

Dilemma of Belongingness in Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee's

Queen of Dreams

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American Writer. Being a diaspora herself, her novels deal with the lives of immigrants. The present novel, *Queen of Dreams* (2004) deals with the experiences of First and Second Generation immigrants. Both First and Second immigrants face the dilemma of belongingness. First Generation immigrants are unable to cope with the alien environment and yearn to return back to their homeland. The dilemma of belongingness is more crucial in the Second Generation immigrants who do not have true knowledge of their homeland and their true identity.

Key words: Diaspora, immigrants, identity.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) written by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee takes into account the dilemma of first and second generation immigrants through the character of Mrs. Gupta, a first generation immigrant and her daughter Rakhi, a second generation immigrant respectively.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* begins with two epigraphs. The first epigraph is by Haruki Murakami which begins as:

What we know and what we do not 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?

The epigraph in a way suggests the curiosity of a person always trying to know about his/her past. The second epigraph is by Reetika Vazirani which begins as:

We say America you are
magnificent, and we mean we are heartbroken.

The lines highlight upon the status of immigrants in the host country.

The novel begins with the dream of Rakhi's mother who sees a snake, 'snake is symbol of rebirth', in Indian mythology "The snake was almost invisible as he curled and uncurled. Hieroglyphs, knots, ravelling's"(2)

It is clear that her life, which was mystery will be revealed since she did not disclose anything to her husband and her daughter, except she being an dream interpreter.

After Mrs. Gupta's death in a car accident Rakhi finds the dream journals of her mother in her room and thus the entire life of her mother is laid before her. Dream journals are the diary entries of Mrs. Gupta which gives a peep into her past life and her yearning to return back to India from where she had migrated. It is through the dream journals that readers come to know the problems of adaptation faced by first generation immigrants.

It is for finding her mother's past and finding her own identity that Rakhi starts reading the dream journals which she believes would help her to come out of her alienation and help her to carve an identity.

In the first dream journal, Rakhi's mother regrets her decision of coming to America and yearns to return back to India. She gets to know her mother being an orphan, her life in the slums, her having the gift of dream-telling, her being taken to the caves by a lady, where she was taught the art fully, her expertise in the art.

Rakhi also comes to know about the myths that form the basis of Indian society that is right from the beginning the individuals are taught the importance of boundaries in their lives. They are expected to obey their elders. The role of deities in shaping a person's life is also shown. It is through the myth of Neehar the Unfortunate, Rakhi comes to know that unlimited desires and disobeying the elders can lead one on the path of self-destruction. Through The myth of king Tunga –dhwaja Rakhi comes to know that not only respect to elders but respect to the deities also is an important part of Indian culture. King Tunga-dhwaja disrespect of deity made him to lose his kingdom. There are certain restrictions imposed on dream-tellers. First is that they are not allowed to marry, second is they are not allowed to dream on their own, third is that the dream-tellers have to live in proximity.

Rakhi comes to know about her mother's visit to Calcutta where she meets Rakhi's father, whose song enchants her and her falling in love with him. The elders of the caves come to know about her affair. So three choices are put before her, first is the elder would dream-walk in into my memory and remove the man's image from there (175). Second is, that she would stay with the man she had chosen "again the elder would adjust my memory so that I forgot the caves and all I'd learned there".

Mrs. Gupta promises that she would never marry the man so that in due-course of time, if she realizes her mistake, she could return back to the caves. So she deliberately chose the exilic condition for her.

After migrating to California with Rakhi's father. Rakhi's mother tries to see dreams which delude her. Her remaining sad all the time. Since she had lost her identity as the dream-teller. Her contacting other psychics so that she could regain her lost identity.

In America, Mrs Gupta starts interpreting the dreams of strangers but her art of dream-telling undergoes a change as in India the dream-tellers reveal the entire truth to their clients but here in an alien land, she only cautions her clients rather than providing them complete information.

Mrs Gupta keeps on craving for the dream-world and keeps the soil below her pillow the soil which she had brought from the caves, so that dreams should descend upon her. Mrs Gupta's longing for the culture can be seen as she preserves her identity by wearing salwaar- kameez, she cooks Indian food. As Rakhi recounts, "at home we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the way my mother kept her culture" (7).

As a result Rakhi exoticises India. As "Orientalists" exoticise "Occident". She forms an altogether different picture of India "an imagined India", an India researched from photographs, because she had never traveled there. She had painted temples and cityscapes and women in a marketplace and bus drivers at lunch" (10)

She even borrows cassettes of Bengali songs from the library "[...]a tape with songs about the Bengal monsoons: how the skies grow into the color of polished steel, how the clouds advance like black armies, or spill across the horizon like the unwound hair of beautiful maidens" (81).

