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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Limits of Assimilation: Bewildered Second Generation Immigrant Identity in Chitra Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

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Abstract:

Early childhood is a time of identity formation and exploration. For individuals with an authentic heritage, there is usually only one culture they ascribe to, thus making the identification of cultural values, goals and career aspirations relatively uncomplicated. But for immigrants the search for their identity is an arduous task. Even more difficult for second generation immigrants who find it particularly hard to bring together their cultural and personal values as they search for their identity in the world they are presently part of. Chitra Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* is such a novel embedded with the combinations of social concerns, racial intolerance, multiculturalism and mystical realism. This novel explores the problems related to the assimilation of second generation immigrants who think of themselves as part of the territory they currently live in. Chitra Divakaruni takes up the life of Indian immigrants in the USA as the subject matter for her novel and tries to vivify the image of second generation immigrants, who have tried to assimilate the alien culture and have endeavoured to accept the changed identity, overthrowing the Indian cultural heritage in which they took their first breath.

Keywords: Diaspora, Immigration, Assimilation, Cultural identity and Identity Crisis Introduction

Interest in "question of identity" had dramatically enlarged over the last three decades to such a degree that it became a dominant theme in the contemporary fiction and sociological studies. In general, identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. Identity of an individual is not stable and is always in a state of flux because it is fashioned in a society and is solely a product of social construction. Identity is best constructed as being both relational and contextual. As defined:

Rather than being something fixed and universal, identity is a multi-faceted and often contradictory process situationally deployed that must be continuously negotiated and which is ever-changing. (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle 3-4)

Identity is a discursive product and therefore, holds the possibility to get remade and remodeled in new and innovative ways. Being a part of society the society impacts upon

both the individual and groups because, it is composed of different elements that plays influential role in the identity formation. As Stuart Hall asserts:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 222)

Culture plays a very poignant role in the construction of identity of an individual he is part off because; culture is viewed as a symbolic construction of a vast array of social group's experiences, the embodiment and the chronicle. That is why some scholars see identity as an offshoot of culture and label it as "cultural identity".

There are at least two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity". The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. In the second sense, identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. As Stuart Hall describes:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall 225)

Identity in Diaspora:

Culture plays an important role in constructing the identity of the human being and moreover helps to make him socialised in a society. Sometimes the society gets dispersed or scattered either by human actions or by natural calamities over which the human being has no control. The whole established scenario changes and the conditions for living in that scenario become unfeasible. Human being moves from that place to another place to continue his journey of life. This dispersion or the scattering of an established set up of which the human being was part off and moves to another place for the continuation of the journey of his life is termed as Diaspora. As a diasporian subject the question of identity comes forth in the new environment because identity (as both a concept and a lived experience) is central to discourses of Diaspora and in turn, "Diaspora has been crucial in unshackling identity from territoriality" (Gilroy 229).

As the individual migrates from his own home to live in some other geographical land his identity is questioned because of the roots. The individual may try to assimilate in the new land, culture, but unfortunately doesn't wholly and solely depend on his own will as there are limits of assimilation and depends on the citizens of the new land how much

they will let him assimilate into their own culture. This instability and the decentring of the individual both from his native land and in other social world constitute a crisis of identity for an individual. As a cultural critic Kobena Mercer observes:

Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. (43)

In case of Diaspora the immigrants feel certain problems due to the juxtaposition of multiculturalism and inter-racial interaction into the new geographical lands. It has been revealed that due to Diaspora (dispersion or scattering) an individual is un-homed and he loses the sense of belongingness and “thus suffers from sense of insecurity, identity crisis and alienation” (Kezia 53). So the identity of Diasporic citizens becomes a serious issue to deal with as described by Paul Gilroy:

Diasporic identities disrupt, challenge and critique essentialised conceptions of identities (as national, unchanging bestowed at birth, etc), partly by exposing how identities are produced outside or in opposition to the nation state. (85)

Diaspora is an amalgamation of ambivalences, conflicts, questions of belongings, placements and displacements, old values and new desires, identity crisis, changing global conditions and psychological generation and degeneration. The domestic space in diaspora becomes the scenario of chaos when especially the later generation comes to age and starts understanding the notions related to the cultures, traditions and the most important about identity. The problem arises mainly because there are differences between first generation and second generation immigrants. As in the case of first generation immigrants, they can relate their diasporic experiences to their own memories of a time before migration, and later generations for whom the new land has never been new and whose memories of the home land are more fragmented as they have nothing to relate with. John McLeod claims that:

