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ROLE OF DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES IN THE IDENTITY FORMATION OF WOMEN MIGRANTS IN CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

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Abstract:

*The present study aims to find out the impact of diasporic experiences on the identity of the Indian American migrants, particularly the women migrants with reference to the novel *Queen of Dreams* by Chitra Divakaruni. The conflict between the hostland and homeland and between the tradition and modernity initiates a quest for identity in the women migrants and they try hard to adapt and assimilate into the host culture so that they can find a coherent and single identity. But with the course of time, migrant women, like Rakhi, the protagonist of the novel, realises that as an immigrant she possesses a hyphenated and plural identity instead of a fixed or singular identity. Her mother, and her friend Belle, also have conflicts related to their identity which they resolve with the passage of time. Nostalgia, displacement, longing for the homeland, discrimination after the 9/11 attack in America, cultural differences, efforts to assimilate into the culture of the hostland are some of the key factors which affect the identity of the women migrants in the hostland, and how amidst all the confusions and chaos, the women migrants assert their identity is remarkably portrayed by Divakaruni.*

Keywords: *Identity, diasporic experiences, women immigrants, discrimination.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a famous Indian American author. She depicts the problems of American immigrants and their quest for identity in the migrated land and the Indian-American experience of struggling with two identities. Diasporic identity discards the notion of fixed identity and accommodates plural identity as Stuart Hall writes “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (“Who Needs” 120). The issue of identity is a complex one; it is fluid, flexible and ever-changing. It includes many facets of our being, like our sexuality, gender, class, race, and sense of belonging to a particular religion, culture, family, community, and nation. It also includes an individual's beliefs, fears, ambitions, interests, and experiences. Michael Hogg defines identity as “people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg 2). Human beings are considered as social animals so they cannot segregate themselves from society, and their identity is constructed in relation to the people around them. The migrants face many problems in the host countries. Some of these are alienation, displacement, homelessness, rootlessness, nostalgia, identity crisis, racial discrimination, and many more. But amongst these, the problem of identity crisis is gaining prominence in modern and ever-changing society. Along with men, women in the contemporary era are also becoming more conscious of their identity, individuality and freedom.

While depicting the experiences of the diasporic community in the hostland, the novel *Queen of Dreams* synthesises the Indian American experiences. The major problems faced by these immigrants are those of their search for identity. Generally, the political crisis in the hostland causes an identity crisis in the imagined sense of community of the immigrants. At such crucial times, immigrants are generally stereotyped as terrorists and culprits. R. Malathi highlights that as a diasporic subject Rakhi is compelled to live in a perpetual state of tension and irresolution because she is unable to sever her ties with the imaginary

homeland though she has accommodated into the host culture (Malathi 353). Rakhi constantly struggles for her hidden past and contemplates a visit to the mysterious land of India. There are many incidents in the novel, which shows her fondness and longing for India, which usually happens with immigrants. They feel nostalgic at times and yearn for the familiarity of their homeland. Rakhi has never been to India but her paintings are mostly about India, imagined India, that is, [...] an India researched from photographs because she'd never travelled there She'd painted temples and cityscapes and women in the marketplace and bus drivers at lunch [...]" (Divakaruni 10). Before Rakhi discovers the journals of her mother, she creates a false image of India through all the secondary sources available to her. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* states that the immigrants conceptualise the concept of nation, as he illustrates that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which [...] it came into being" (Divakaruni 12). She has never been to India, but she imagines it in her head. Generally, all migrants of the second and third generation do that. So, Rakhi remains in a constant dilemma about her homeland and her identity.

Salman Rushdie writes that "the effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things [...]" (Rushdie 124-125), so as an immigrant Rakhi unrealistically imagines her homeland. Rakhi longs for India and Indianness and she also yearns for being a dream interpreter like her mother because for her being a dream interpreter means being an Indian. In addition, she always craves to hear about India, "I would have preferred the stories to have come from my mother and to have been set in India [...]" (Divakaruni 4). She craves to visit India at least once in her lifetime. Aparajita De writes about Rakhi that, "she grows up with a monocentric cultural identity-conflicted and alienated [...] This identity was forced on her by her parents [...] This denial of her access to a complete cultural heritage blurs Rakhi's sense of self" (Aparajita 78).