As her mother has not allowed Rakhi an access to the mysterious side of her personality, she thinks that by knowing about India she would be able to see the hidden aspect of her mother's personality and would be able to relate to her fully. Though staying in

the same house, only once Rakhi got a chance to see the materials of her mother's dream world. Otherwise her mother hid it in such a meticulous manner that it was difficult for her to find them. The other thing that she had observed about her mother was that she rarely met her clients. She had seen her mostly busy over phones talking to strangers. Rakhi believes that by not giving her adequate information about India her parents have "doomed her to the bland life of suburban America." (43)

As Malathi in her research paper has mentioned, "Having imbibed the American culture by birth and Indian culture through blood Rakhi trapezes between the two cultures".(1) At one point, she think to become "interpretor of dreams", at another she believes that being a dream-interpreter would made her life complex as she would have to convey the message of dreams to those people who do not even believe in it. As Pushpa Dixit observes:

"For a second –generation Indian-American like Rakhi, the sensation of being in-between is particularly accentuated. Conflicts typically arise from the cultural clash between American individualism and Indian communitarianism"(4).

Rakhi decides to explore the dream-world on her own. She reads Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* but fails to find her answers.

Rakhi is a divorcee and cannot get rid of the thoughts of her ex-husband. Rakhi also realizes that though they have separated but Sonny still is a part of her family. Another incident which she is unable to forget- is her rape in the club where her ex-husband works as a DJ. This incident has left a deep impression on her psyche. As she remember. "That the worst part of the night was not the assault but the fact that he had not been there to rescue her from it. She had called to him for help, and he had failed her" (202).

Not only her family life is disrupted but her life as a painter has also come to a stand-still. When she tries to paint a eucalyptus tree (a symbol for growth) she is not able to paint it because of stagnation in her life. She longs for movement, fertility in her life. While painting she tries "[...] to mix in order to re-create that green, colors that are not green at all. It is the closest thing she knows to magic in a world that has disappointed her over and over with its mundane workaday habits..." (9)

Rakhi faces another problem, that is, her Chai house is on the verge of closure, due to opening of new restaurant in its vicinity. She is afraid because this does not mean losing her business only but it also means losing the custody of her daughter. Despite this she

is unwilling to discuss the problem with her mother. As she wants that this place should completely belong to her as dream world belongs to her mother fully: The Chai house is her sanctuary, the one place she has made her own. Much as she loves her mother, she does not want her taking it over- the way she (effortlessly, without a single word, without even wanting it) dominates other areas of Rakhi's life (47, 48) On Belle her friend's suggestion, she seeks her mother's advice, though her mother cannot help them through dreams. She helps them with her valuable suggestions. She accepts her fault of not telling Rakhi much about India "...The 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.... It pressed upon your brain like a tumor" (89) C Bharathi and S. Kalamani observes: "Taking responsibility for her choices in raising her daughter, Mrs Gupta also emphasizes her good intentions. Ironically attempting to protect her daughter from feeling like an outsider in America, she makes her feel like an outsider both to her mother's past and her family's identity" (135).

As she says:

The reason you do not have enough power to fight that woman there is that she knows exactly who she is, and you don't. This is not a real Chai shop'. –She pronounces the word in the Bengali way- 'but a mishmash- a westerner's notion of what's Indian. May be that's the problem. May be if you can make it into something authentic, you will survive. (89)

Though her mother talks about authenticity but she does not tell her the real meaning of it. For Rakhi authenticity means, to be like her mother that is the reason for her wearing her mother's old dupatta in her exhibition of paintings. When her mother enquires about the same, she thinks: Because it's from your other life, I wanted to say, the one that's magic, the one you won't let me enter. But I didn't want to spoil the moment. Besides, it wasn't all her fault. If I'd had the gift, the way she did, nothing could have kept me out. (95)

She allows her father to help them in resuscitating their business. She allows him to change the name of Chai house to Kurma House.

As Rakhi's father mesmerized her mother with his song. Similarly, his singing in Kurma House catches the attention of an immigrant who brings other immigrants with him. So the place becomes the meeting place of the immigrants who remember their pasts collectively with the help of song sung by Rakhi's father.

Rakhi also could see the behaviour, dresses of the immigrants and their longing for their host country. On seeing them the word “foreigner” comes to her mind because though they have similarities with Rakhi’s father but it is difficult for Rakhi to relate with him: “Some wear western clothes and some are in Kurta-Pajamas, but what I notice most are their faces... they hint at eventful pasts lived in places very different from this one, difficulties and triumphs I can’t quite imagine. The word foreign comes to me again, though I know it’s ironic. They are my countrymen”(194).

