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Negotiating Home and Self in Divakaruni's Queen of Dreams

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Abstract

The research paper is a humble effort to explore the complex relationship between migration, memory, identity, and the meaning of home in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004). Through the life of Rakhi, an Indian-American artist living in California, the novel examines how immigrant subjects negotiate between inherited cultural histories and contemporary realities. This study examines that home in the novel is not presented merely as a geographical location but as an emotional, psychological, and imaginative space shaped by memories, dreams, and personal experiences. Rakhi's search for selfhood is deeply connected with her attempt to understand her mother's hidden past and her own fragmented cultural identity. This paper argues that Divakaruni represents identity as a fluid process where belonging emerges through negotiation rather than through attachment to a single place or culture. Through dream symbolism, mother-daughter relationships, and diasporic experiences, the novel explores the hidden dimensions of identity formation and the search for a sense of self. I have attempted to analyse how Divakaruni portrays the struggle of immigrants who continuously negotiate between their past and present. The study contributes to the existing study dealing with the themes of migration, memory, identity and the meaning of home making it relevant today.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity, home, migration, memory, women, dreams, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned Indian-American author, poet, and professor known for her significant contribution to diasporic literature, particularly in exploring the experiences of immigrants, women, and cultural identity. Born in Kolkata, India, in 1956, Divakaruni moved to the United States in the late 1970s for higher education. Her personal experience of migration deeply influences her literary works, where she examines themes of displacement, belonging, memory, tradition, and the negotiation of identity between two cultures. Divakaruni writes extensively about the lives of South Asian immigrants, especially women who struggle to balance inherited cultural traditions with modern realities. Her fiction often focuses on the emotional complexities of migration and the ways in which individuals reconstruct their identities in foreign spaces. Through her powerful female characters, she explores issues of gender, patriarchy, independence, and self-discovery.

Her novel *Queen of Dreams* particularly reflects her interest in diasporic identity, memory, and the relationship between homeland and adopted country. The novel presents the struggles of Indian-American characters who negotiate between their ancestral past and present cultural realities. Divakaruni's writing is marked by a blend of realism, mythology, symbolism, and feminist perspectives. She gives voice to women whose experiences are often hidden within traditional narratives and presents them as active participants in shaping their own identities. Through her exploration of migration and cultural hybridity, Divakaruni has established herself as an important voice in contemporary Indian diasporic literature.

The experience of migration often creates a complicated relationship between an individual and the idea of home. For immigrants, home becomes divided between the remembered homeland and the lived reality of the adopted country. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an important Indian-American writer, frequently explores the emotional experiences of immigrants, particularly women negotiating cultural displacement and identity conflicts. *Queen of Dreams* focuses on the life of Rakhi, a second-generation Indian-American woman whose struggle for self-definition is connected with her relationship with her mysterious mother, who possesses the ability to interpret dreams. Divakaruni depicts the Indian American experience of struggle with two identities or cultures. She attempts to bridge the gulf between an American-born daughter and an Indian immigrant mother. The daughter yearns to understand her mother's behaviour and her work. Rakhi, an American-born Asian struggles to identify herself. She does not know when, where and how to relate and belong. Mrs. Gupta, a first-generation Indian immigrant in America is the queen of dream. She says, "A dream is a telegram from the hidden world." (QD-34). She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter. Rakhi, a young artist and divorced mother living in California is an American by birth and grows up with a feeling of belonging to her land of birth "a land that seemed to me be shaded her unending mystery" (QD-4). She considers America her home and is made to realise her real identity in India and not in America. She runs a tea shop named the Chai House to earn a living and to provide her six year old daughter Jona. The Chai House was later renamed as the Kurma House with the few sanitary courts of American which shows the fusion of east and west.

The novel presents home as something beyond physical boundaries. For Rakhi, America represents her everyday existence, while India exists through her mother's memories, stories, and dream journals. The tension between these two worlds creates her identity crisis. Divakaruni suggests that immigrant identity is not simply a choice between two cultures but a process of creating a personal space where different influences can coexist. In novel, home is constructed through memories rather than only through physical belonging. Rakhi's mother carries India within herself through her dreams and memories, while Rakhi experiences India as something distant yet deeply connected to her identity. Rakhi's mother explains the importance of dreams by describing them as messages from an unseen world. The idea that 'a dream is a telegram' reflects how dreams preserve experiences that cannot be expressed through ordinary language. The dream world becomes a symbolic home where forgotten histories and emotions survive. For Rakhi, discovering her mother's journals after her death becomes a journey into an unknown homeland. The journals reveal a past that was hidden from her, forcing her to reconsider her understanding of family and identity. Her mother's silence becomes another form of inheritance, showing how immigrant families often carry unspoken histories across generations. Thus, Divakaruni challenges the traditional idea of home as a fixed place. Home becomes an emotional landscape created through stories, memories, and relationships.

