

## WHISPER OF RELATIONSHIP IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

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### Abstract

*Diaspora often seems to question themselves as to who they are – the proud and certified natives of the country of their adoption or the country they have their roots in. They dwindle in the face of their belonging which in long run of time affects their relationship with their family members and the natives of the country they have migrated to. This paper argues the difference between the approaches towards maintaining the love and friendship bond in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel Queen of Dreams. Here, I explore the rupture in the relationships despite the genuine efforts in the perspectives of the first, the second and the third generation diaspora as depicted in this novel.*

**Key Words:** Diaspora, relationship, maintenance, efforts, approach, rupture.

### Introduction

The immigrants face the differences in the perspectives of the two or the subsequent generations – the parents and the children and the grand children. The generational gap that inevitably exists between two generations becomes more acute in the case of immigrants. The older generation's experience of their settling and forming bonds of friendship with the natives, their efforts to keep ties with their family in their homeland is very different from that of the younger generation which has only experienced the present as the new homeland where they are currently living. In this discourse, the family environment sometimes gets disturbed and the gap between the two generations become noticeable. The rupture in the perspectives of the first generation diaspora and the second or third is acutely felt. Here, R. Radhakrishnan in the essay "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora" argues that the older generation cannot refer to the Indian value system to solve the problems of the younger generation, neither can the younger generation "indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about 'where they have come from'" (123). Hence it is necessary for members of both the generations to bridge the gap by empathizing with the other and appreciating the experiences of the other. Due to this gap in the understanding and perspectives of the different generations of the diaspora, their family relationships and social bonds are often under stress.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her sixth novel *Queen of Dreams* refers to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the narrative that affects the relationships in the Gupta family as well as their relationship with the Americans. Gayatri Spivak comments that women are not in a better position than men in their diaspora state. She states that diaspora women are “super dominated, super exploited” (249). She believes that women may never get complete satisfaction, nor enjoy the advantages and find it difficult to adjust to the new surroundings as compared to men. She continues that the diaspora women are “never the full subjects of and agents in civil society: in other words, first-class citizens of a state” (249).

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* deals with three generations of a Bengali immigrant family of the Guptas in California. She brings out the various circumstances that affect the married life of the Guptas themselves and their daughter Rakhi. The novel also portrays the relationship of the Indian diaspora with their second and the third generations. Experiences of racism and colour bias that the diaspora community faces in a new homeland are depicted in the novel. The protagonist, Rakhi represents the second generation of the family. Born and brought up in Fremont, California, Rakhi is a divorcee and a single mother, very much like Sudha in *The Vine of Desire*. She is also a painter and runs a tea house in Berkeley, California.

Rakhi's mother, Mrs Gupta is a dream interpreter. In order to sustain this power, she is forbidden to have a physical relationship with a man. However, Mrs Gupta also wants to live in a family so she decides to get married. Since a temple wedding would snatch her powers of interpreting dreams, she opts for a legal wedding ceremony. Initially the couple enjoys their married life, but as Mrs Gupta becomes pregnant, she senses her powers diminishing. Mrs Gupta decides to stay separately in the same house, away from her husband. The marriage does not make Mr Gupta happy because he is supposed not to have a physical relationship with his wife any more. He feels upset in the beginning but he accepts his wife's priorities. Mr Gupta loves Divakaruni's 'queen' of dreams as “queen of my dreams” and “my queen of dreams” (33).

Divakaruni writes in the first person narrative and switches to third person, when her daughter Rakhi's consciousness pokes at her. When Rakhi is eight, she notices that her parents sleep separately and do not have a close relationship like her friends' parents. Her mother explains to Rakhi, “my work is to dream. I can't do it if someone is in bed with me” (7). Rakhi finds her mother's profession to dream other people's dreams so glamorous that she takes her mother to be an icon and wishes to be like her.

Mrs Gupta does not discuss her profession with Rakhi, however she talks about issues like boyfriends and bodily changes in a friendly manner with her. Though they are frank enough on such issues, Rakhi however longs for special care and attention from her mother. She wishes that as the other immigrant women show their concern towards their children, her mother should also express her love for Rakhi instead of giving a cold response to her. It

hurts Rakhi that though it is her mother's dream-world that fascinates her most, yet she is deliberately kept out of it by her mother.

