

Depiction of Father - Daughter Relationship in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

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Chitra Banerjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who have achieved enviable positions within a comparatively short creative span. As an immigrant, Chitra Banerjee seems to take pride in being less of an Indian and more of a westerner. Belonging to the group of young Indian writers that emerged on the literary scene with a postcolonial diasporic identity after Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's position as a South Asian writer in English is distinct as well established. As someone who has spent more time outside India than in it, she has been accepted as an Asian American writer, living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical work. Most of her stories, set in the Bay Area of California, deal with the experience of immigrants to the United States, whose voice is rarely heard in other writings of Indian writers in English. It may be suggested that the personal odyssey of Chitra Banerjee from the position of an immigrant is reflected in her writings at the thematic level.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the American reality: the souring of American Dream, fears and anxieties that the Americans are vulnerable to, and the immigrant Indian's response to the emptiness and loneliness that haunts the inhabitants of this modern wasteland. The novelist has dramatized the protagonists' search of identity in an alien country. The novel manifests when the migrants are placed alongside the Americans who have already undergone the first stage of settlement and transformation. If one were to thread the stories by underlining an aspect common to them, then it might be possible to suggest that it is the theme of immigration and transformation which is at their centre. The immigrants dream of wedding themselves to the American soil and becoming Americans, the troubles and tribulations they have to go through for achieving this goal notwithstanding. The novelist depicts the problems of the people emigrating to America and the dream of new life which tempts them to go there. America holds out to them the promise of a bright future, a world free from inhibitions, racial differences based on multinational customs, religions, traditions, languages, etc.

Divakaruni's sixth novel, *Queen of Dreams* (2004), utilizes the magic realist mode. Like Tilo of *The Mistress of Spices*, who uses spices to help customers solve their problems. She takes up the life of the Indian immigrants in the USA as the subject – matter of her novel *Queen of Dreams*. There she tries to vivify the image of women who have tried to assimilate the alien culture and have tried to accept the changed identity, overthrowing the Indian cultural heritage in which they took their first breath. What is most important is Mrs. Gupta's spirit of solving others' problems by not overthrowing her old culture

and adjusts herself with the surroundings of USA and her relationship with family members.

This gift of vision and ability to foresee and guide people through their fates fascinates her daughter, Rakhi, who as a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, is struggling to keep her footing with her family and with a world in alarming transition. Rakhi also feels isolated from her mother's past in India and the dream world she inhabits, and she longs for something to bring them closer. Burdened by her own painful secret, Rakhi finds solace in the discovery, after her mother's death, of her dream journals. "A dream is a telegram from the hidden world" (34), Rakhi's mother writes in her journals, which open the long-closed door to Rakhi's past.

As Rakhi attempts to divine her identity, knowing little of India but drawn inexorably into a sometimes painful history she is only just discovering, her life is shaken by new horrors. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 she and her friends must deal with dark new complexities about their acculturation. The ugly violence visited upon them forces the reader to view those terrible days from the point of view of immigrants and Indian Americans whose only crime was the color of their skin or the fact that they wore a turban. As their notions of citizenship are questioned, Rakhi's search for identity intensifies. Haunted by her experiences of racism, she nevertheless finds unexpected blessings: the possibility of new love and understanding for her family.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* reveals independent, introspective women who have accepted their life as immigrants and observe the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. The novel gives intimate first person accounts of second generation immigrant's existence and her relationship with her father.

Mrs. Gupta, the 'queen' of dreams, retains much of her Indianness. In fact, it is imperative she does so, in order to retain the powers she had acquired in India-the power of interpreting dreams – which otherwise would desert her. Notwithstanding to give up the powers, nor willing to reside in the caves with elders, Mrs. Gupta strikes a balance between the two choices. She resolves to choose the third where she could keep "the lesser ones, so that I might help others in the world" (175). But she was to promise never to marry through she could live with a man because only then. "In the eye of the Great Power, then, my spiritual essence would not be joined to his" (176). So rejecting the ceremonial wedding in the temple, she legally weds Gupta making him deeply displeased and making him feel they were not really married. To let the dream – spirit invade her, she is forbidden to squander her body in

search of physical pleasures. Later, the couple leaves for the United States, where the young dream – teller's powers leave her almost completely. Unable to dream, Mrs. Gupta loses her identity and sinks into depression.

It is at this time that the snake, the mother's guiding dream – spirit, comes to her in a dream. He tells her that "each time (the dream – teller) I had sex with my husband, or even slept in same bed, my powers – already weakened by being so far from the caves – dwindled further" (283). She decides to "break off all ties with (her) husband" and return to the caves to regain her talent. Shortly after, however, the dream – teller discovers that she is pregnant with Rakhi and cancels her plans. She tries to make up for it with him by concentrating on household duties.

