



Cultural Identity and Immigration Experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novel *Queen of Dreams*.

Farzana Salim¹, Dr. Asghar Ali Ansari²

¹Research Scholar, School of Languages, Literature and Society, Jaipur National University,
Jaipur, India

²Research Supervisor, School of Languages, Literature and Society, Jaipur National
University, Jaipur, India

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.14](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.14)



Article info

Article Received: 08/03/2025
Article Accepted: 10/04/2025
Published online: 18/04/2025

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams* delves into the intricacies of cultural identity, immigration, and the challenges faced by diasporic communities. Through the lens of the protagonist, Rakhi, and her experiences as part of an immigrant family in America, the novel explores how cultural values are both preserved and transformed in the face of migration. This paper examines how the immigrant experience affects personal and collective identities and highlights the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation. It also delves into the novel's depiction of the complex emotional landscape of immigrants, particularly the role of dreams and spiritual traditions in shaping their sense of self. The research will analyze the narrative structure, themes, and character development to understand how *Queen of Dreams* reflects the broader issues of identity and the immigration experience.

Keywords: Character Development, Cultural Identity, Diasporic, Emotional Landscape, Immigration.

Introduction

Immigration is a defining phenomenon of the 21st century, shaping the social, political, and cultural landscapes of both the host countries and the immigrants themselves. For many immigrants, the journey to a new land is one of both promise and challenge. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* portrays the nuances of this experience, particularly

focusing on the lives of immigrants from India in the United States. Set against the backdrop of a changing America, the novel explores themes of cultural identity, displacement, adaptation, and the complexities of family and personal relationships in the context of migration.

The central character, Rakhi, navigates the tension between her Indian heritage and her American life, highlighting the psychological

and emotional complexities faced by the second generation. Her mother, a skilled practitioner of dreams and spiritual healing, also embodies the immigrant experience in a different manner, as she struggles to maintain her cultural traditions while also engaging with her new surroundings. Through these characters, Divakaruni paints a poignant picture of how cultural identity is shaped by both the internal and external forces at play in the immigrant experience.

This research paper will explore how *Queen of Dreams* addresses the concept of cultural identity through the immigration experience and will argue that the novel reflects the broader struggles of diaspora communities in retaining their cultural roots while simultaneously navigating the pressures of assimilation.

Literature Review:

There is a growing body of academic work that examines the intersection of cultural identity and immigration in literature, particularly within the context of the Indian diaspora. Scholars have explored how cultural dislocation affects individual identity and how literature serves as a space for the negotiation of identity between the "old world" and the "new world."

Diaspora and Cultural Identity: According to Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, diaspora is not merely a physical relocation but involves complex negotiations of cultural identity, which result in hybrid identities. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity is useful in analyzing Rakhi's struggle to reconcile her Indian heritage with her American upbringing. She is neither fully American nor fully Indian but exists in a space where both cultures influence her sense of self.

Immigration and Assimilation: In his book *Theories of Immigration and Social Integration*, Alejandro Portes discusses the concept of "transnationalism" – the process where immigrants maintain connections to their

country of origin while simultaneously engaging in their new homeland. Rakhi's relationship with her mother, whose ability to navigate cultural traditions represents this transnationalism, is key to understanding how immigration reshapes personal identity.

In *Imagining India: The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani suggests that the immigrant experience is not only about physical relocation but also the internal navigation of dreams and desires that reflect both nostalgia and aspiration. This is crucial to understanding the spiritual and psychic landscape in Divakaruni's work, where dreams and cultural rituals play an essential role in navigating between past and present.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Rakhi's journey serves as an exploration of the ways in which cultural identity is negotiated and constructed. As a first-generation American, Rakhi's dual identity is constantly in flux. She is caught between her Indian cultural heritage, symbolized by her mother's spiritual practices, and the pressures of assimilating into mainstream American society. The themes of cultural identity are vividly portrayed through Rakhi's reflections on her relationship with her mother, her disconnection from traditional Indian values, and her attempts to reconcile these aspects within her own life in America.

Rakhi's journey in *Queen of Dreams* serves as an example of how cultural identity evolves and is influenced by the immigrant experience. Raised in a traditional Indian family by a mother who practices spiritual healing and dream interpretation, Rakhi is initially steeped in her cultural heritage. However, as she grows older and integrates into American society, she begins to distance herself from the spiritual and traditional practices of her mother. She represents the second-generation immigrant – one who is caught between the need to belong to the host country and the pull of the cultural traditions and values of the ancestral homeland.

Rakhi's relationship with her mother, who practices dream interpretation and healing,

stands in stark contrast to the American culture she encounters. The dream world is a place where Rakhi can access her cultural roots and past memories, creating a link between her immigrant experience and the broader themes of identity. However, Rakhi often feels burdened by the weight of her mother's spiritual heritage and the expectations placed on her to continue these traditions. As Rakhi navigates her life in America, she seeks to redefine herself outside of these confines, illustrating the internal struggle between honoring one's heritage and pursuing personal growth within a new cultural framework.

