (QD-26). Rakhi longs to be with her mother. She too wants to read dreams like her mother. "I wanted to be an

interpreter... 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 India” (QD-35). But she is not successful because she does not possess the gift of reading the dreams. She needs to know the reason for her mother’s isolation. Mrs. Gupta hides her past to prevent her daughter from experiencing the split between her Indian and American identities and also to prevent her from adopting the Indian culture. This only arouses her curiosity and she starts craving for all things Indian. She admits, “I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she’d grown up in -- just as she never spoke of her past” (QD-35).

After Mrs. Gupta’s death, things change. The dynamics of some of Rakhi’s important relationships change forever. She notices her father for the first time, and he is not the same indifferent man as he used to be. Earlier she felt, “I cannot remember a single instance in my life when I felt close to him” (QD-115). Rakhi discovers the ‘Dream Journals’ after her mother’s death. She reads them with the help of her father in order to translate to Bengali. She tries to interpret and understand her mother’s life. Explaining about Indian culture to Rakhi there took a cultural transmission. She finds the answer for the basic need for ethnic belonging, mutuality and continuity, which helps her to reconstructs her identity. Rakhi finds it difficult with her business, relationships and events relating to 9/11. Rakhi says:

We see clips of firefighters heading into the blaze: We see buildings collapsing under the weight of their rubble -- We look at them all, then at each other in disbelief. How could this have happened -- here, at home, in a time of peace?

In America. (QD-255)

The violent bombing takes a great toll on the lives of the immigrants. They are branded as terrorists for keeping their shop open; they are thrown into a nightmare where they started to question about their identity. They blame the colour of their skin or the fact that their attire is different from the natives. Rakhi and her friends are treated ruthlessly and humiliated by the Natives. All the feeling of being America is lost on that day. She thinks that “I don’t have to put up a flag to prove that I’m American! I’m American already. I love this country” (QD-264). Rakhi starts questioning her own identity and she thinks that “But if I wasn’t American, then what was I?” (QD-271). Sonny brings Indian organization’s e-mail copy as evidence which says, “Don’t wear your native clothes. Put up American flags in prominent locations in homes and business pray” (QD-274). She is horrified, “she feels a need for prayer, but she doesn’t know towards which deity, American or Indian” (QD-274). She starts suffering multiple stresses and is forced to search her identity where she has to locate herself.

Rakhi does not accept the division in her family’s history between India and America. She feels the pull of both the cultures in her veins but fails to understand where she belongs to. She searches for the meaning of what life is by trying to understand her relationship with her father, friend Belle, husband Sonny and daughter Jona. He even narrates the stories of his past and quenches Rakhi’s thirst for India. Rakhi learns about her father’s unique characteristic as a singer, cook and as a good mentor and guide. He helps her in rebuilding the Chai House to 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).

It serves as a place of belonging closer to her roots. This novel explores the conflict of ideas between Mrs. Gupta and Rakhi by the inner battle between a first-generation and second-generation Indian American. Mrs. Gupta believed that loneliness was her strength. Rakhi is faced with many doubts. She thinks: “Did my mother make the wrong choice in deciding to come to America with my father?” (QD-211). Rakhi thought of her mother as a serene person. But after reading her journal, she understands that her mother refused to accept sadness, which she considered a useless emotion. Mrs. Gupta survived by making herself believing that loneliness was strength. Rakhi describes her mother as the one who is beautiful and sad like a princess from one of the old Bengali tales.

In western cultures, dream interpretation is a science, practiced by the psychologists. In Indian culture, dream interpretation is a gift. Rakhi’s mother practices the culture of dream telling in the place far away from the place where she has learnt it. In a country like India, dream teller is supported and encouraged by the fellow dream tellers. But in California, she tells her dreams alone. Here Divakaruni explores the force of tradition of her native country as well as the challenges faced by the immigrants in her adopted country.

Mrs. Gupta wanted Rakhi to get accustomed to her American way of life and to line in-between two nations. She blames Rakhi for her failing business in the Chai House.

The reason you don’t have enough power to fight that woman there is that she knows exactly who she is, and you don’t. This isn’t a real Chai Shop’ – but mishmash, a Western’s notion

of what's Indians. Maybe that's the problems. Maybe if you can make it into something authentic, you'll survive (QD-89).

She also accepts the mistakes of bringing her up wrongly.

You're right. It is my fault. I see now that I brought you up wrong. I thought it would protect you if I didn't talk about the past. That way you wouldn't be constantly looking back, hankering, like so many immigrants do. I didn't want to be like those other mothers, splitting you between here and there, between your life right now and that which can never be. But by not telling you about India as it was, I made it into something far bigger. It crowded other things out of your mind. It pressed upon your brain like a tumour. (QD-89)

Rakhi is the blend of the east and the west. She feels too American and seeks 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. After the death of Mrs. Gupta, it is only through her father she learns about her parents past.

After the 9/11 attack, Rakhi becomes mature and gets a new vision for herself. India has become greater after the terrorist attack on America. She and her family love India though it is the memories of past and present lives. Rakhi raises her voices against mental trauma, culture alienation and identity crisis of the dislocated people from their homeland. Rakhi understands the way of life. She has understood her father's affection, Sonny's and her daughter's love, care and affection for her. Her daughter Jona, has incorporated the characteristics of both her grandmother Mrs. Gupta and her mother Rakhi. She can dream and also paint. Jona is an enigmatic character. Rakhi observes,

With her grandmother died and her mother overwhelmed, the painting must have given her stability. A way to express her emotions. I observe the care with which she delineates details. The windows of the tall building gleam in the light from the flame. --- The sky, too, is full of fire. It's hard to wrench my eyes from the strangely magnetic quality of the painting. (QD-212).

At the end of the novel, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life. The terrorist attack forces Rakhi into the necessary changes to get her life back on track. She attempts to acculturate to the alien country. She forgives and re-kindles her love for her husband and family. She grows as a confident individual and immerses as a stronger person. She loves India but had adapted to American life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the problems faced by Indian as an immigrant who tries to adapt to the American lifestyle, which forces them into complexity, trauma, and sense of loss. She also portrays the possibility of establishing bicultural identities in Rakhi in spite of Mrs. Gupta avoid in transmitting her Indian culture.

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