The dream- teller's distance from her husband and daughter creates a malfunctioning family in which the daughter vainly strives for her mother's attention, and the father periodically sinks into the oblivion of drinking. Rakhi's relationship with her father is largely dysfunctional throughout her childhood. The intensity of the mother/daughter relationship overshadows the father's frail attempts to connect to his daughter. Although Rakhi realizes that her father is far more accessible to her than her mysterious mother, she often disregards him, preferring the company of her mother. Rakhi's curious description of the differences between her parents illuminates the dynamics in the family. As Rakhi puts it, Father, "was the tidy one in our household, the methodical one, always kind, the one with music and also "rarely expressed his opinions on matters pertaining to my life" (28).

Although the mother in *Queen of Dreams* hides her past in an attempt to prevent her daughter from experiencing an inevitable split between her Indian and American identities, she eventually realizes that her reticence causes her daughter to imagine her own ethnicity as well as her mother's native country through the western perspective of the majority culture. Tragically, it is only after the mother dies in a car accident that Rakhi and her father discover the mother's confessional dream – journal in which she finally allows her family a glimpse of her real self. Writing in Bengali and providing little cultural background regarding her native country, the mother assumes that the daughter will turn to her father to fill in the gaps in her narrative. Hence, the task of cultural transmission is finally redirected to the father and he assures "I can help you read them . . . If you want" (126). Explaining Indian culture to his daughter through the stories of his own life, the father answers Rakhi's basic need for ethnic belonging, mutuality, and continuity, thus helping her reconstructs her identity:

I'd always thought my mother was the mystery person in our household. But my chameleon father is turning out to have a few surprises in him, too (161).

Rakhi desperately wants to succeed as a painter or as a lucrative shop owner. Rakhi as a diasporic subject is compelled to live in a perpetual state of tension and irresolution because she is unable to sever her ties with the imaginary homeland though she has accommodated into the host culture.

Since Mrs. Gupta never shares her sorrows with Rakhi, the daughter does not develop the social skills necessary for effective communication with her family and friends. Moreover, since the mother teaches her daughter that "the best way to love people is not to need them" (45), Rakhi avoids turning to the people she loves for help. The mother's message undermines Rakhi's relationship with her husband Sonny, whom she has attempted to love in that "need - less way" (45). Rakhi wonders if her mother's words indirectly caused her to separate from her husband. Being accustomed to Rakhi's independence, Sonny "couldn't come through when she finally did require help?" (45). A DJ in a famous nightclub, Sonny invites Rakhi to come and hear him play. The evening, however, ends in a disaster; Rakhi is drugged and raped; the loud music and the commotion prevent Sonny from hearing his wife's cries for help. When, a week later, Rakhi tells her husband about the rape, Sonny refuses to believe her. Although it is hard for Rakhi to share her traumatic experience, Sonny does not notice the paralinguistic signals that reveal his wife's anxiety: "she kept running out of breath, her mouth grew dry and her face was hot as though it was she who'd done something shameful" (202). The husband's failure to interpret his wife's mental state correctly indicates the couple's basic inability to communicate that results in further alienation. Sonny's dismissal infuriates his wife; they have a fight, yet she never gets to the main reason for their separation. For Rakhi, "the worst part of the night wasn't the assault but the fact that he (Sonny) hadn't been there to rescue her from it. She'd called to him for help, and he'd failed her. She never brought it up again. Soon after that, she moved out" (202).

Since the mother (Mrs.Gupta) cannot actively participate in the familial reconciliation, it remains somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, the mother's journals initiate the reconstruction of the father-daughter bond. As the father translates the journals to Rakhi, the daughter comes to terms with her mother's death and slowly rediscovers her father's unique character and talents. Although at first, Rakhi blames her father for her mother's death, when the father and daughter start cooperating to save Rakhi's coffee shop, the daughter learns to trust her father and gradually relinquishes her anger. Sitting late into the night and sharing ideas, the father and daughter realize that it is the first time they have spoken to each other directly, without the mother's mediation:

Through their excitement they are dimly aware that this is a first-ever event. Before this, all their interactions took place in the presence of the mother, through her as it were. She was their conductor, their buffer zone, their translator. She softened the combative edges of their words and clarified their questions, even to themselves. I'll take care of it, she whispered without words. Don't you worry ... (165).

Rakhi develops in relation to her father deeply. While the mother's journals reveal her secrets, thus providing the daughter with the necessary context to understand her mother. The father's stories contribute to Rakhi's sense of alienation. When the father first tells her a story about India, the daughter:

She leans forward, her eyes shining. Here is the kind of story she has waited for her entire life, has begged, cajoled, badgered her mother for- in vain. And to think it was waiting all this time inside her father, the drinker, the singer, the skeptic who never believed in dreams. The parent she always dismissed, although affectionately, thinking he knew nothing she'd have any use for (168).

