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Identity Crisis and Resilience of Immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

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Abstract: This paper explores the identity crisis of immigrants and focuses on one of the most profound themes of cultural displacement. Immigration to foreign nations and dislocation from the homeland has produced numerous studies on diasporic experiences in the recent post-colonial literature. The main objective of these writings is to explore immigrants' internal conflicts, confusion, pain, and tension. This body of work has emerged as an inner voice of diasporic authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many other renowned writers in the field. These writers expose their personal experiences and channel their identity crisis, alienation, mental trauma, dislocation, and a sense of belongingness and ties to their homeland, particularly India, into their work. Immigrants from other nations often perceive the United States of America as a land of promise. This notion makes them march toward this nation in pursuit of a better life. America provides numerous opportunities for aspiring immigrants who are in search of better lifestyles, job opportunities and economic liberty. However, migration often results in a loss of natural identity in the minds of the individuals and creates multiple concerns in their new life in the alien land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams (2004)* addresses the identity crisis of first and second-generation immigrant communities. In her works, Divakaruni more sensitively handles feminine concerns of nativity, racial discrimination, generational and cultural conflicts and assaults. Her reflection on immigrants' experiences exposes that trauma is a mental suffering rather than a physical one.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Assimilation, Alienation, Belongingness, Trauma, Cultural Conflict, Immigrant, and Displacement.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, being a diasporic writer, has first-hand immigrant experiences. She portrays the internal conflict and confusion of her characters and their inner struggles in balancing between two cultures, the Indian and the Western cultures. Her personal experiences help her to understand the hostile situation and shocking experiences faced by immigrants in a foreign land. She chooses women as protagonists in most of her works and displays their strong will and resilience. Divakaruni explores the mental trauma of her characters while surviving in a hostile environment; they often rediscover themselves by marching towards self-discovery. Her works deal with immigrants' traumatic experiences in the United States and draws inspiration from her personal encounters. Her experience of displacement from her home culture allows her to write the minute details about migration and its impact on the minds of the migrated individuals. Pushpa Dixit points out that diasporic literature often portrays two dimensions of the relationships of the immigrants, "One, the relationship to its motherland, which gives rise to nostalgia and reminiscences; second, the forged relationship with the new land and its people, which give rise to conflicts and multiculturalism" (Dixit 111).

In each novel, Divakaruni skilfully addresses the complex issues of diasporic women and expresses their hardships and the way they have been compromising and adapting themselves in an alien land. Through her characters' predicaments, she deals with universal issues such as racial discrimination, cultural displacement, identity crises, generational conflicts, and the struggles of immigration and assimilation. Her works also provide critical insight into both Indian and American cultures and address the issues of displacement. K.S. Dhanam points out:

Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions … she also contrasts the lives and perceptions of first generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos. Her writing course with her identifications is with a brave new world forging to life. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia. (62)

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni presents a mesmerizing story of the female protagonist Rakhi who is entangled between East and West aspirations. She tries to make both ends meet and ultimately fails in contradictions. Her struggle to fulfill the aspirations of her daughter, Jona, is the central motif of the narration. Her second-generation immigrant status in the United States increases her attachment, affection, and fascination with the homeland which leads her to experience dislocation in the foreign land. Rakhi's obsession and attachment towards her homeland, India, creates contradictions in her present life and evokes feelings of loss, cultural displacement, and identity crisis. This paper brings out the diasporic elements in general and highlights the traumatic experiences of expatriates. It examines that Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* captures the raw feelings of immigration and explores immigrants' trauma of dislocation, identity crisis, cultural displacement, desperation for home culture, feelings of isolation and disconnection, race and class discrimination and cultural clash.

The novel, *Queen of Dreams* primarily deals with cultural displacement which is also interlinked with multiple themes and sub-themes that complicate and enrich the narrative of the novel. One of the main issues in the diasporic immigrant experience is identity crisis which is the main theme of discussion in this article. In *Queen of Dreams*, the generational indifference among mother and daughter relationships prevents them from being close to each other. Rakhi's mother, Mrs. Gupta is a dream interpreter who refuses to discuss her dreams and her life in India with Rakhi which increases the deceptive illusion of India in her. As an immigrant, the protagonist Rakhi stands for self-assertion and self-respect in the foreign land. She maintains Indian socio-cultural ethos and keeps values, liveliness and dignity of Indianness. Mrs. Gupta emblematically represents the traditional Indian mother who is filled with Indianness in her attitude towards her daughter, she reveals her innate feeling by stating, "Being different doesn't mean that you are weird." (Divakaruni 8). Rakhi experiences a sense of not belonging due to the cultural differences while accessing the social institutions when she is insulted by her friend "you guise are weird" (Divakaruni 99). This represents not only her strangeness but also the racial prejudice she is experiencing in the new land. This increases her insecurity and creates the feeling of outsider filled with suspicion and disbelief.