Mrs. Gupta, her mother intentionally keeps her daughter away from her Indian past so that her daughter may not feel split between two identities. But, Mrs. Gupta retains much of her Indianness as she belongs to the first generation migrants who generally try to preserve their past. She wears Indian clothes and as Rakhi says, "at home, we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture" (Divakaruni 7). This creates a cultural conflict between the mother and the daughter. On the other hand, almost all of the characters changes and shorten their names in order to gain full adaptation into the host culture, like Rakhi as 'Riks', Balwant Kaur as 'Belle', and Jonaki as 'Jona' or 'Jo'. This is an attempt of the migrants to assimilate and adapt to the host culture's way of living. Her father loves to hear Hindi songs from famous movies like 'Ananda', 'Sholay' and 'Guide'. Mr and Mrs. Gupta also love to watch Hindi movies.

When Rakhi was in school, she read books about India and discarded westernised clothes, unlike her Indian classmates. She has a longing for India since her childhood. R. Malathi describes the situation of Rakhi, who imbibes the American culture by birth and Indian culture through blood. Born and educated in America she perceives America as her home. Though ignorant, she constantly bickers after her imaginary past and contemplates a visit to the mysterious land India which she would never make (Malathi 353). She constantly swings between the two cultures. This creates a sense of loss and identity crisis in Rakhi.

When Rakhi's mother suggests her to make the Chai House authentic and real by giving it an Indian touch, Rakhi feels puzzled. Rakhi does not know what being Indian really means. She blames her mother for this bafflement, "and whose fault is it if I don't know who I am? If I have a warped Western sense of what's Indian?" (Divakaruni 89). Describing the situation of Rakhi, Uma Jayaraman writes that "the daughter has never been to India but is determined to identify her 'roots' so that she can understand her identity as an Asian American appropriately" (Jayaraman 2). Her quest to know about her Indian roots and her parents' past is necessary for her to understand and comprehend her sense of identity. However, Rakhi's mother believes that by hiding their Indian past from Rakhi she can save her from feeling split between two

cultures and two identities, she says, “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 was, I made it into something far bigger. It crowded other things out of your mind. It pressed upon your brain like a tumour (Divakaruni 89).” However, later, her mother and father realise that what she they have done with her daughter was wrong. Rakhi speculates that “how was she protecting me by not telling me about India?” (Divakaruni 90). Rakhi feels incomplete without comprehending the other side of her parents' past. So, after the realization, Rakhi's father helps her in the remaking of the Chai House, and they try to make it a real Indian store. As Rakhi attempts to discover her identity, knowing little of India from her mother's journal after her death and from her father's stories about India, her life is disturbed by new qualms. As Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* suggests that inconsistent identities are “constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (Brah 8). As Rakhi tries to imagine her identity in a certain way, she finds herself in the midst of an aberrant situation, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre:

It takes me a minute to process what I saw: a plane crashing into a tall building that looks familiar looks just like the one that exploded. The scene comes on again. I become aware of the newscaster's voice telling me that terrorist planes have hit the World Trade Centre (Divakaruni 252).

Rakhi's reaction to this news is in terms of being an American, who is unable to believe that anybody could hate America. After the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, she and her friend Belle has to deal with new complications of their identity formation in the host culture. After this tragic incident, the natives of America started attacking and blaming the immigrants whose only crime is the colour of their skin or the fact that their attire is different from the natives. The political turmoil in the host country destabilise Rakhi's notion of identity, and she occupies a place of “in-betweenness” as suggested by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. After the attack, the notions of citizenship of the immigrants become doubtful and questionable; they have become criminals and terrorists now. Aparajita De states, “In a wider context, the diasporic identities are linked to geopolitical processes” (Bhabha 88). The diasporic identities are always related to international relations and politics. Identities change and are challenged due to the change in the social, political and cultural setting. The indifferent attitude of the hostland adds to the sense of alienation and otherness in the migrants. Same happens to the protagonist of the novel, *Desirable Daughters*, Tara, who suffers identity crisis in the hostland. Parveen Kumari writes that “The protagonist, Tara, suffers from a sense of unbelonging and alienation at her adopted home (America). Her long stay in America fails to provide her with any sense of belonging and she realises her position as an outsider” (Kumari 310). Even the migrants of the second and third generation, like Rakhi, who are born and brought up in the hostland, are made to feel outsiders.

