

Emotional and Intellectual Oscillation in Chitra Banerjee's Queen of Dreams

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Abstract

A prolific South Asian diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee is a U.S. resident. In her fictional works, we can witness almost all the diasporic issues such as hybridity, identity, racism, assimilation and acculturation. It is important to understand the idea of boundary in order to comprehend diaspora. Since Renaissance, man has been indulged in an attempt to configure and reconfigure the world on the basis of the geographical knowledge by the instruments like compass, telescope and Ptolemaic maps. This effort is further concretized in locating all the countries in a single space known as globe.

Keywords: *Diaspora, oscillation, Indian, immigrant, belongingness*

The knowledge of space and time was furthered with the human development eg. the theories of Galelio, Copernicus and Descartes. Diasporic literature is a desire to take one step further, to measure what cannot be measured. In this process the diasporic writers measure the mental space with the memory, vision or myth of their homeland. The emotional and intellectual oscillation of the diasporic consciousness between 'here' and 'there', forms a state of dual consciousness that lays emphasis on describing experiences, state of mind and sense of identity. The hyphenated identity gives rise to multiculturalism and the identity oscillates between the binaries of culture, time, space and nation. The text I chose for my research is Queen of Dreams which exhibits the Indian American experience of the struggle in a Bengali family in America that swings between the influences of the new culture and the impressions of the old culture. The East and the West could be seen jostling in the tale with trials and tribulations. Queen of Dreams thus makes an apt study for the diasporic sensibilities of the first-generation migrant, Mrs Gupta. She came to a foreign land with her mystic skill of interpreting dreams. It was hard for her to decide to marry and leave India as her ethnic community was not in the favour of her marriage. But her decision to marry and leave India can be seen as a pull factor for better prospects. She might have thought of immense possibilities which America as an alien space may offer to her. Without knowing about the intricacies of

their occupation we still get an idea through the narrative that they are not very affluent. Divakaruni has been interested in the magical parts of Indian culture, in folk beliefs, age-old traditions and how they are incorporated into modern times and settings. The unexplainable, enigmatic, and magical India has been portrayed in the dreams concerning caves, snakes, and spiders to construct a world that subverts the distinction between human and animals, culture and nature, the human and the divine. She counsels the people around her in America, but she is different from the American Psychiatrists as she does not charge a fee. Despite interpreting her own dreams, she seeks out strangers and enter their dreams to counsel them." 'Once she decides on a goal, she never let's go. 'like the tortoise, my father would say, 'in the tale of the hare and the tortoise ' ". (QD32) She helps all but she cannot help Mr Gupta leave liquor. "He was alcoholic and she could do nothing to stop him though she could grow mad periodically at him and threw his bottles. He was fond of Indian music." From time to time, he could sing along- he had a powerful baritone- a rapt and distant smile on his face." (QD32) At times he would feel sorry and sing in a Bollywood style kneeled on his knee with open arms "Mere sapno ki rani "Rakhi would try to interpret this as "queen of dreams or my queen of dreams". (QD33) The dream metaphor is active throughout the text. The book opens with a description of the Dream Journal that interprets snakes in the dream. The interpretation of the dream leads to the conclusion that foretells death. Death, if understood, can lead to a beginning. It is this death of Mrs Gupta that opens new dimensions of understanding and reconciliation in the family. It signifies a fresh start with a mature understanding of the cultural conflict and renewal of identity.

The protagonist of the novel is Mrs Gupta. However, the narrative is about her daughter Rakhi. It revolves round her survival in an American society including her dilemmas related to Indian culture. It also underlines the American upbringing and the past of her mother in the form of Dream Journals written in Bengali. These were comprehended after the death of Mrs. Gupta, by her husband. In this family, Rakhi grows up like an American

by birth with a feeling of belonging to her land of birth. She always longed to take up her mother's task of interpreting dreams or her Indianness. "To be an interpreter of the inner realm seemed so Indian. 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." (QD35) She helps her mother in washing vegetables, making bed and other household works but could not convince her mother to learn the mystic art of interpreting dreams. The reader comes to know about her as a young divorcee and a struggling artist, with a small tea shop also known as "The Chai House". She is presented to the readers as a painter obsessed with the antiquity that connects her to the roots of India. She and her mother are different in the art they hold. "Perhaps this is why she dreams and I paint. Because dreams look to the future, and paintings try to preserve past." (QD31) Her survival is dependent on the Chai Shop as it is the financial income derived from this place that will grant her the custody of her daughter Jona. Her marriage with Sonny is unhappy though they were both of Indian origin and she fancied that he will connect her to India. While painting the eucalyptus grove, the smell of rain reminds her of the South Asian tape with songs of Bengal monsoon.