Though the children born to migrants or the next generation occupy different spaces in the representative culture because of their better assimilation and better settlements, and their confusions, feelings of rootlessness and displacements are also less intense and are not of similar nature but their sense of identity borne from living in Diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents. (McLeod 33)

This consciousness gains a different dynamics for later generations, who quite literally do not have the same starting point as those who originally migrated. The later generations have not experienced migration and have no memories of the time before it. They are the heirs of the diasporic memories that are told and retold, re-appropriated and reinterpreted in light of here and now. Throughout their lives they construct their diasporic narratives of home and belonging out of these memories, together with their own experiences, their “migration routes” and “migrant roots”. Often for descendant of migrants the question

“where do I belong” is more pressing and the meanings they give to home are more complex (Stock 27).

In this paper my focus is on how the descendents of first generation immigrants assimilates completely within the culture of host countries but unfortunately are not accepted by them. In fact they are pushed back to ponder over where do they really belong to. For exploring this scenario I have opted Chitra Divakaruni’s novel *Queen of Dreams*, as this novel is entrenched with the lives of both first and second generation immigrants.

Analysis of Queen of Dreams

Belonging to the group of young Indian writers that emerged on the literary scene with a postcolonial diasporic identity after Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni’s position as a South Asian writer in English is distinct as well established. As someone who has spent more time outside India than in it, she has been accepted as an Asian American writer, living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical works. Most of her stories deal with the experience of immigrants to the United States, whose voice is rarely heard in other writings of Indian writers in English.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel, *Queen of Dreams* (2004), utilizes the magic realist mode. She takes up the life of the Indian immigrants in the USA as the subject matter of her novel and tries to vivify the image of women who have tried to assimilate into the alien culture and have tried to accept the changed identity, overthrowing the Indian cultural heritage in which they took their first breath. In this novel Chitra Divakaruni has portrayed Rakhi as a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, struggling to keep her footing with her family and with a world in alarming transition. Rakhi is a second generation Indian who has never been to the land of her ancestors but paints fanciful pictures of it in a bid at closeness with her roots. Rakhi Gupta is American, her parents not quite so. Bengali immigrants in California, they carry with them an Indian past they think they will not share with their daughter. Her mother Mrs Gupta has a gift of vision and ability to foresee and guide people through their fates, and this gift fascinates her daughter, but what is most important is Mrs Gupta’s spirit of solving other’s problems by not overthrowing her old culture and adjust herself with the surroundings of USA and her relationship with family members.

So, this gift of vision and ability to foresee and guide people through their fates fascinates Rakhi and by this thing Rakhi also feels isolated from her mother’s past in India and the dream world she inhabits, and she longs for something to bring them closer. Burdened by her own painful secret, Rakhi finds solace in the discovery, after her mother’s death, of her dream journals. “A dream is a telegram from the hidden world” (34), Rakhi’s mother writes in her journals, which open the long-closed door to Rakhi’s past.

As Rakhi attempts to find her identity, knowing little of India but drawn inexorably into a sometimes painful history she is only just discovering her life is shaken by new horrors. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 she and her friends must deal with

dark new complexities about their acculturation. The ugly violence visited upon them forces the reader to view those terrible days from the viewpoint of immigrants and Indian Americans whose only crime was the colour of their skin or the fact that they wore a turban. As their notions of citizenship are questioned, Rakhi's search for identity intensifies. Haunted by her experiences of racism, she nevertheless finds unexpected blessings: the possibility of new love and understanding for her family.

The novel gives intimate first person accounts of first and second generation immigrant existence. *Queen of Dreams* is blended with the themes like creation of own space after the scattering of an established set up, family relationships, pride in one's heritage, identity crisis, and keeping up the traditional culture. *Queen of Dreams* is divided between India and the US, although set entirely in America. To Rakhi, as no doubt to many US born Indians, India represents the mystical and the longed for quite literally a land of dreams, and one that she is on a quest to understand, through the cryptic medium of her mother's dream journal.

Queen of Dreams illustrates the deceitful, arrogant, hypocrisy and xenophobia of the Americans towards the South Asian immigrants. Early childhood is a time of identity exploration and formation. For individuals with an authentic heritage, there is usually only one culture they ascribe, thus making the identification of the cultural values, goals and career aspirations relatively uncomplicated. But for immigrants the search for their identity can be an arduous task because of their roots and it becomes even more complicated for the second generation immigrants to blend in their cultural and personal values.

So the second generation immigrants who have tried their best to adapt everything of the American life style by leaving their own cultural heritage gets bewildered about their identity and broods over that if we are not Americans then what we are. So the question of identity comes forth in the life of the second generation immigrants, where do we actually belong to.