Since childhood Rakhi has been fascinated with India where her mother Mrs Gupta has come from. Though Rakhi has never been there but she longs to hear stories about India. India is always in her thoughts and she paints what she thinks. Avtar Brah conceptualises this dilemma, "the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native" (209). In an interview with Luan Gaines, Divakaruni explains the reason for Rakhi's fascination for her mother's mysterious past in India and her obsession with India, "Rakhi's parents have been atypical in not telling her much about India – which causes her to hunger for it. India becomes looming and mythical in her imagination." Divakaruni continues, "Because in some ways she has been denied her heritage, she longs to recreate it for herself. Her friend Belle, on the other hand, wants to escape from all the pressure her parents put upon her to be Indian."

Rakhi idealises her mother and loves watching her cooking Indian food. She loves everything that her mother has brought from India, like scarves and sarees. In an interview with Susan Comminos, Divakaruni states, "Usually, children have these wonderful ideas about India, and their immigrant parents, who have a real emotional connection to the homeland, are all for furthering them: 'Yes, yes, it's just as wonderful as you think it is.' Of course that will lead to problems if the young person ever returns to India." Rakhi also has some complaints against her mother that she does not attempt to satisfy Rakhi's curiosity about her profession of interpreting dreams and keeps her secrets to herself.

Though Rakhi wants to be close to her mother, she does not want her mother to intervene in her married or professional life. Rakhi has been living separately from her husband Sonny, but she does not seek her mother's help in settling the matter through her talent of dream interpretation. Rakhi also experiences problems in establishing her tea house, but does not seek her mother's help. Rakhi herself handles the court proceedings of the divorce and the custody issues of her daughter, Jona. Rakhi feels that her mother may have powers to look into her clients' future and help them through her powers of dream interpretations, however she should control her family life herself without the intervene of her mother. Divakaruni explains this state of mind of Rakhi in her interview with Luan Gaines as, "she feels she is in her mother's shadow — and yet strangely neglected by her. She feels she is a failure because she doesn't have her mother's gift, which she has always longed to possess."

Rakhi is married to Sonny whose parents too are Indian immigrants. He was brought up in America and both Rakhi and Sonny have similar choices – they enjoy long drives and spicy Indian food. Sonny is dedicated to his job of a jockey in a night club and loves to work the whole night there, which Rakhi dislikes and thinks "he was a night spirit" (71). Their relationship gets sour when one night in his club she is attacked and harassed by some men

and Sonny does not come to help her. Rakhi can never forget the incident of that night when she was trapped between strange men: “Her lips felt swollen” (125) and “There were hands everywhere” (126). Sonny tries hard to convince her that he was unable to listen to her cries for help due to the loud music. But Rakhi is not able to excuse him especially when Sonny refuses to investigate the matter and punish the culprits. Not willing to live with a man who does not care for her dignity and respect, Rakhi shifts to another house and applies for a divorce.

Sonny still loves Rakhi and wants their reunion. He feels that as Rakhi’s mother has the power to control other people’s life, Rakhi too wants a control over her family life and Sonny. He believes that Rakhi left him as he did not act according to her wish and did not complain against the attackers for their misbehaviour, “because I wouldn’t let you control my whole existence” (137). However, Sonny looks after his daughter Jona very well, who in turn loves him and wants to stay with him. Despite Sonny’s caring attitude for Jona, Rakhi calls him, “Sonny-the delinquent-dad” thinking that he does not look after Jona well (96).

Divakaruni portrays Rakhi as a dissatisfied person who does not trust her husband and complains on all petty matters. She is also not able to completely detach herself from him and acts as a possessive ex-wife. Rakhi feels curious about the woman who often calls Sonny on his phone, wondering “who’s been calling him so many times” (55). She also feels jealous and curious when Sonny cancels the trip which he planned with Jona and takes a woman on the trip instead. Due to her fear of his involvement with another woman, Rakhi hesitates to enter his bedroom suspecting Sonny might be making love to another woman.

Sonny maintains a friendly relationship with Rakhi’s mother and visits her from time to time. Divakaruni portrays Sonny as a romantic and caring person who tries his best to resolve the tension in his marital life and live with Rakhi again. But Rakhi blames him alone for the breakdown of their relationship. She believes that, “A relationship doesn’t spoil in one night, like milk” (12). Rakhi wishes that Sonny could be like her father, understanding and docile. Rakhi has observed her father Mr Gupta as a calm and uninterfering husband, always surrendering to his wife’s wishes. Rakhi compares him with her over-imposing husband and dislikes Sonny for his “me, myself and I” attitude (95). Rakhi also feels irritated with his passion for his job as a disc jockey and his affectionate terms with her mother for which she calls him, “Sonny-the master-tactician” (61).

