

Cultural Conflicts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a creative writer of South Asian diaspora living in America. Being a diaspora writer, her novels exposes the troubled lives of migrants and their cultural differences between homeland and host land. She thinks that Indian immigrant women experience the shock of cultural rift caused by displacement sooner than men since they have to live their present life in the new country with their troubled memories of the past. Her novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) delineates the cultural conflicts experienced by the first and second generation migrants. First and Second generation immigrants together face the predicament of belongingness and they cannot culturally get settled. Divakaruni unearths the difficulty of first generation immigrants to assimilate with the alien culture which lead them to yearn to go back to their native country. Even the second generation immigrants are perplexed with their true identity in view of the fact that they do not have any idea about their homeland. The present research proposes to explore the cultural conflicts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*.

Keywords : diaspora, alienation, cultural conflicts, in-betweenness, assimilation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian novelist who is settled in America. Divakaruni, is not just a writer to voice, but a novelist to permeate the quintessence of cultural issues in her writings. She writes what she experiences in the hostland as an immigrant. She magnificently combines her Indian inheritance with her immigrant experiences of loneliness, troubled identity and uprootedness in her novels. She precisely handles the ordeals of confused identity linked with cultural hurdles. She concentrates on the diasporic Indian women jammed between two conflicting cultures. When an individual departs his/her native culture and goes

to a new culture, his/her previous tradition will conflict with the new one.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* represents the real America, its horrors, troubles and angst effectively. The Indian immigrants are scared about the blankness and lonesomeness of modern America. The author dexterously handles diverse diasporic issues of the immigrants who have left their motherland and struggled to acquire the alien country's culture and tradition. The novel exposes the life of three generations – the Indian born mother Mrs. Gupta, American born daughter Rakhi, a single mother in Berkeley who has grown up in America, and her American daughter, Jonaki. The novel focuses on search for identity, both personal and societal and also it craves to attain a sense of emotional gratification. Divakaruni has adeptly exemplified the clash of cultures.

The first-generation Indian immigrant Mrs. Gupta who resides in America is known as the 'queen of dreams'. She used to infer other people's dreams and gives a word of warning to them about the impending problems. Mrs. Gupta keeps hold of her Indian roots to a greater extent. She refuses to have a ceremonial wedding as she has promised that she will never marry a man, because "In the eye of the Great Power then my spiritual essence would not be joined to his" (176). She is permitted to live with a man, so she legally weds Mr. Gupta. This makes Mr. Gupta extremely unhappy and he starts to realize that they were not actually married. Shortly, the couple moves to the United States.

In California, Mrs. Gupta feels more and more alienated and separated from her capacity. There Mrs. Gupta's power of interpreting dreams slowly goes away from her. Not capable to dream, Mrs. Gupta loses her own identity and becomes disheartened. Though the conjugal relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Gupta is not cordial, they live together in the same residence, because of their

love towards their daughter Rakhi. She conceals her past to stop her daughter from experiencing the unavoidable fissure between her Indian and American identities.

However Rakhi, Mrs. Gupta's daughter is an American by birth, who strongly believes India as her motherland. The second generation Rakhi and her husband Sonny also lead an unhappy life. Rakhi has got divorce from her husband and started earning from her coffee shop. Though she loves her homeland, she is uncertain about her belongingness. Rakhi has been brought up and educated entirely in the American way by her mother, but she cannot stick to the American life comprehensively. She is only interested to be familiar with the Indian way of life. Divakaruni says in one of her interviews: "... I share an interest in the lives of the second generation – the children of Indian ancestry who are born in America. How do they relate to India? How are they different from their parents? (Chakaravarty 197)

Rakhi's pursuit of identity is interrelated with her search for roots in India, her inherited homeland. Rakhi is a daughter, a girl's mother, proprietor of a coffee shop and an ardent painter. In fact all those identities do not categorize her because of her constant rummage around her ancestry. She is very much interested in knowing her parents' life style in India and she wishes to visit the country. The novel gives a picture of the troubled psyche of Rakhi who is caught between her traditional and modern identity. Viney Kirpalopines: "For modern or traditional, it is the eternal quest of man to seek, to put down roots somewhere, to possess some point of space to which he can relate emotionally or psychologically" (Kezia 45).

Mrs. Gupta did not reveal her past life of a dream-teller to her daughter. Even after getting settled in America, she follows Indian way of life. Rakhi says, "At home we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture" (7). On the other hand, Mrs. Gupta has expected Rakhi to grow as a pure American, but her daughter is adamant in discerning the real identity of her. Rakhi says: "As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be an interpreter. But when I turned twelve, 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 Indian" (35).

Mrs. Gupta was an orphan who has faced the cruelty of hunger and denial in the slums. She has saved herself from being a deprived woman by

becoming a dream teller. She says: "It afforded me some protection in that place where orphans were used in cruel ways" (230). Rakhi can find out her identity when she recognizes Mrs. Gupta's actual life. She is really upset by the sudden death of her mother. At that time, she comes to know about the dream journals of her mother which make her to value her feeling of belongingness. Those journals interpret her mother's authentic identity of a dream teller. Besides, the stories related by her father help her to unfasten the mysterious knots of her uncertain journey to recreate her cultural identity.

Rakhi is surprised when she discovers that her daughter can envisage the future of other people. At this juncture, she starts to realize that she does not know anything about her mother as well as her daughter's talents. Without any prejudice she helps her daughter to practice her power and create an identity as a dream-teller. By doing this, she has recreated a balanced life between past and present. It is very difficult for Rakhi to adapt and assimilate with the American culture. Though she was born and brought in America, she cannot consider her as an American. At last she makes up her mind to restart her American life again and goes to the Club.

The club is a place where she can meet different people. They used to enjoy the fusion music that Sonny has produced. There the music is used as a symbol for crossing cultural barricades. Rakhi's endeavour to live as an American is evident when she appreciates the Indian instruments which generate a fusion of Indian and American music. As Sheth 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).

Though in the beginning she was perplexed by her confused identity, gradually she becomes successful in her life by accepting American way of life. Nair comments: "Through assimilation and acculturation, an Indian immigrant woman in America can create an identity for herself. But this is an identity that is constantly evolving being open to change and perpetual motion" (Kezia 59). Rakhi's transformation is absolute at the end as she discards her discomfiture and joins with people of other communities. Rakhi becomes a part of the transnational culture by moving socially with them and accepts to dance in the club. In the end Rakhi understands that it is not possible for an individual

to live alone and he/she has to become accustomed and acclimatized to the culture of new country.

Divakaruni is successful in presenting a fair account of cultural conflicts of immigrants in an unfamiliar land. The success of immigrants is not to run off from the intricacies of life but to face the trials and tribulations fearlessly and courageously in the new ambiance. Queen of Dreams recounts the characters' search for their authentic image; and the fluctuation between the conventional values of their home land and the ethics and ideals of their settled country. This is a confrontation with the cultural ethos in the process of finding an immigrant's authentic identity. Rakhi renovates herself and accepts both the cultures of her native land as well as hostland. She can love India as it is her ancestral country, and she can also adore and assimilate with American culture because she realizes that it is her place at present.

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