Rakhi represents the second-generation immigrant experience. Unlike her mother, who directly remembers India, Rakhi belongs to a generation shaped by both American surroundings and Indian heritage. Her identity exists between cultures. The novel shows that cultural identity is not inherited completely; it must be discovered and negotiated. Rakhi initially feels disconnected from her mother's world because she

does not fully understand the traditions and memories that define her mother's life. Divakaruni portrays this struggle through the conflict between belonging and alienation. Rakhi's artistic identity reflects her attempt to create meaning from different cultural influences. Her paintings become a space where personal experiences, family history, and cultural memories merge. The novel suggests that identity is not something discovered as a complete answer; rather, it develops through continuous interaction with one's past and present.

The relationship between Rakhi and her mother forms the emotional centre of the novel. Their distance represents a larger cultural gap between generations of immigrants. Rakhi struggles because her mother remains mysterious and emotionally unavailable. The decision of her mother to keep Rakhi as far off as she can from getting Rakhi involved with the knowledge of her Indian culture kept Rakhi more charged and thirstier for connecting with her roots. She intensely pondered upon the thought of unravelling the mystery of her Indianness. This core split between her American and Indian distinctiveness enhanced past the consequences of 9/11. This horrific confrontation destroys her confidence and she undergoes a dark cycle of self-doubt and shaking self-esteem. She questions "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?" Her words are an example of her positive perspective on America, "I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I am American ! I'm American already. I love this country." (QD-264) The statement, "You ain't no American" ceaselessly rings in Rakhi's mind. Her words "we were suddenly foreigners again" highlights the fragile nature of immigrants identity in post - 9/11 America, showing how quickly safety and belonging can vanish. She horrified,

"She feels a need for prayers, but she doesn't know towards which deity, American or Indian." (QD-274)

She starts suffering multiple stresses and is forced to search her identity where she has to locate herself. The text describes the loss of a secure identity, where long-term residents are viewed as outsiders. This quote encapsulates the deep fear and trauma felt within the community, where the illusion of acceptance is instantly shattered after that incident, they came across :

"Since the assault at the Kurma house, she'd been to afraid to go anywhere alone at night. Things she'd hardly noticed before – a group of people waiting at an intersection, footsteps behind her as she walked to her car, someone asking her if she had the time – loomed in her mind, throwing out monstrous shadows. Just thinking about them made her breath fast and shallow." (*Queen of Dreams*, 299-300)

Rakhi's mother was poisoned by the fear that her child should not live with the pain of split identities, she states :

"I didn't want to be like those mothers, splitting you between here and there, between your life right now and that which can never be. But by not telling you about India as it really were, I made it into something far bigger. It crowded other things out of your mind. It pressed upon your brain like a tumor." (*Queen of Dreams* 89)

However, after her mother's death, Rakhi begins to understand that her mother's silence was connected with experiences she could not easily communicate. The novel presents communication as a complicated process. One significant idea expressed in the novel is that words can both heal and damage because they attempt to represent complex emotions. Through this idea, Divakaruni explores how family histories are shaped not only by what is spoken but also by what remains unsaid.

Rakhi's understanding of her mother eventually helps her understand herself. By accepting her mother's past, she begins accepting the multiple layers of her own identity. Rakhi does not accept the division in her family's history between India and America. She searches for the meaning of what life is by trying to

understand her relationship with her father, friend Belle, husband Sonny and daughter Jona. After the 9/11 attack, Rakhi becomes mature and gets a new vision for herself. At the end of the novel, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life. She attempts to acculturate to that country. She forgives and re-kindles her love for her husband and family. She grows as a confident and stronger person. She loves India but had adapted to American life.

Dreams function as a major symbolic element in the novel. They connect the conscious and unconscious worlds and represent hidden aspects of human experience. The dream visions of Rakhi's mother are not simply supernatural elements; they represent memory, intuition, and emotional truth. They allow characters to access parts of themselves that remain hidden in ordinary life. Divakaruni uses dreams to question the boundaries between reality and imagination. The dream world becomes a metaphor for the immigrant experience itself because immigrants often live between remembered worlds and present realities. The novel suggests that understanding oneself requires recognizing these hidden emotional histories. Divakaruni shows that home is also connected with safety, recognition, and acceptance. When these are threatened, individuals are forced to reconsider their relationship with the society around them. The negotiation of home and self in *Queen of Dreams* is also deeply connected with gender. Divakaruni presents women as carriers of cultural memory while also showing their struggles within traditional expectations. Rakhi's mother represents a woman whose inner world remains powerful despite external limitations. Her dream-telling ability symbolizes female knowledge and intuition that exists outside traditional systems of authority. Rakhi, meanwhile, attempts to create a self-defined identity as an artist and mother. Her journey reflects the feminist idea that women must negotiate between social roles and personal aspirations. The novel therefore presents selfhood as a space where women can redefine themselves beyond inherited expectations.

Conclusion

Queen of Dreams presents home and self as interconnected but constantly changing concepts. Through Rakhi's journey, Divakaruni explores how immigrants negotiate multiple identities shaped by memory, culture, family, and personal experiences. The novel rejects the idea that belonging depends on a single homeland. Instead, it presents identity as a creative process where different histories and cultures come together. Rakhi's search for herself becomes a search for a meaningful home—one that exists not only in geography but also in memories, relationships, and imagination. Divakaruni ultimately suggests that true belonging emerges when individuals accept the different parts of themselves rather than choosing only one cultural identity.

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