"How the color of the skies grow into the color of the polished steel, how the clouds advance like the black armies, or spill across the horizon like the unwound hair of a beautiful maidens. I loved that tape, even though I could understand only about half the wordsThey were hiding things from me, beautiful, mysterious, important.....What cruel karma had placed me in the care of the two Indians who never mentioned their homeland".(QD82)

She craved for a space that is personal and Indian. She got that space while painting her sensibilities. Her dream of exhibiting her paintings in the famous Atelier Art Gallery is fulfilled. Rakhi feels that her Indian outfits won't suit the occasion so she borrows a black gown from Belle with spaghetti straps. Belle's stiletto heels, mascara, lipstick and the Indian black and silver scarf that belonged to her mother's other life makes her perfect "just the right fusion of East and West". (QD93) Her friend Belle is a second-generation Indian American, her partner in business and best friend. But she is in sharp contrast to Rakhi in her pro-American attitude. Belle is opposite to Rakhi as she wishes to shed off her Indian identity which she feels like a baggage. Belle is different from Rakhi as she wants to escape from all the pressure that is put upon her for being an Indian. She tells Rakhi that her parents love to talk endless about India as if it is a paradise. She was given two dollars extra to go to the language class at

gurudwara. Rakhi wants to learn Bengali but she is not encouraged in the family however in her Chai House Rakhi could be herself dreaming and fascinated by what India has to offer as expressed candidly "before I die I would like to go to India".(QD83)

The crisis occurs when the Chai shop finds a competitor cafe named Java in the close vicinity. The identity of the Chai Shop is endangered by the opening of an American brand that is famous for its food chains in the U.S. Java the new café chain had the American features. It allowed its customers to remain unknown. It offered a "comfortable company of a roomful of nameless, faceless folks just like themselves, happy to be left alone, to gaze into the middle distance, to notice no one."(QD85) On the other hand the customers at Chai House were treated with a familiarity of belonging, with homemade cookies, custom-ordered coffee, hand finished furniture. "Our customers allow us into their lives just as we've invited them into ours".(QD85) The issues of assimilation and acculturation take a new shape in the form of existential crisis and racial discrimination. The Chai Shop becomes a living space where the existential crisis is seen in its whole. Rakhi had already experienced the pain of sticking to Indian identity in the form of separation from her husband. This was the first jolt she felt because she adhered to Indian values. She felt threatened for the second time in the shape of a rival coffee shop. The newly opened café gained popularity, and the Chai Shop customers swiftly flooded Java for the American-ness and low-priced food items. The immigrant experience of Rakhi heightens with the existential realities of geographical displacement. It is also a crisis because it directly affected the emotional and physiological space. She needed her mother's advice to overcome this crisis in her life. Mrs Gupta counsels her to introduce some new concept. She advised her to rejuvenate "it with spirit and energy, something that she could not pronounce but meant to bring people back in." And you must do it quickly before you grow weaker" (QD88). The business was declining as Mrs Gupta says:

"You do not have enough power to fight that woman where she knows that who exactly she is, you don't. This isn't a real chai shop but a mishmash, a Western notion of what's Indian, and maybe that's the problem. Maybe if you can make it into something authentic, you'll survive". (QD89). Rakhi angrily replies, "And whose fault is it if I don't know who I am? It has wrapped sense of what's Indian?" (QD89) Mrs Gupta admits her fault and acts and says:

"You're right. It is my fault that I brought you up wrong. I thought it would protect you, but I didn't think about the

past. That way, you wouldn't constantly be looking back, hankering, like those other members spitting 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 were, I made it into something far more significant. It crowded other things about of your mind. It pressed upon your brain like a tumour" (QD89).

The unpleasant argument between the mother and daughter did not help the situation because the mother being a mystic could not spell everything out to her daughter as she was expecting. Unfortunately, Mrs. Gupta did not live long enough to be able to bring India to Rakhi. The death of Mrs Gupta came as a blow to Rakhi because she was confident that her mother could resolve the problem she is facing for the crisis in the Chai shop. Mother's sudden demise in an accident changes her entire viewpoint. The death introduced in the beginning of the novel gains significance here. Mrs Gupta's death changes the situation in the favour of the family, for they can now exhibit their Indian traits to give momentum to the Chai House and the family relations. To follow the Indian tradition of taking the ashes to a river, Rakhi brings her mother's ashes to the Pacific Ocean. Her husband, Sonny accompanies her to the cliff below which Pacific hurled against black and gleaming. Rakhi fondly bids goodbye to her mother saying "I throw the handful of ashes as far as I can, but the wind blows most of it back at my face.....Atleast now some of her is in me". (QD134) This new beginning of Rakhi with indianness gifted by her mother after her death, revives the café. Mr Gupta, with his Indian recipies, Indian music and the Indian tales from Bengal, gets involved in the revival of Chai shop with newly named Kurma House.