The father recollects his childhood ways and explains how he struggled in his life. Thus Rakhi is able to picture the dream land, Calcutta, where she wishes to visit at least once in her life. The sharing of the story has created something that stretches, trembling like the thinnest strand of a spider web between them:

The tea shop was a small-one – just a shed, really – at a crossroads, no more than a few wooden chairs and tables set in front of two large clay firepits. On the first Keshto, the owner-manager – cook, boiled tea all day in a large aluminum kettle. On the other, he would cook sweets, stirring the white granules of sandesh in a huge iron wok until they became a smooth paste, or squeezing the dough jilebis through a hole in a cloth onto sputtering hot oil. Some days he would fry chili pakoras instead, their pungent smell reaching all the way to the bus stop, making passengers late for work because no one could resist stopping for Keshto's pakoras. (168)

After the death of her mother (Mrs. Gupta) in the mysterious car accident, her father volunteers to help resuscitate 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" (165). While trying snacks and sweets, Mr. Gupta has been telling stories all week. Rakhi comes to know about his early days as a student in America, about the odd jobs he held to make money - a janitor in a hospital, a slot- machine repairman in a casino.

From time to time my father sings as he cooks, mostly songs from the movies, though sometimes a haunting tune that sounds far older will wind like wood smoke through the store. They make me restless, these tunes, as though there is something inside my chest that wants to escape. There's a feeling like pinpricks in my fingers, a need to paint – something I haven't been able to do since my mother's death. (180)

The intermingling of two cultures is strongly felt in the new emergence of the resplendent coffee shop under the banner 'Kurma Shop'. The resuscitation of the 'Chai House' and its survival was so crucial to Rakhi because the trusteeship of her daughter Jona depended on it. Married and separated –which is common in American culture - from Sonny, the number one DJ of popular night club, the rearing of her child swung in her favour because of the shop.

The violence unleashed in the American society on account of the bombing of the World Trade Centre takes a

great toll on the lives of the immigrant. Branded as terrorists for keeping the shop open they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. Obscene words are hurled at them: "Looked in a mirror lately? One of them spits. You ain't no American! It's fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson" (267). Ruminating over these words Rakhi reflects "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?" (271) All the built in feeling of being American is lost on that day of great loss to many people as they realize, "And people like us, seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of stranger, who lost a sense of belonging" (272). Rakhi, thus, suffers from multiple stresses and is forced to construct a gender identity where she has to locate herself.

After the catastrophe of fire in the 'Kurma Shop' she realizes her mother's words that, "Calamity happens so we can understand caring" (237). The bond of affinity develops after the calamity. Disaster makes the customers more informal in their relationship to Rakhi. The fact that they all belong to one country makes them relate and they form a distinct ethnic group and community. The customers begin to flock around the 'Kurma Shop' to hear Gupta sing their cherished old, loved Hindi songs. They rediscover the joy like an "unexpected oasis tucked into an arid stretch of dunes" (196) a pleasure they thought they would never find in America.

Rakhi's adoption to America starts as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one. Yet, living as an immigrant offers her immense possibility of creativity and she is empowered enough to create new narratives of belonging and identity. Her problem of complete assimilation to the host culture and tradition is complicated and complex. Though born in America, America does not offer her the passport of being an American. Yet, the stamp of a true American is seen in her. Her resilience of spirit while facing odds in life and accepting challenges creativity reflect the individualistic trait of the American. She makes acculturation her strength, as towards the end of the novel she learns to appreciate Indian instruments produce music that is not purely Indian but an American mix. She moves from here to a deeper philosophy of life which equips her to set right her estranged life with Sonny, her husband, in the dance hall "on the web of the world where Sonny and she have touched orbits once more" (307) paving the way for an integrated family life, very much similar to that in an Indian setup. By adopting American ways, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life, although temporarily she suffers a setback due to doubts about her sense of belonging and identity. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, on the other hand, chooses to adapt, to keep herself Indian to the core on American soil, to merely adjust to the American ways for a cause - a cause that is important to her, a high cost that she is willing to pay in order to preserve the power of dreams that enable her to reach out to people around her, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems. Her stance of adopting, though it breaks her normal home – life, becomes the channel of building up the homes of all sundry.

Art and identity are shown as interdependent components of Rakhi's self. It is only when she absorbs the new ways of artistic expression that she is capable of breaking the binaries

between what traditionally is seen as American or Indian. Her mother's writing and her father's stories, as well as the band's cosmopolitan music and the Indian-American paintings, provide Rakhi with alternative ways of self-definition. It is therefore through these meaningful exchanges with others that she realizes that there is more than one legitimate way to be ethnic or Indian American. The relational identity Rakhi finally constructs allows her to reinterpret the ethnic other not as different, exotic or inexplicable, but rather as an equal subject that has the power to acknowledge another individual as an independent self. After discarding the western, individualistic approach to herself, Rakhi succeeds in developing her unique painting style and starts creating authentic works of art that relate to her Indian – American experience. The Novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the possibility for establishing a bicultural

identity in spite of Mrs. Gupta's initial refusal to transmit her culture. Divakaruni's approach as an existential alienation is contingent with the view of South Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience.

Chitra Banerjee, in her fictional work, depicts father daughter relationship of a second generation Indian immigrant, Rakhi. More often than not she creates characters who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and float gleefully in the multi-cultural society of America. Divakaruni has herself claimed in many of her interviews that the diasporic subjects especially women are concerned about their identity, an identity which they try to reinvent constantly. Their diasporic status change their familial relationships.

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