

**ASSIMILATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION : A STUDY OF *THE QUEEN OF DREAMS***

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**Abstract**

*Immigrant literature is increasingly interested in the transnational experiences of its protagonists, and with the literal and metaphorical crossing and re-crossing of borders. The question of belonging in the new country requires a fundamental shift of thinking in relation to place. The memory of the home country presents itself as an alternative to the imposing and painful present. The narratives revisit their protagonists' pasts through reminiscences and flashbacks, and sometimes more explicitly through the narrator's interjection of details about the country left behind in the process of immigration. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which the Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni advocate a hybrid world in her novel The Queen of Dreams. Is it possible for someone to discard one's past altogether? Can identities really be erased in the process of hybridisation? The complex process of hybridisation results in multiple inter related identities out of which the individual forms his/her own personal identity. Many of them try to discard their past altogether and adopt a new unhyphenated identity. Yet, the subterranean urge to cling to one's own past, one's culture and history is always there .*

*The Queen of Dreams* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni continues experimenting the theme of magic realism that started earlier in *The Mistress Of Spices*. However the plot progresses through a closely entwined theme of reality of displacement and cultural assimilation of an immigrant life. Mrs. Gupta, a first generation immigrant is torn between her desire for individual existence as a dream reader, and her family responsibilities. Dream readers live in a cave, observe a vow of celibacy and cannot fall in love. On one visit to Calcutta she defies all the vows, therefore exiled from the cave. Post marriage she migrates to America where she realizes that her gift of dream telling has begun to fade. The guilt, reminders and warnings of the past begins to create a conflict in her present life, which she must resolve to establish her identity and selfhood. And she responds to it by deciding to withdraw herself from her present and cling to her past. Dream Journals in the text are vehicles for depicting the interior life and private struggles and anxieties which Mrs. Gupta faces but cannot talk to anyone. Ashcroft aptly describes:

In the case of diasporic peoples 'place' might not refer to location at

all, since the formative link between identity and an actual location might have been irredeemably severed. But all constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question ‘Where do I belong?’ The place of a diasporic persons ‘belonging’ may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief including nostalgia for a distant homeland. It is when place is least spatial, perhaps, that it becomes most identifying. (Ashcroft 125)

In her refusal to talk about her past she attempts to escape the sense of hyphenation that she constantly finds herself in. Rakhi, her daughter is fascinated by India, her ancestral land surrounded with hazy mystery because of her parent’s apparent disinterest to share their past. In a symbolic way after a bad dream, young Rakhi tries to crawl under her mother’s blanket only to be taken to her own room. (Divakaruni 6). Unable to penetrate and resenting the fact, Rakhi paints herself an *imagined India* through photographs and borrowed books about her parents’ homeland.

Rakhi, and Belle, also a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Indian American co-own a cafe called the ‘Chai House’, which sells food adapted to American tastes. Chocolate Chip, blueberry, bran, carrot, almond muffins, lemon-glazed Danishes, and a plate of crumbly sugar-and-cinnamon cookies named as Delhi Dietbusters. (Divakaruni P24) Both of them form a strange pair, with Rakhi’s obsession with her ancestral land and Belle’s stubborn determination to rub every bit of her Indianness. This hyphenated personalities of the owners gets reflected in the “Chai House” where muffins with strong coffee and freshly baked bread cohabit with handmade puppets from old silk sarees and pictures of bathing elephants in Mughal Gardens. The Chai House is a symbol of identity for both of them. Rakhi’s custody of her daughter depends upon her earning from this place, and for Belle, it is her one major chance of getting accepted into the mainstream culture; Americanized Belle with a red sequined halter top and doubly-pierced navel. She does not like the idea of arranged marriage for herself and fears that her parents would arrange her marriage to an upright young Indian farmer they usually buy their supplies from for the produce store they run. She wants to escape from all the pressure her parents put upon her to be “Indian”.

The Chai House is in the danger of being closed down and Rakhi turns to her mother to help her resurrect it. Mrs. Gupta tells her that she must make it “authentic.” Rakhi finds authentic Indianness in the shared sense of community that her father’s acquaintances and his friends bring to the Chai House. According to Social anthropologist Mary Douglas, cooking and eating of food encode social relation and transaction across boundaries and that each meal carries forward something of the other meals. (Douglas P695) Food is deemed as one of the preliminary symbols to carry and signify the adherence of the Indian and other South Asian communities to the home land. Cultivating the ethnic food in the alien atmosphere helps in the construction and the amalgamation of the past and the present. Therefore, ethnic cuisine is levelled as an “emotional anchor” as focused by an Indian American cultural critic Ketu Katrak.