Therefore, Rakhi's search for identity escalates. After the attack on the World Trade Centre, the Americans become dubious and violent towards the immigrants. When Rakhi keeps her Chai House open after the dreadful incident in order to help and provide a valuable community service to the people, the natives think that they are not bothered about the safety of the country as they believed that closing the shop is the only way to show that they are concerned about their country. They are stereotyped as terrorists for keeping the shop open even after the attack. The owner of the Java store puts up a banner that proclaims 'Proud to be American' inside the store window. However, Rakhi does not believe in showing off her love for the country by putting banners or flags. She thinks that “I don't have to put up a flag to show that I'm American! I am American already. I love this country I know” (Divakaruni 264). The attackers do not believe them and insult them by calling them with obscene words: “Looked in a mirror lately? One of them spits. You ain't no American! It's fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson” (Divakaruni 267). Rakhi and her friends are treated ruthlessly and humiliated by the natives.

Uma Jayaraman writes about Rakhi that as “she tries to order her chaotic life of hyphenated identity, a failed entrepreneur, a failed mom, a divorced mother, mother-fixated daughter, into a unified whole through imagining her identity in a certain way, she finds herself in the midst of inexplicable situation” (Jayaraman 6). The attack disturbs her fixed notion of identity. Rakhi starts questioning her own identity, and she thinks that “but if I wasn't American, then what was I?” (Divakaruni 271). She feels rootless, and suddenly her own appearance becomes alien to her. All the built-in feeling of being American is lost on that day of great loss and they realise, “and people like us, seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of a stranger, who lost a sense of belonging” (Divakaruni 272). In the fear of being attacked Sonny warns them to not to wear Indian clothes, but Rakhi asks “what native clothes? She wonders, looking down her pants” (Divakaruni 274). He also insists them to put up an American flag in prominent locations, like in homes and shops. Amidst the entire trauma, Rakhi is horrified, “She feels a need for prayer, but she doesn't know which deity, American or Indian” (Divakaruni 274). She wonders that how can one become so frightening and vulnerable overnight. When the customers visit the store after the attack, they treat Rakhi like a guest, “They declare that they welcome her presence in their community” (Divakaruni 275). She wonders that how can they welcome me here, as I was born here. Stuart Hall claims that identities are fragmented and plural which keeps on changing with the course of time (Hall, “Who Needs” 4). She has to construct a new identity for herself where she can relocate herself.

So, Rakhi adaptation to American culture as a second generation immigrant starts from her childhood, but her complete absorption and assimilation into the American culture are a highly difficult one. Though born in America, America does not accept her completely as an American because of her colour and her race. However, she perceives herself as an American. She never feels that she is an outsider before the attack on World Trade Centre. The violent attack that Rakhi and her friends encounter strips their sense of belonging and identity. However, the attack also makes Rakhi more mature and helps her in understanding the plural nature of identity. She develops a sense of plural and multiple identities by discarding the fixed or singular notion of identity. She accepts her hyphenated identity of belonging to an Indian as well as an American community. She realises that the co-existence of two cultures will help to live a peaceable life in the hostland. The attack also brings Rakhi closer to her inscrutable family. She resolves all her disturbed familial relationships in the end.

Mrs. Gupta's Notion of Identity as an Immigrant:

Mrs Gupta is a dream interpreter. For her dreaming is the sole purpose of her life, as she says “my life is nothing but a dream” (Divakaruni 19). Mrs. Gupta helps people by interpreting their dreams, and also warns them for the future calamities, “I dream the dreams of other people [...] (Divakaruni, 7). After her marriage to Mr. Gupta, the couple moves to California. However, Mrs. Gupta continues her job of deciphering dreams of other people along with writing dream journals after she permanently settles in America. Mr. Gupta calls her wife in Bollywood style by singing a song which goes like this, “Mere sapnoke rani” but she never understands what it means, “queen of my dreams. Or was it my queen of dreams?” (Divakaruni 33).

