

IMMIGRANTS' IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL "QUEEN OF DREAMS" BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract

This paper focuses primarily on the identities of the characters in the novel "Queen of Dreams" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who is an Asian – American writer of short stories, novels, essays and poems. In all of her novels the main characters are always searching for a homeland and their identity especially those of the Indian immigrants who are living in America. The novelist clearly portrays the condition of the immigrants searching for an identity who are living in America facing the day to day experiences of life and searching for their identity in America. The novelist herself is an immigrant, who brings out the condition of woman in a place, where the characters are suffering due to their existence between their homeland and a new land. This novel "Queen of Dreams" is about immigrant people's struggle for fearless existence and search of a homeland identity.

Keywords: Identity, Immigrants, Homeland.

Introduction

The very first problem an immigrant faces when stepping into a new land is identity crisis, because he/she feels a sense of alienation, (the pain of being far away from their homeland), the pain of leaving behind everything familiar since their birth makes the mind of the immigrants to struggle. Immigrants have a sense of estrange and a sense of separation from their homeland as they find themselves captured between their native land and the new land. They face a feeling of non-acceptance by the host community, loneliness, identity and alienation. Firstly the immigrant people search for identity and later on to preserve their identity and ensure their safety and ultimately struggling for fearless existence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born on 29th July 1956 in Kolkata from a traditional middle class family; she migrated to America in the year 1976 to pursue her postgraduate studies from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and ph. D from the University of

California at Berkeley. Divakaruni teaches in the national ranked creative writing program at the University of Houston where she is the Betty and Gene Mc David professor of creative writing. She also serves on the advisory board of MAITRI in the San Francisco Bay area and Daya in Houston; they both are organisations that help South Asian or South Asian American immigrant women who find themselves in domestic violent situations. She also served on the board of PRATHAM, an organisation that helps educate underprivileged children in India.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poet, short story writer, essayist, professor, children's fiction writer and a distinguished novelist. Her works includes in novels *The Mistress of Spices* (1917), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) and *Queen of Dreams* (2004) are some of the best known novels. Her poetry includes *Dark like the River* (1987), *Black Candle* (1991), *Leaving Yuba City* (1997). Her short story collection includes *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which mainly focuses on Indian immigrant women, caught between two worlds. Her works are been translated into more than 29 languages across the world. Chitra Divakaruni has received a numerous awards and honours including. *The American Book Award for Arranged marriage: stories* (1995), *PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for Arranged Marriage: stories* (1995), *Light of India award, Times of India, (2011)*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's themes in most of her novels revolve around the problem of identity and immigration. In all her writings she had attempted to create a complete picture of the South Asian family life in America, she writes about what she knows and about what she feels from her experience as immigrant women. Divakaruni is best known for exploring the themes of love, friendship, self – discovery and alienation. Being an immigrant Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says in one of her interview that “*It is the immigration which makes me into a writer*”, and “*It gave a desire to tell my stories and also the stories of the immigrant people like me, it also gave me the need to look back to India*”, (CBD) .

Queen of Dreams

The novel “Queen of dreams” begins with an epigraph by Haruki Murakami as

“What we know and what we don't know are like

Siamese twins, inseparable...

Confusion, confusion.

Who can really distinguish between the sea and what's

Reflected in it? Or tell the difference between the falling rain and loneliness?”

- Haruki murakami, *Sputnik*

Sweetheart

This means the curiosity of every person always lies in trying to know about his/her past.

The novel "*Queen of Dreams*" (2004) is about the generation of immigrants' family living in America. This novel portrays an Indian-American experience of its characters Rakhi & Mrs. Gupta who are living in America as immigrants from India. Rakhi is the daughter of Mrs. Gupta and also a second generation of immigrant living in America struggling to manage her divorced life with sonny who is also an immigrant. Rakhi runs a Chai house with her friend Belle (Balwant) and her mother Mrs. Gupta (dream teller). Rakhi is fascinated in knowing the past life of her mother, but her mother hardly opens her mouth regarding her past life in India. The novel surrounds on the experiences of the two characters in their immigrant nation.

Generation of Immigrants in America

Mrs. Gupta is the first generation immigrant in the novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004), who is a dream teller "*I dream the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives*". (QD 7) living in California with her husband Mr. Gupta and her daughter Rakhi. She was born in India and had inherited the power of foretelling the dreams of other people and interpreting them to help the people. She then married Mr. Gupta and migrated to America and when she migrated from India she lost the power of interpreting the dreams and in America she loses her identity as a dream teller. Then Mrs. Gupta realises her mistake of choosing the life with Mr. Gupta which ruined her life and also she lost her identity as a dream teller. She then tries to find her way back to the caves (India) to regain her identity as a dream teller. Mrs. Gupta feels somewhat happy by taking the decision to leave America "*once i had made the decision to leave, I was no longer depressed*". (QD 292) But things were not in good terms that when she decided to return to India. she came to know that she was pregnant with Rakhi and cancels the plan "*Next I let go the possibility of return*". (QD 295) After when Rakhi was born she slowly started to regain the lost powers, and then she started to interpret the dreams of people and even helped them one by one. Finally she prefers not to speak unnecessarily and never about her past because she thought that it may result in losing her power again. Though Mrs. Gupta had regained her power of interpreting dreams, the art of dream telling was totally different than earlier. When she was in India she had the power to reveal the entire truth to their clients and gave solutions for their problems, but in an alien land (America) the only thing she can barely do is to know the dreams of people and advices them by saying precautions.

