

VIOLENCE AND ATTACK IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

Dr. C.Bharathi

Assistant Professor of English

J K K Nattraja College of Arts and Science

Kumarapalayam – 638 183

Namakkal Dt.

bharathichinnasamy@gmail.com

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee has insisted on being read not as an Indian or expatriate writer but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim that America is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. Her novel Queen of Dreams presents the history and ethnic identity of the immigrant women portraying the realities of violence and attack due to class distinction in American society. She writes about the devastating effects of racism. The discrimination affects them from different angles, from the general to the personal. Her protagonists struggle to find solace, assimilating the two worlds; but the conflict that arises makes the protagonists, at times, schizophrenic and disillusioned. Chitra Banerjee, in Queen of Dreams, has skillfully blended immigrant and diasporic sensibilities.

Key words: expatriate, immigrant, Third World, history, ethnic identity etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian immigrant in America associated herself with Asians against Domestic Abuse, an organization in Houston. Her interest in these women grew when she realized that there was no mainstream shelter for immigrant women in distress, a place where people would understand their cultural needs and problems in the United States. The experience she gathered from counselling sessions, the lives of Asian women opened up to her revealing unimaginable crises.

Chitra Banerjee has insisted on being read not as an Indian or expatriate writer but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim that America is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. She is evidently accepted in her adopted country as an Asian American or a 'woman of colour,' but not as part of the 'mainstream' of American writing, or even of the 'mainstream' of American women's writing. To her credit she won many prestigious awards instituted by Americans. As an award winning author and poet, she writes for both adults and children.

Chitra Banerjee's early experiences have had a great bearing on her writing and outlook on life. Her novel *Queen of Dreams* presents the history and ethnic identity of the immigrant women portraying the realities of violence and attack due to class distinction in American society. She strongly opposes racial prejudice. She writes about the devastating effects of racism. She also perpetuates the stereotypes that Americans are violent, self-centred and materialistic, lacking in the poetry of life.

Homi Bhabha says in his book *Nation and Narration* "Nowadays, a far graver mistake is made: race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing peoples is attributed to ethnographic or, rather linguistic groups" (8). Asian Americans, like all people of colour in America, can acculturate into American life in terms of values, customs and cultural forms; however, due to embedded racial barriers they will not be able to completely assimilate or become fully integrated into the American society. In her essay "The Reluctant Patriot" Chitra Banerjee says, ". . . Holding that rectangle of red, white and blue in my hand made me realize how much America, the country I had come to as an unthinking, 19-year-old immigrant from India, meant to me. How over the years the values it stood for—liberty, equality, justice, tolerance, the pursuit of happiness for all—had seeped into me and shaped me."

The woman is also subjected to insidious racial discrimination and has to struggle against this in almost all walks of life. The discrimination affects them from different angles, from the general to the personal. And the Indian-American woman is left a "hyphenated" entity struggling to come to terms with her new life. Uncertainty dogs her at every step as she wages the battle all alone.

Chitra Banerjee's protagonists struggle to find solace, assimilating the two worlds; but the conflict that arises makes the protagonists, at times, schizophrenic and disillusioned. This phenomenon gulps down the minds of the protagonists in their aspiration to achieve something in life.

In Chitra Banerjee's writings, the struggle of the protagonists is depicted as they progress to assimilate and find themselves stranded in the middle of nowhere, desperately trying for a way out and suffer in the process. This dilemma is the core of Chitra Banerjee's writings.

Rakhi finds herself struggling with her business, relationships and the devastating events relating to 9/11. Rakhi says, "We see clips of firefighters heading into the blaze; we see the buildings collapsing under the weight of their own rubble . . . We look at them all, then at each other in disbelief. How could this have happened—here, at home, in a time of peace? In America?" (*QD* 255)

It is not only in America that the Indian migrants and their children undergo these humiliating and discriminatory experiences, the diasporas meet this kind of treatment in every dominant culture in another nation. In her essay "The Reluctant Patriot" Chitra Banerjee says,

My own South Asian community has suffered from hate crimes and racial profiling. Sikhs in turbans and beards have been beaten and even shot to death; women in veils have been called terrorist bitches; businessmen in suits and ties have been asked to get off airplanes because their skin color made the crew nervous. The other day, outside our local grocery, a man shouted at my children and me, using an obscenity I won't repeat, "Ay-rabs, go home!"

"You come too late, much too late, there will always be a world – a white world between you and us" (339) says Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. In America the devastation caused by the terrorists on September 11, 2001 shattered all complacency and Chitra Banerjee has felt an urgent need to write about it. She has experienced sorrow since a national tragedy to bring her community together. In *Queen of Dreams*, this terrorist attack is explicitly inter-woven into the narrative, since it has shattered their lives for a long time to come. Therefore, she believes that it is important to maintain a degree of cultural identity and strong family bonds that the Indian culture promotes. Her aesthetic stance on multiculturalism reveals that the immigrant groups selectively acquire linguistic and other cultural practices of the majority culture without rejecting their own ethnic identity and culture.

Chitra Banerjee's discussion of violence as a necessary mode of resistance to the rhizomatic persistence of "The West" as a colonialism of the mind is dealt in her novels. The psychologicistic struggle upon which Rakhi insists may provide a crucial background against which to understand the affectivity or functionality of the violence that surfaces in *Queen of Dreams*. Chitra Banerjee explains it in her interview with Karthik Ramaswamy in *Niruvana*:

. . . in some ways it's my most political novel, dealing most directly with an event of national importance and its aftermath. Yes, it helped me express the terrible pain I felt after 9/11 because, in addition to suffering the effects of this national tragedy, my community (and other communities like mine that "looked like terrorists") had to suffer from hate crimes that erupted in so many parts of America.

Violence, Chitra Banerjee asserts is the price one pays to remake home out of the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between the two worlds. The following lines of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* can be considered here: "As the contradiction among the features / creates the harmony of the face/ we proclaim the oneness of the suffering / and the revolt" (342).

Rakhi confesses that in America talking about the murders was like talking about the weather. Chitra Banerjee similarly refers to the pervasive spirit of violence in the cities. Rakhi represents all immigrant wives who have their own problems of adjustments when placed in the contexts of cultures at logger-heads. About the humiliations and insults that the immigrants have to suffer, she says:

I hear Sonny yell, 'Watch out, Riks!' But it's too late. Someone's got me in a choke hold. I hear him laugh in my ear. Sonny's rushing at us, an intent look on his bloodied face. He lunges with the pipe . . . Now two men are coming at Sonny together. I grab one, a fist strikes the side of my head, and I learn there's truth to the saying about seeing a star . . . The man with the switchblade is kneeling over Jespal. Someone's holding Sonny with his arm twisted behind his back. He's yelling for help, but of course no one comes. The man raises his knife and Jespal screams. (268)

Writers of the diaspora often rewrite history and frame new narratives of family, society and nation with a desire to revisit the past. It is here that memory and nostalgia play a very important role. The diasporic writer occupies a kind of space that is one of exile and cultural solitude. While immigrant and expatriate writing are more inclined towards the contemporary experience in the host society, diasporic works are more preoccupied with the idea of the deserted or imagined homeland. Chitra Banerjee, in *Queen of Dreams*, has skillfully blended immigrant and diasporic sensibilities.

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