Divakaruni skilfully highlights the cultural differences of both nations. Rakhi's inability to find her roots and search for identity in the foreign culture plays a pivotal role in the development of the novel. Whenever Rakhi's mother shares stories about India, describing its rich cultural heritage, tradition, and spirituality, Rakhi develops an illusory perception of India. She was born and raised in the USA and never visited India. Her lack of personal and first-hand experience develops an obsession with her homeland which creates unbearable pain in her. On the contrary, Mrs. Gupta, the queen of dreams, retains her roots and keeps her Indianness in her. She retains her heritage and creates an existentialist sense of identity. As an Indian immigrant, she socially and culturally adapts to life around her with her nostalgic reminiscences of her past life in India which safeguards her cultural identity.

Though Mrs. Gupta moves from India and is ready to lead an insignificant life as an immigrant denotes the true Indian sense. She is very much aware of the social expectations from Indian women which are filled with so many social, cultural, and familial responsibilities. They are often exploited by imposing patriarchal norms and experience oppression under its influence. In order to overcome all difficulties Mrs. Gupta has decided to uproot herself from her native culture and settle down in the land of opportunity with the immigrant status:

What constitutes the making of a character or a personality is the pressure that the existing social order exerts on the inner psychic structure of an individual. The inner character prototype tends to quiver in a disintegrating sociological process of identity formation. Experiencing life mostly in a post war regimented and conformist society, the identity of the Post-modern individual becomes anonymous. (Ravichandran 19)

Mrs. Gupta becomes a dream interpreter and willingly accepts her life as an immigrant woman, ignoring the life filled with responsibilities by stating, "What I had seen of wifehood made of seem a draught life all day at the beck and call of laws, husband children, wives worked endlessly and without hope of praise though if things went wrong there was always plenty of blames. The inevitable life of wives the one carried out in darkness in closed bedrooms" (Divakauni 146). Mrs. Gupta is ready to experience the harsh reality of migration and unwilling to fulfill the social expectations of Indian women.

Being raised in the United States as a second-generation immigrant, Rakhi never feels a sense of connection to the host culture, she feels disconnected between her American surroundings and her Indian heritage. Her longing to find her roots and her obsession with India stem from the fondness she developed from her mother towards her home culture. She struggles to resolve the cultural differences though she is unaware of her root culture, and feels suffocated in the foreign land. After the death of her mother, she feels a sense of loss which also intensifies her longing for a connection to her home culture. The absence of mother's love and the loss of connection to the cultural heritage of her mother create agony.

The protagonist, Rakhi has not visited her home culture but her paintings resonate with her thoughts about India. She creates an imaginary vision of India through her mother's fondness for her cultural heritage. Rakhi is caught between the two cultures which results in several complex psychological outcomes. She struggles to balance the expectations of two distinct cultures which create a sense of internal conflict and confusion about her own identity. The Indian immigrants face an identity crisis due to cultural differences, experiences of discrimination and racism, economic and social status and political problems in the alien countries. When an uneventful incident takes place like the Twin Tower attack in the USA or political problems arise, during such a crisis, immigrants are ill-treated and perceived as threats to the host country. In *Queen of Dreams*, Indians are treated like terrorists following the attack on the Twin Towers in America. The protagonist, Rakhi is forced to feel insecure though she was born and raised in the same country and is compelled to forsake her American identity.

The cultural consciousness of second and third-generation immigrants is a complex phenomenon. They reflect a blend of their home cultural heritage, traditions, and the influences of their host cultures. They do not have any first-hand experience with their home culture which makes them struggle between their own identity and the past. Rakhi's longing for Indian identity pushes her to give up on a monocentric cultural identity in the United States that conflicted and alienated her. This forced American identity on her by her parents denied her access to a complete her cultural heritage and blurs sense of self. Rakhi's association with American culture is a strategic deliberate attempt by her mother who forced her to adapt with the new culture in order to safeguard her from the turmoil of living between two cultures. Rakhi's mother consciously keeps herself away from the American lifestyle and cultural practices and preserves her Indian cultural identity through her dresses and food. The struggle between two cultures is a prevalent theme in the lives of many immigrants. Rushdie sums up the experience of the expatriates:

We must also do so in the knowledge –which gives rise to profound uncertainties– that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of mind. (4)

Rakhi finds it challenging to fit into both cultures which make it difficult to define her cultural identity independently of these cultural influences. This internal conflict leads her to a crisis of self-identity. Her inability

to navigate into either culture asserts her outsider status which leads her to undergo a sense of alienation, loneliness and isolation. She undergoes several traumatic experiences while shaping her identity in the host culture. She faces numerous challenges while navigating her life between the two distinct cultural worlds. She faces racial discrimination, experiences cultural displacement, clashes between the traditional values and the modern American lifestyle, loss of cultural connection and absence of emotional support. She experiences several traumatic experiences, challenges and struggles to meet the requirements to shape her identity.

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