The second generation immigrant living in America in this novel is Rakhi Gupta who is a young artist, and the daughter of the dream telling mother Mrs. Gupta and divorced wife of sonny, who is also an immigrant living in America, whom with Rakhi fell in love and married later. Rakhi is the mother of a child named Jona, whom the novel portrays as a third

generation immigrant. Mrs. Gupta brought up Rakhi by keeping her ignorant about India and also about her experiences as a dream teller in India. She also says that it was only to protect her from hanging between the identities of being an American and an Indian – American “*I thought it would protect you if I didn’t talk about the past. “The way you wouldn’t be constantly looking back hankering, like so many immigrants do”.* (QD 89) But this only makes her to feel incomplete and also it creates a thirst for homeland. Rakhi had never visited India, but is determined to know the roots of herself and her mother in India in order to understand her identity as an Asian – American suitably. Rakhi is altogether a different kind of child, during her childhood, when her mother tells bed time stories, she (Rakhi) only preferred the stories of India from her mother “*I would have preferred the stories to have from my mother, and to have been set in Indian”.* (QD 4) Later in her college days she used to listen to Bengali songs by borrowing them, from the South Asian library. Though she doesn’t understand the meaning of the lyrics she used to listen to them by reading the translations provided by them.

Being a painter, most of her paintings are about Indian temples, city spaces and women in a market place and bus drivers at lunch “*until now, most of her paintings had been about India – an imagined India, an India researched from photography, because she’d never travelled there. She’d painted temples and city spaces and women in marketplace and bus drivers at lunch, but never trees not as her main focus”.*(QD 10) Thus Rakhi always wanted to know about India and she is very fond to express her identity as an Indian. Hence being a second generation immigrant Rakhi yearns for her motherland.

Torn Between Two Identities

After the death of Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi and Belle were too depressed and they were in lack of moral support, then they suffered a lot to cope up in their business at the Chai House where the customers are seemed to be lacking interest in Chai House and prefers Java, a new store which was running smoothly. By this time Rakhi’s father Mr. Gupta came to the shop to help the girls by preparing new dishes which are mostly Indian food items. Rakhi is wondered by her father’s intelligence in cooking and she asked him about his secret in cooking, then he narrates the story of his childhood life in India where he used to work in a small tea shop and from where he learnt all those things, then her father fulfils Rakhi’s thirst of knowledge about India. He also helped her by translating the “*Dream journals*”. This reveals the mystery of her mother’s past and from that Rakhi came to know the roots of her family in India which was her longing since from her childhood. Her father then renamed the Chai House as “*Kuruma House*” which itself is an Indian name. Days passed, things were getting well at the Kuruma House “*Business is brisk at the Kuruma House*” (QD 216). Soon Kuruma House developed and gain new customers and a group of musicians used to play

songs and even they dance to entertain the customers, which made the Kuruma House to look busy, this changed the Kuruma House into 'Kuruma House International'.

But on September 11 2001, a national tragedy in America had happened, after that the immigrant community in America started to suffer from the effect of political crisis. On that day things were not going as usual every shop were closed but Kuruma House International is still open and waiting for the customers' arrival. Rakhi shocked to see the nearby stores put up the American in their windows, under that they have written, '**GOD BLESS AMERICA**' and '**PROUD TO BE AMERICAN**'. Rakhi was surprised to see the customers of her shop coming in a different way rather than as usual, wearing western clothes *"Instead of kurtas and loose pants, dashikis and fez hats, today they're dressed in jeans. T-shirts. A 49ers cap"*. (QD 264) Then a group of men claiming themselves as patriots of America with bats and blades came marching towards the Kuruma House International to attack and broke everything, but when sonny and Mr. Gupta tried to stop them they started to attack sonny and the people around in the Kuruma House, and they got injured and they screams for help, and they even uttered they too were Americans by saying *"We're Americans, just the way you are. We all feel terrible about what happened"*. (QD 267) but those men didn't stopped attacking them they attacked Sonny and Jespal who were in the Kuruma House by saying that it was people like you (especially they points out the immigrant community people) who did this kind of terrorism in our nation *"You ain't no American ! It's fuckers like you who planned their attack on the innocent people of their country"*. (QD 267) then they went off hearing the alarm of police men coming towards the Kuruma House. After that incident everything collapsed in the lives of immigrant community people, they noticed the e-mails are being circulated by Indian organisations claiming not to wear your native clothes *"Don't wear your native clothes"*. (QD 274) the immigrants didn't sleep in the nights fearing the attackers at the Kuruma House International, the only thing that runs in Rakhi's mind is the word *"you ain't no American"* (QD 267), Rakhi questions herself who she was and what was her identity, *"But if I wasn't American then what was I?"* (QD 271) Rakhi felt very bad about the attackers at the Kuruma House and also the conditions of the immigrants who suffered from such type of humiliation from the Native Americans. The immigrants were playing a dual role by living in the new land experiencing unwanted humiliations and their yearning for their homeland where they can live without any fear. Though the second generation immigrants like Rakhi, Belle and Sonny were born in America itself, the Native Americans consider them as strangers who belongs to the minor group. Thus though they were born in America, the Indian Americans were considered as strangers or outsiders by the natives because of their ethnicity and the appearance. Hence the immigrant people like Rakhi, Belle and Sonny were in danger because of their ethnic origin is not America; the immigrants always struggle for their independence existence.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself is an immigrant, depicts both the dreams as well as the struggles of immigrants in America. Divakaruni detects and appreciates the hope for freedom and better life that America evokes in the minds of the immigrants. But at the same time, she genuinely records the sufferings of the immigrants especially of those people emigrated from India; she also focuses on the miserable lives of the immigrant people in their alienated land. The novel *Queen of Dreams* presents the mere sorrows of the lives of the Indian immigrant people. Chitra Divakaruni stands for every Indian immigrant people who are living abroad like America.

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