At the same time America was shaken with 9/11 attacks. Minor communities are looked down upon. As they see on T.V: “We ‘re sitting in front of the T.V Belle,my father, Jonna, Jespal, Sonny and I. We know we should turn the machine off, shouldn’t watch the replays over and over,the towers flaming and crumbling, crumbling and flaming[...]we look at them, then at each other in disbelief.How could this have happened _here, at home, in a time of peace? in America? (255)

Rakhi and her father decide to open the shop. Since, they believe their customers, who are all immigrants would be terrified in the same manner. They are advised by their neighbour to put a flag on their shop to prove their loyalty as American, but Rakhi refuses to do so. As she is of the view that she does not have to put a flag to show her patriotism.

At this time Rakhi receives four paintings by an anonymous sender makes her think that neither life nor art can be restricted to boundaries as in the novel she is seen trying to make green colours by mixing other colours. This painting shows an amalgamation of a lot of colours. Though the painting does not depict a rainbow, yet it shows the significance of every colour that is all situations in human life. And these paintings make her shed her binaries she was entrapped in and finally she is seen her status as a second generation immigrant.

The second painting shows is of a woman’s torso which in a way suggests Rakhi’s helplessness to come out of the helplessness to come out of the trauma to which she was subjected after her rape in the night club.

As this incident brought darkness and she was unable to take decision of her life and this trauma even lead to her taking the decision of getting separated from Sonny.

The third painting shows a background of neon yellow. It depicts that she would be able to see things clearly now.The fourth painting “...is made up of two parts, side by side The left given her the sensation of bending over and peering into a blue – green well, spheres

within spheres, like ripples. At the very center, where one would have expected darkness, a brilliant white light. The image on the right is that of a closed door with an arch above it. (or is it a sacred shape she cannot fathom, a lingam, a Stupa?) Blacks again, blues pale greens. At the top of the door, that same light. When she closes her eyes, she can see brightness, branded into her lids”(245).

This shows Rakhi’s present condition, in which she is caught, to find clarity of vision, she would have to open the door or cross the hurdle and give an outlet to her anxieties, fear, conflict and dilemma then only, she will be at peace with herself. It is only after receiving these paintings that Rakhi is able to give an outlet to her fear in the form of a painting which she draws the painting of her depict not only the attack on the world trade centre but it also showed that “Kurma House” is also a part of America. By this she wants to show the fear and anxieties in the minds of all people of America who experienced the tragedy of 9/11 attacks.

Her earlier paintings were mostly of lifeless things that is bus stands, paintings of market places, in India and when she draw a eucalypts grow and a mysterious man practicing Tai-Chi near it. She was not able to draw the hand movements of the man and later on after completing that she felt that she could not draw the hand movements properly and it seemed that the man was out of balance. Her paintings reflected the imbalance in her life. Rakhi practices it afterwards also though she believes that it has not transformed her fully but she is able to win victory upon her negative feelings as earlier her whisper voice used to give advice to her but now she has developed strength of mind and does not need the help of any whisper voice. Not only her relation with her father improves but she is able to forgive Sonny, who she felt early had failed her “She invites Sonny over and works for him- something she’d vowed she’d never do again. But there’s a warmth to being in her small kitchen, Jona and him and herself....”(276).

Finally she decides to revisit the Club to come out of the memories of her past and despite Sonny’s request to accompany her she decided to visit the place on her own, but unlike she had expected it. Divakaruni on being asked in one of interviews about Rakhi falling into a “victim’s” role and what must she do to change the direction of her life. Divakaruni to this replies that she wants her heroine to “Stop blaming herself. She needs to find her voice as an artist. She needs to learn to feel O.K about unsolved mysterious. She needs to forgive and exist again” and Rakhi does learn all of this.” (Divakaruni,8-2)

The club is a different place. People where she has entered are enjoying the time listening to the fusion music that Sonny has created. She would make out of the difference between the music which the musician play at Kurma House as it has raw quality attached to it but here music is used as a metaphor which is crossing barriers and the visitors of the club are also not only members of minor communities. As Brar observes:

Fusion music opens new vistas of life for Rakhi. It broadens her spectrum and expands her horizons....She has to move from periphery into the centre of cultural hybridity. She has to adopt and universe herself in it. She has to become a part of that music to be at peace with herself, her daughter, her husband, and, in a way with her dead mother. (115)

Rakhi's metamorphosis is complete in the end as she sheds her inhibitions and mixes well with the people of other communities. Rakhi too makes herself a part of this transnational community as she does not resist herself from dancing. Rakhi feels the friendliness in them as people are not letting the other's fall who stumble during dance. Rakhi finally realizes that one cannot live a life of isolation but one has to adapt to the circumstances. She also learns the lesson of forgiveness and adaptation which are required in life.

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