Rakhi calls Sonny, “Sonny-the-infuriating” (23) and “Sonny-the-hell-raker” (213) and does not try to resolve the misunderstanding between them. However Sonny ignores Rakhi’s attitude and performs the rites of Mrs Gupta’s funeral sincerely. He is shocked by her unexpected death and breaks into tears when he scatters her ashes. Even then Rakhi does not see any goodness in him and feels envious, “When I’d left him, he’d shouted and threatened, begged and sulked. But he hadn’t cried. What had my mother meant to him that he should cry

now?" (134). Rakhi has never liked his closeness with her mother, who she thinks is only her own.

Possessive and secretive about her mother, Rakhi wants to keep her mother's journals wholly to herself and does not bring it to the notice of Sonny, who otherwise would have read them. Gradually Rakhi acknowledges his concern for her when he helps her father in establishing her tea house by sending his friends there to buy food and promote their sale. Rakhi's faith in Sonny is revived on the fatal night of 9/11 when Sonny fights to protect Rakhi and saves her from the terrorist attack in her tea house. Sonny's concern and courage makes her forget her old grudges and she starts admiring him, "because death brushed by us so closely, and because I'm thankful to be alive" (272). She is filled with gratitude and she decides to begin her life with him as his wife again.

There is a lack of affection between Rakhi and her father too. Since childhood she has seen him living in a separate room in the same house and conversing very little with anyone. Rakhi feels that his presence is not more than a vague image in her life. During weekends Mr Gupta engages himself in drinking and listening to old Hindi songs. Rakhi loves her mother so much that she thinks her father should have died instead of her mother in the car accident. She considers her father responsible for the accident and feels that since he was with her mother in the car, the mishap occurred. After the sudden death of her mother, Rakhi shows no sympathy towards Mr Gupta while taking care of his bruises. She avoids touching him while dressing his bruises, does not talk to him and even stops calling him dad.

Though marginalized in his own home Mr Gupta is a sensible man and wants to clarify the misunderstanding between him and Rakhi. He explains to her that at the time of the accident Mrs Gupta was upto something and was chasing a black car saying, "He's my only chance to get back what I've lost" (117). She was driving at such a high speed that she lost control over the car and the accident took place. Mr Gupta convinces his daughter that he had respected his wife's wish to stay aloof from him and not have a physical relationship in order to keep her powers of dream interpretation intact. He says that it is his love for the family that he never expressed his desires and never demanded anything from anyone, but distanced himself from everyone. Rakhi is not fully convinced by her father's explanation; however is urged to reconsider her feelings for him due to his affectionate behaviour.

Rakhi is happy to have her mother's dream journals, but is also puzzled by their content and is unable to understand them. Her father offers to help her in reading the journals and gradually together they are able to interpret the meaning of the journals. Mr Gupta also offers to support her tea house when Rakhi is struggling to save it from being shut down. With the success of these two tasks, Rakhi starts believing in her father and his abilities. Now the father-daughter relationship grows stronger than before and they work together in the tea house. Mr Gupta expresses his interest in cooking Indian food for their guests and their sale increases.



Rakhi is impressed by her father's hidden talents that are unfurled gradually. Mr Gupta sings Indian songs while cooking in the tea house and is admired by their Indian clients. Very soon they have a good clientele of their Indian immigrant friends who frequently visit their tea house. Rakhi is happy at the success of her tea house and feels grateful to her father for the immense patience he has shown despite her cold attitude towards him earlier. She is also thankful to him for all the support he has offered her.

Rakhi feels relaxed in her father's company and converses with him freely. She develops faith in him and shares with him her one night's adventure with a black car. She tells him that the words EMIT MAERD written on the license plate of the car puzzled her. She could not interpret the meaning of those words and seeks his help in solving the mystery. Mr Gupta tells her that when these words are read in the reverse order they mean DREAM TIME. Now Rakhi admires her father more than ever for solving mysteries and for running the tea house successfully. Rakhi praises him saying, "Is there no end to the personalities hiding inside my father's skin?" (181).

