

Exploring Immigrants Quest for Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Queen of Dreams'

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Abstract

The present paper mainly focuses on immigrants' quest for identity of the characters in the novel 'Queen of Dreams' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Asian-American writer of short stories, novels, essays, and poems. In most of her writings, she deals with the experiences of immigrants, particularly women, and the challenges they face living in America. The novelist depicts the struggles and challenges of immigrants and their quest for identity. She is an immigrant herself, who brings out the condition of women in a place, where the characters are suffering due to their existence between their new land and homeland. The dwindle between these poles and realise that they are unwanted in America that increases their quest for their roots, homeland and their past. This novel 'Queen of Dreams' is about immigrant people's journey in America, their struggle for identity, fearless life and longing for homeland

Key Words: Immigrants, Experiences America, Quest, Homeland, Identity

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned Indian- American novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer. She is an immigrant herself, coming from a middle-class educated family from Kolkata, India. Her works often explore the experiences of immigrants, particularly women, and the challenges they face in navigating multiple cultures. She depicts the expatriate young women living in the US. Who strive hard to preserve self-identity in an alien society. She throws light on the state of mind of immigrant and the realistic environment, the relations that are torn apart between belonging and not belonging. It's the strong desire of the immigrant that eases the wounds of longing. Her works include 'The Mistress of Spices' (1917), 'Sister of My Heart' (1999), 'The Palace of Illusion' (2008) and 'Queen of Dreams' (2004) are some of the best known novels. Her poetry includes 'Dark Like the River' (1987), 'Black Candle' (1991), 'Leaving Yuba City' (1997). Her short story collection includes 'Arranged Marriage' (1995). In most of her novels she deals with the problem of identity and immigration. In all her writings she has strived to create a complete picture of the South Asian family life in America. She writes about what she knows and her experiences as an immigrant woman in an alien land. The present paper tries to focus on Chitra Banerjee's debut novel 'Queen of Dreams' that explores the complexities of immigrant experiences and the quest for identity.

Immigrants Identity

An immigrant is someone who moves to a new country to live there permanently. People immigrate for many reasons, including economic, social, political and personal. It is clearly evident that nowadays people move to the US for better life, economic growth, opportunities in corporate sector to enhance their research skills, higher education etc. Immigrant identity in the US is a complex phenomenon that includes how people identify as immigrants, search for self-identity sense of belongingness to an immigrant group, and their connection to homeland. The immigrants uproot themselves from their homeland either by choice or necessity they try to keep connected to Indian culture and traditions living in alien society in doing so they face many challenges like being away from one's roots, feeling of not belonging and searching for one's identity. In this regard Jopi

Nyman vividly comments “Rather than searching for roots and authenticity, migrant writing constructs itself in the space of in betweenness between different cultures, societies and homelands. In this process, it reflects on both the old and the new and questions existing political and cultural binaries.” (53) Chitra Banerjee as an immigrant writer represents the same in all her writings. While portraying the varied experiences of an immigrant in an alien land the novel ‘Queen of Dreams’ blends the Indian- American experiences. The main problems faced by these immigrants is search for identity. Generally due to political upheaval the identity crises hangs largely and they are generally stereotyped as an outsider, terrorist, culprits, opportunists, grabbing native jobs which has become an issue nowadays in the USA.

Immigrants Quest for Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s ‘Queen of Dreams’

Chitra Banerjee’s ‘Queen of Dreams’ (2004) depicts the experiences of first- and second-generation immigrants. Both of the generation characters face the dilemma of belongingness and insecurity in an alien land. First-generation immigrants failed to come to terms with the Western environment and long to return back to India but it’s not with the second-generation immigrants as they lacked attachment, and true knowledge of India and their identity. Mrs. Gupta is a first-generation immigrant who is the dream teller. “I dream, the dream, the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives” (QD7) Living in California with her husband Mr. Gupta, and daughter Rakhi. Mrs. Gupta was born and brought up in India, and inherited the power of foretelling dreams of other people to interpret it. After marriage to Mr. Gupta, migrated to the US and hence lost the power of interpreting dreams losing her identity as a dream teller. Later, repents for marrying Mr. Gupta which ruined her life, and lost her identity as a dream teller. She wanted to return to India but cancelled as she was pregnant with Rakhi. ‘Next I let go the possibility of return’. (Q D 295) After the birth of Rakhi she regained the power of interpretation of dreams.