In *Queen of Dreams* Rakhi the main protagonist, second generation immigrant remain always in dilemma whether she is American or Indian. It is obvious that Rakhi consider the adopted country as her own as she is brought up in that atmosphere. And the case of discrimination for second generation is a psychological torment. As Femke Stock argues:

The differences between first generation migrants, who can relate their Diasporic experiences to their own memories of a time before migration and the later generations for whom the new land has never been new and whose memories of the homeland are more fragmented (Stock 24).

Rakhi is quite intimate with her Indian friend Belle since they are roommates during their freshman year at Berkeley. They have accompanied each other in every moment of their life whether happy or troubled ones and always pressured each other in the same manner as Indian parents know how take care of their off springs. They have shared precious moments of each other's lives. They have confessed to each other things that they have

never dared to tell anyone before, and seen themselves newly through each other's lives. Both Rakhi and Belle are sometimes thinking where they actually belong to and what did they feel themselves.

They have stayed up night's talking about how Rakhi sometimes feels too American; how Belle would love to shed the last vestiges of her desi-ness. (15)

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 she and her friends deal with dark new complexities about their acculturation. The ugly violence visited upon them forces the reader to view those terrible days from the point of view of immigrants and Indian Americans whose only crime was the colour of their skin or the fact that they wore a turban. As their notions of citizenship are questioned, Rakhi's search for identity intensifies. Haunted by her experiences of racism, she nevertheless finds unexpected blessings: the possibility of new love and understanding for her family.

The violence unleashed in the American society on account of the bombing of the World Trade Centre takes a great toll on the lives of the immigrant. The immigrants living in the America are seen with suspicion. They are branded as terrorists for keeping the shop open they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. Chitra Divakurani in "Queen of Dreams: Reading immigrant identity" remarks:

The ways that spiritual and familial homeland traditions both support immigrant identity in host countries, yet fail to provide solutions to the alienation of immigrants in those same host countries in the times of national crisis. (23)

Sonny, Rakhi's husband tells them not to open the shop because the people of the America will think that they don't care about the folks who died or America being attacked. They will think that all they cared about is making money in these tensed conditions. Argument goes on in between Sonny, Rakhi, Belle and Mr Gupta and finally it is decided that they will open the shop to provide a valuable community service. As soon as they open the shop they are attacked and labelled as the terrorists and obscene words are hurled at them:

"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" (267).

Ruminating over these words which the young man threw upon the people in the shop Rakhi begins to think upon her identity. She thinks that: "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?" (271).

All the built in feeling of being American is lost and Rakhi suffers from multiple stress and is forced to construct a gender identity where she has to locate herself, because until now she was thinking that she was American but this identity is snatched from her in a very skimpy time. After some time he says, 'so many people lost so much today'.

I nod. I think of the people in the towers and in the airplanes, who lost their lives. The people grieving tonight, who lost their loved ones? Leaders and decision makers, who lost belief in their invincibility, and people like us, seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of the strangers, who lost a sense of belonging. (272)

Rakhi desperately wants to succeed as a painter or as a lucrative shop owner. Rakhi as a Diasporic subject 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.

Conclusion

While concluding this paper it can be said that it mainly focuses on the problems faced by the second generation immigrants in host countries. This paper shows how immigrants especially second generation, even after completely assimilating themselves into the host countries are not accepted. They are forced, hurled abuses, attacked and their identities are snatched from them and are finally left bewildered and confused. Queen of Dreams explores the characters who feel isolated, clustered, disoriented when their identities are taken away from them. Moreover, this paper shows that it is not the choice of the immigrants (whether first or second generation) to assimilate into the host culture but it depends on the people of the host country how much they will let immigrants assimilate into their culture.

The immigrant's dream of wedding themselves to the foreign soil and becoming foreigners is shown magnificently by the novelist. The troubles and tribulations they have to go through for achieving this goal are made known or publicised. The novelist depicts the problems of the people emigrating to America and the dream of new life which tempts them to go there. The immigrants think that America holds out to them the promise of a bright future, a world free from inhibitions, racial differences based on multinational customs, religions, traditions, languages, etc but the reality is exposed by the novelist how the modern wasteland haunts the immigrants. In spite of the fact that the second generation Indian immigrants spend their whole life in America they aren't treated as the Americans because of their brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with the darker circles under them, the black crinkles of the hair looks suddenly alien, their dream gets shattered and the question again arises in the mind of the immigrants who they are and where do they belong to?

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