Mr Gupta also shows his affection for his daughter and the bond of father-daughter relationship strengthens between them. He freely shares his experience and memories of his childhood in Calcutta. Rakhi takes much interest in learning about his past in India, which her mother had never discussed with her. It is only now that Rakhi comes to know about her father's life in India and feels attached to him. Divakaruni portrays Rakhi as a modern girl who is brought up according to the American ways of life; however, she is always curious to know the kind of life her parents have spent in India. Gonzalez and Marino comment upon Divakaruni that, "Being a transnational writer, there is 'the sign of blurring of boundaries between things, Asian and things Asian/American'" (12).

Together, Rakhi and her father work to reopen the tea house under the new name Kurma House. Rakhi wishes her mother could see them together supporting each other. She does not blame her father for a fire in the Kurma House and tries to avoid any unpleasantness between them. She now wishes for an everlasting positive relationship with her father. Rakhi remembers her mother's words: "Calamity happens so we can understand caring" (237).

Rakhi has no deep attachment with her daughter Jona either. After the separation of Rakhi and Sonny, Jona prefers to live with her father and stays happy in his company. Jona does not like her mother's attitude towards Sonny when she insults him in her painting show (97). Jona reacts at Rakhi's behaviour, and says, "You told him to go away. How could you be so mean, Mom?" and leaves the hall with her father. She does not care to stay back till the end of the show (98). Though Jona is a little girl, she understands human nature well. She knows that her mother loses her temper on trivial matters, so she is not affected by Rakhi's outburst. Rakhi loses her temper again when she is invited at Sonny's house for dinner, and walks out of the house refusing the dinner prepared by them. Jona remains indifferent and enjoys the food with her father and lets her mother follow her whims.

Divakaruni presents Rakhi as a quick-tempered woman. Rakhi's unpredictable behaviour is the outcome of her mother Mrs Gupta's strained relationship with her husband Mr Gupta. Rakhi has always seen her mother disagreeing on certain matters with her husband and having no consideration for his feelings. Rakhi inherits this attitude from her mother and herself suffers in her relationship with Sonny and Jona. As R. Ivekovic writes, "in such extreme situations, it is the "second" or "third generation" that may sometimes bring about something new (31). Rakhi has seen her mother as a self-dependent woman, and following her ways she does not trust Sonny in any matter related to Jona.

Rakhi believes that Sonny would not be taking good care of Jona when he takes Jona on a trip to Mendocino (14). Rakhi does not like to live with them and does not consider herself completely separated from them either. Rakhi exposes her inner-self through her whisper voice which says, "You're just afraid Jona will have too much fun with Sonny" and "You're afraid she won't want to come back to you" (15). Divakaruni presents the instability of Rakhi's mind where she cannot decide whether they are her family or not, whether she needs them back in her life or not. Rakhi feels satisfied when she is able to find fault with Sonny, where she can put him down. After her return from the trip when Jona asks her for food, Rakhi, instead of planning about cooking something for her daughter, feels happy that Sonny is not taking care of Jona properly. Internally, her whisper voice says to Sonny-the-irresponsible, "I knew you wouldn't feed her right" (57).

Jona likes to live with her father, however she wishes that Rakhi should also try to resolve the conflict and stay together with them happily. Jona acts like a bridge between her parents. She visits Rakhi with her father practically every day and invites Rakhi to Sonny's house. While on rides, Jona makes them sit like a husband and a wife in the front seats of the car. Rakhi also enjoys their company and likes to spend time with them. The night when Jona is suffering from fever, Rakhi has to spend the whole night at Sonny's house. As Rakhi has improved her relationship with her father, she also resolves to develop a loving and affectionate relationship with her husband and daughter again.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* focuses on independent women who introspect about their life as immigrants and form new values to adjust in the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. They do their best to form emotional bonds with their family members and friends from the host country. Conflict is inevitable, especially in the immigrant situation, where, as R. Radhakrishnan avers, the older and younger generations of immigrants nurture different memories of the past, and have different values in life. First generation diaspora are more rooted in the culture and tradition of their home country, while the second and later generations of diaspora gradually break away from the value system upheld by their parents or grandparents, and adopt the cultural practices of the country where they reside.

In such circumstances too, in the fiction of the diaspora writers as Divakaruni, one observes close ties between family members – between parents and children, as Rakhi and Mrs Gupta; between siblings, as Sonny and Jona in *Queen of Dreams*. The emotional bonding between immigrants becomes stronger despite several odds in the novel *Queen of Dreams* where Rakhi revives her relationship with her father Mr Gupta, husband Sonny, and daughter Jona. The emotional bonds of immigrants as portrayed in this novel, provide them with the moral strength and support necessary for them to be able to survive even in difficult circumstances in a foreign country.

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