The dreams of her mother are very symbolic and mysterious that reveals an image of India. Mrs. Gupta loves her family, and she does not want to disturb her family life due to her dream interpreting talent, so she creates a wall that prevents her husband and her daughter to come close to her. She always refuses to discuss with anyone about her dreams and her past in India. In order to retain the power of interpreting dreams she had acquired in India, she denies all the physical pleasures of her marital life. She creates an identity for herself which revolves only around her dream world and which no one dares to enter, not even her husband and her daughter. This distance creates a malfunctioning family in which Rakhi vainly strives for her mother's attention, and father sinks into the habit of drinking.

Establishing herself as an immigrant Indian Mrs. Gupta neither fully assimilates nor fully denies the culture of the hostland, but just adapts the life around her, without transforming or changing herself

completely. Her adaption and will to be authentic comes into focus when Rakhi's Chai Shop comes at the point of crumbling, and then she gives her daughter some suggestions so that she can make it more authentic or Indian. Later, Mrs. Gupta dies in a tragic car accident leaving everything behind, her dreams and her family. Mrs. Gupta remains Indian on the soil of America. She merely adjusts there and pays a very high cost in order to preserve the power of her dream interpreting talent. All her life, Mrs. Gupta preserves her identity by only being a dream interpreter and rejects all the important roles of her life, of being a good wife and a good mother.

Balwant Kaur aka Belle's Notion of Identity as an Immigrant:

Balwant Kaur, Rakhi's best friend and her partner in the Chai shop, belongs to a conservative Sikh family. They share everything with each other, and help each other financially as well as emotionally. Belle loves to shed everything related to her old self, and she loves being American. She is one of those immigrants who does not like to linger back on their past life. Belle helps Rakhi to survive when she gives divorce to Jonny. Belle knows everything about Rakhi, her weaknesses, her stubbornness, her suspicions and her passion for art. Rakhi accepts Belle's wildness and consoles her whenever she becomes restless. She is a bold and independent woman. She constantly fights with her parents because they always try to pull her back into the traditional Sikh culture, by convincing her to marry a typical Sikh man. However, she discards her old ways of living and wants to become a complete American. Belle believes in carving out new routes instead of lamenting over the lost "roots" (Bhabha 2). She equally loves the Chai house. Belle along with Rakhi put up everything they had in order to establish the Chai House. When the Chai House faces danger and comes on the verge of closing down, she becomes worried, as Rakhi says, "Chai House means even more to her than it does to me. She was the one who dreamed it into being" (Divakaruni 27). Belle loves to work on her own terms, without depending on or following anybody, "Think how much fun it would be, not having to work for anyone else, I've always wanted that" (Divakaruni 28). However, her parents never trust her. Therefore, Belle works even harder to prove them wrong.

Belle does not approve the idea of arranged marriage. She does not like to confine herself to only one man for the whole life. She wants freedom and individuality. Belle hates her parents' notions about arranged marriage as they want her to marry an Indian farmer. She does not want to spend her life only by fulfilling the duties of a typical Indian homemaker. She is a very audacious and determined woman. She refuses to marry Jespal, a family friend because according to Belle, he is a traditional man and who will probably try to control her after marriage. Following orthodox traditions and sticking to only one man for the whole life is very suffocating for her. She wants to live a free and happy life, without any social bondage and oppression. Her sense of identity lies in being an independent and self-sufficient woman. She discards all the societal and cultural norms and stigmas related to women.

In conclusion, the novel explores the life of Indian American women immigrants' notion of identity. The concept of identity is explored at the personal level as well as at the social and cultural level. The characters in the novel face identity crisis due to a political disaster in the hostland. It usually happens that whenever something erroneous happens in the hostland, immigrants are always first blamed for that. Consequently, violence and aggression are inflicted upon them. Immigrants are made to feel 'the other' by the natives of the hostland. Rakhi's inability to reconcile her American identity with her Indian identity is resolved in the end. Her father's stories about India and her mother's journal help her in understanding her 'roots'. The trauma and bewilderment of the attack make Rakhi mature, and she resolves her disturbed and broken relationships in the end along with finding her hyphenated identity by rejecting the singular and fixed notion of identity. Her familial and marital relationship reconciles in the end. She also accepts her identity as an Indian-American instead of thinking herself only as an American. Towards the end, she realises that being an immigrant she is half-Indian and half-American. She accepts her hyphenated identity. Rakhi's notion of identity changes over the course of time. The experience of Rakhi as an immigrant and her familial relationships play a significant part in the reformation and transformation of

heridentity.

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