Back home, Mr. Gupta toiled within his narrow surroundings in order to assert his individual success. Kesto's shop and the authentic Bengali food items that he learnt to make, in a way helped him migrating to the US. The developed Chai House or *Chaer Dokan* renamed as *Kurma House* with its authentic Bengali snacks like *Pakora, Singara, Sandesh, Jilebi, Beguni, Nimki, Mihidana* and tea, coffee in the Indian way, is an ideal place for reproducing the Indian scene even at a changed cultural system. Mr. Gupta authenticates the experience of Indianness in this situation on the basis of shared experience of old Hindi film music and memories of the homeland. He is joined by the middle aged Indians who share the same memories and consequently other diaspora groups because they too experience a similar identity crises.

In response to a new cultural landscape as well as to maintain a connection with the past, immigrants, replicate linguistic, cultural, and social norms, creating their own hybrid spaces that mirror and often replace a past relationship to their land of origin. The new authenticated Kurma House gets more personalized when the visitors begin to leave objects—a Tibetan Bell, a small Persian rug in jeweled colors, an African Mask, a woodcut from Afghanistan, a Jade figurine—representatives of their past lives and therefore precious (Divakaruni P268). Redesigning the space with splendor takes into account the traditional roles in being active partners in engineering their own assimilation.

Homi Bhabha points out that diasporic identities are characterized by a “continuing relationship to a homeland” that may either be physical, when individuals or group members continue to visit the homeland, or based on an imaginary community with the knowledge that they cannot, or will not return (Bhabha2). The memory of cultural trauma in their former homeland in combination with potential discrimination feature prominently in the construction of diasporic identities. Migrants live and share the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples as they realize that they may never be fully accepted by their new nation and maintain memories, myths, customs and traditions of their original homeland. They position themselves astride the boundaries of two different cultures. Unable and unwilling to assimilate, these immigrants exist as on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never get completely interpenetrated and fused. To account for this duality, migrants assert their identity by declaring their hyphenated identity.

. Rakhi in the novel thinks that the listeners keep coming back ,

... because they are drawn, like me, to the old men. There's enigma about them – where they've come from, why they left those distant places. Why they've to give up in order to survive in America. Watching them pull us out of the cramped familiarity of our own lives into a larger possibility, *once upon a time, in a large land far, far away*. It's what I wrestled my mother for, even as she'd insisted that the only magic lay in *now*. (Divakaruni P196)

The feeling of displacement and alienation can be similar for both first and second generation immigrants. The dilemma Rakhi finds herself in after 9/11 is typical for a second generation immigrant. She refuses to flaunt her patriotism and love for America by pasting the national flag on the glass window of her tea-shop because she believes herself to be a natural citizen. However her acceptance of the American identity is questioned when they are attacked and beaten up badly. She feels doubly displaced and begins to wonder as to where she belongs?

Even though the second generation immigrants are better assimilated than their parents, their identity is influenced by the migrant history of their parents and grand parents. Thus diaspora communities are created out of merging the old country narratives to the new, thereby creating the sense of shared history. Through her paintings, Rakhi tries to piece together her sense of what she is, but the bits and pieces that she reconstructs from the stories her father tells her from his childhood and her mother's dream journals gives her a warped sense of her hyphenated identity.

Magic realist novels portray the everyday reality consisting magic and myth, thus the concept of hybridity depicting syncretism of cultures constitute an apt literary medium for hybrid identities and multi-dimensional experiences of a diaspora life. The characters in the text are caught between the traditional customs of the culture from which they have migrated and their present experience with the receiving culture. The constant oscillation between contradictory conceptions of race, culture, time and geography creates a state of liminality or the "in-between" space, which makes them develop altered consciousness.

This multiple consciousnesses, results in a self that is fragmented. Yet paradoxically, it is this very condition that provides the means by which the conflict of consciousness gets resolved for the character, redefined as a source of adaptive strength by diasporic individuals.

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