"The Chai House into an Indian Snack Shop, a 'chai dokan'- as it would be called in Calcutta. They will model it after the shop the father worked in so many years ago, with a few American sanitary touches thrown in with Indian pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki. Mihidana "(QD 165).

Another interesting aspect of the novel that a child shares with the parents. The bonding is not just physical but also deeply emotional. Rakhi's mother never told her about the mysterious land and said, "India wasn't mysterious. It was just another place, not so different, in its essentials, from California" (QD4) to respond to the queries that the little girl Rakhi had. The curiosity about her parent's native place always haunted Rakhi. A fascination for India always gained significance to Rakhi to know about the past of her mother and father, of the place they belonged to This was another reason why she married Sonney, a

youndman of Indian origin. Although Mrs. Gupta could not help the child as long as she lived, Mr. Gupta brought the lost glory of native place back to Rakhi. India is revived and refreshed in his storytelling during the reformation of the Chai shop as Kurma House. "Tell me about the shop you worked and it plunged into her first Indian story." (QD166)She has longed for the stories from her mother, but she sensed a new talent in her father, besides drinking, singing, and being a sceptic. Thus, listening to her father became a moment of awe and wonder. The storytelling becomes indicative of the Indian tradition of telling stories to children, which is part of an oral culture that children in foreign lands miss too much.

Kurma House became popular, and earning became smart. The clients who visited Kurma House were mainly Indian. She observes, "while some wear western clothes and some are in Kurta pyjamas. Lines on the face showing their age, giving a hint about their living in an alien land in many difficulties and fewer triumphs" (QD193-4). Mr Gupta has taken over as the main chef preparing dishes specific to Bengal, a talent he equipped in Bengal from Keshto. With this, he adds to the ambience with Indian music and songs. Rakhi finds that the clients share the same skin color. "They're my countrymen; we share the same skin colour"(194). The ethnic consciousness bound the group. It was a small group of Indian immigrant audience who regularly visits the shop demanding Mr Gupta to sing songs from old Hindi movies underlines their constant effort to build the lost boundaries in the hosting space (America). It also helps them preserve their cultural hangovers, often dwindled by the dominant culture, to overcome the identity crisis with all its complexities.

These ethnic trans-national identical showed their solidarity for the first time during the fire disaster at 'the Kurma House ' during which Rakhi also identified her Indian roots partially. The unbelievable, overwhelming support and encouragement provided by the customers offer her a clear picture of where she belongs, although she is reluctant to accept it.

"Don't worry the shop will be in mint condition before you know it. Meanwhile, we'll keep coming; whatever food you can manage to make, we'll buy. And we'll sing and play and keep your spirits and ours up. We're all brothers and sisters here, after all, bhai-bahen" (238)).

Rakhi's quest for identity rises when she looks at her reflection in the glass. She finds her brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with dark circles familiar but suddenly alien "But I wasn't American then what was

I?"(QD271). She negotiates her identity as Indian and as American by a constant effort of assimilation and acculturation. Rakhi understands the reality of her being different from the native Americans. This realization becomes more grounded with the 9th September 2011 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. The decision to open the shop after the attack offended the frantic nationalists of the U.S. They opened to draw support of each other in this tough time and feel healed in the company of like people. She refuses to put an American flag as a symbol of solidarity. She tells Belle, "I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I'm American! I'm an American already. I love this country hell, it's the only country I know, but I'm not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passer-by" (QD264). The violence in Kurma House after the 9/11 attack made them rethink the new complications of acculturation. They are manhandled for their skin tone and ethnic wear. This incident is a blessing in disguise as it binds the family with the new possibility of love and understanding.

It combines the elements that Divakaruni is famously known for. The tale succeeds in two levels. She effectively

takes the reader into an immigrant culture, but she also shows the common ground in a world that some would find foreign. The concept of home, nation, cultural identity, and belongingness to the place of ancestry is not same for each individual. *Queen of Dreams*, beginning with the mother's point of view and ending with the daughter's, seems to arrive at a new level of self-recognition. It takes you on a journey of an immigrant in a foreign land showing his struggles both mental and physical combined with the generation gap. The gap widens as the cultural awareness deepens. The conflict raises from identity crisis to a higher level of existential crisis. We always hear Indians settled outside India that you can take an Indian outside India however you can never take India out from Indian. The novel at a subtle level has validated the statement that despite the conscious of efforts of hiding the roots just to nourish the tree, the tree kept bowing to discover its roots. It is indeed a journey of self realization, self-identification and above all self- fulfilment.

Work Cited

- 1 *Divakaruni Chitra; Queen Of Dreams ; ABACUS Publication, 2005*