The second-generation immigrant living in the US in this novel is Rakhi Gupta, a young and divorced wife of Sonny, who is also an immigrant in the US. It was a love marriage and became the mother of Jona, in the novel she is a third-generation immigrant. Mrs. Gupta brought up Rakhi by keeping her ignorant about her homeland India and also her experiences in India as a dream teller. It was done intentionally to protect Rakhi from the dilemma of hanging between the identities of being an American and an Indian. ‘The way you wouldn’t be constantly looking back hankering, like so many immigrants do’. (QD 89) But this only made her an incomplete person and longed to visit her homeland. Rakhi, never visited India but is determined to know the roots, customs, traditions, culture, and language of her mother in India and to understand her identity as an Asian-American. As a child, Rakhi is unknowingly attracted to listening to stories of India from her mother. In her college days, read Bengali lyrics. As a painter, her paintings are about Indian temples, cities of India, its market places etc. Thus, Rakhi always intended to know and understand India, often found pleasure in identifying as an Indian. It is evident clearly from Rakhi’s behaviour and attitude, how much she yearned for her homeland. Rakhi’s mother has remained a mystery to her husband and daughter Rakhi, while growing up, thinks of her as ‘secretive, stubborn, unreliable mother’. (QD. 8) But from her childhood days Rakhi is greatly attracted to her mother’s mysterious nature, has kept intact her Indian traditions and customs alive in alien land be it be cooking, housekeeping and dressing too. Rakhi’s mother emerges as a strong person surrounded by western culture and living as an exile. Though living as an exile from her native society, most of her dreams are not realised but her original self as a dreamer and helper of the needy sparkles at its full. She

proudly declares to Rakhi ‘I dream the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives’ (QD.7).

Rakhi’s mother compromises her married life for the sake of being a dream teller and rises to be a guardian angel not only for her daughter but needy ones. The mystery of Rakhi’s mother is revealed through her mother’s Dream journal which were written in Bengali and read to her by her father. As a mother, she is ready to help her daughter in all possible ways but Rakhi is reluctant to share her problems as her mother never spoke of her sufferings and problems. Rakhi runs a Chai House with her friend Belle. They were good friends in college times and shared their feelings to each other. ‘How Rakhi sometimes feels too American and how Belle would live, to shed the last vestiges of her desineness’. (QD15) Rakhi though born and brought in America, reflects Indianness in her modest dress and manners. Belle, with her ‘sequined halter’ top mini and double-pierced naval’ is in sharp contrast to Rakhi. Rakhi teases Belle for not knowing roti making, or any other Indian food, and never wears Indian dress like a Salwar Kameez but is very bothered about them now when their business is in trouble because of the new store Java, which has captured the American market. The Chai House was started after five years of struggle, and served homemade cookies and coffee, and satisfied the customers. Due to Java, there was a decline in customers. Rakhi contemplates, ‘Have we wasted our time in creating a refuge when all people want is a stop-n-go?’ (QD 86) Rakhi’s mother has helped her a long way in establishing ‘Chai House’ to give her a sense of a self-independent woman.

Mr. and Mrs. Gupta met with an accident while returning home from their daughter’s art exhibition. Rakhi’s mother dies in the accident whereas her drunken father survives with his broken bones. Looking after her father’s illness helps her to have a new perspective on her parents. Rakhi now could decode her daughter’s dreams and gifts as a dreamer which she inherited from her mother as herself. She upgrades her Chai House with Indian tastes and smells with the help of her father as Chef. She reconnects to her father and riots help her connect with her husband on friendly terms. Her father’s ‘Pakorras’, ‘rice puddings’, ‘Sandhesh’ and ‘gawjas’ bring back their customers. Even Sonny directs his friends to taste the Indian food. The ‘Chai house’ becomes kurma House and meeting place of Eastern people and a mixed race too. Lastly, Rakhi senses, her space in Kurma House among the varied races.

Rakhi faces many challenges as an immigrant in America through being a citizen. Rakhi has completely become an American, observing their culture living in an alien land, later to her shock realizes that her attachment to American culture is only shallow and superficial. Rakhi feeling of being an immigrant with no identity grew stronger after the terrorist attacks in New York and brutal attacks on immigrants. Her mother is said to be disconnected from her homeland and its traditions. It is appalling for her not to be accepted as an American. Her shop was violently attacked Rakhi questioned herself, ‘But if I wasn’t American, than what was I?’ After reaching home, she looks at her reflection in the glass which makes her realise the truth of being an exile in an alien land. She thinks, about the grieving people who have lost so much in a terrible attack. ‘And people like us, seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of strangers, who lost a sense of belonging’ (QD 272) When people expressed their sorry for the humiliating attack on her shop, they welcomed her presence in their community. She questioned how they could welcome her when she was born here. The immigrants played a dual role in America experiencing unexpected humiliations and they yearned for their homeland, where they could live with respect and without fear. Second-generation

immigrants like Rakhi, Belle, and Sonny were born and brought up in America, but the native Americans considered them as strangers belonging to minority groups. So the Indian Americans lived a secondary status and were treated as outsiders because of their appearance and ethnicity. They always felt insecure because of their race and origin and, as a result, struggled for existence and self-identity.

Conclusion:

Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni herself is an immigrant, shared her experiences through various characters in the novel 'Queen of Dreams'. She vividly portrays the struggle and dreams of immigrants in America and their desire for their homeland. Devakaruni finds and appreciates the hope for a better life and freedom that America evokes in the minds of the immigrants. But at the same time truly depicts the challenges and sufferings of the Indian Immigrants to America. They are uprooted and yearned for security and identity in an alien land. America stands out to the immigrants as the promising land, a world free from racial differences, religions, traditions, and customs. The dark reality is opposite to their expectations in America. One can indeed hope for a better life and peace in the world in the coming days.

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