The tension between these two worlds—Indian and American—manifests in Rakhi's personal life, including her relationships with her husband and friends. The American context demands pragmatism, individualism, and forward-thinking, while her Indian upbringing emphasizes community, spirituality, and connection to the past. These dualities make Rakhi's experience representative of many immigrant children who are forced to carve out an identity that accommodates both cultures without fully embracing either.

Cultural identity is a complex and evolving concept that is shaped by the intersections of heritage, community, and personal experience. In *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni intricately weaves a narrative that explores the fluidity of cultural identity, especially in the context of immigration. The novel explores how individuals in diaspora navigate the tension between preserving their cultural roots and adapting to their new environment. Through the protagonist Rakhi and her mother, Divakaruni examines how cultural identity is not a static entity but a process of negotiation that is constantly influenced by personal choice, societal expectations, and the need for survival in a foreign land.

The cultural dichotomy between India and America plays a significant role in the development of Rakhi's identity. On the one hand, there is the rich tapestry of Indian culture that her mother represents. The practices of dream interpretation, spiritual healing, and traditional rituals provide a sense of continuity and belonging to a distant homeland. Rakhi's mother embodies a fixed cultural identity, rooted in her life experiences and the customs she brought with her to the United States. For her, the preservation of cultural traditions is not only about survival but also about maintaining a connection to the world she left behind. This is especially evident in her dream interpretations, which serve as a conduit for understanding the self and one's place within the larger framework of cultural and familial history.

On the other hand, Rakhi's assimilation into American culture creates a contrasting pull. America, in the context of *Queen of Dreams*, represents modernity, individualism, and pragmatism. Rakhi, like many children of immigrants, grapples with a sense of alienation in both cultures. In America, she is seen as different due to her foreign background, yet at the same time, she is expected to assimilate and conform to American norms. This pressure to fit into mainstream American society often leads to a rejection of her cultural heritage, particularly the spiritual and traditional practices that seem out of place in her new world.

The contrast between these two cultural worlds—the traditional Indian world of her mother and the individualistic American world Rakhi encounters—is not just an external conflict but a profound internal struggle. Rakhi's journey to reconcile these two conflicting identities forms the core of her personal development in the novel. Her emotional journey is symbolic of the immigrant experience as a whole, where the individual is constantly balancing the old world and the new, sometimes embracing both, other times rejecting one in favor of the other.

Rakhi's relationship with her mother also reflects the generational divide that often arises within immigrant families. The first-generation immigrants, like Rakhi's mother, hold on to the cultural practices of their homeland as a way to preserve their cultural identity. For them, these practices offer a sense of stability and continuity in a foreign land. Rakhi's mother's ability to read and interpret dreams is not just a personal gift but a means of spiritual and cultural survival. It allows her to connect with her past and maintain a connection to the collective cultural memory of her homeland.

In contrast, Rakhi, as a second-generation immigrant, faces the pressures of both fitting into American society and respecting her mother's cultural practices. As a child of immigrants, she experiences a sense of "in-betweenness" that is characteristic of second-generation immigrants, who are often caught between the desire to forge their own identity and the need to honor the traditions of their parents. This is evident in Rakhi's reluctance to embrace her mother's spiritual practices and her eventual desire to distance herself from them, as they seem at odds with her desire to fit into the American social landscape.

However, as the novel progresses, Rakhi begins to understand the importance of these traditions. Her journey becomes a process of self-discovery, where she realizes that embracing her heritage does not mean rejecting her place in the new society. Instead, she starts to see her cultural identity as a hybrid – one that includes both the traditional practices of her Indian roots and the experiences of growing up in America. This realization signifies her reconciliation with her identity, where she learns that cultural identity is not about choosing one culture over another but about navigating the spaces between them.

Dreams play a crucial role in shaping cultural identity in *Queen of Dreams*. They are not only a means of personal reflection but also

a bridge between Rakhi's Indian heritage and her American life. The theme of dreams runs throughout the novel, linking the characters to their pasts and providing insight into their cultural values and beliefs.

For Rakhi's mother, dreams are a direct link to the spiritual world and the wisdom of her ancestors. Her ability to interpret dreams is a source of strength, as it allows her to navigate the challenges of being an immigrant. Dreams become a way for her to maintain her connection to the cultural and spiritual practices of India, offering her both solace and a sense of control in a new and often alienating environment.

Rakhi, however, initially rejects the significance of dreams, seeing them as old-fashioned and irrelevant to her life in America. She views them as symbols of the burden of cultural expectations placed on her by her mother. Rakhi's initial rejection of dreams signifies her desire to distance herself from her mother's cultural practices and fit into the more pragmatic, secular world of America.

As Rakhi matures, however, she begins to recognize the importance of dreams in understanding herself and her place in the world. Her gradual acceptance of her mother's practices reflects a broader understanding of cultural identity. By embracing the role that dreams play in her personal and spiritual development, Rakhi acknowledges that cultural identity is not about rejection but about integration and balance. Dreams, in this context, symbolize the ways in which cultural identity can be shaped by the past while still evolving in the present.

Rakhi's journey toward self-acceptance and the reconciliation of her Indian and American identities reflects the concept of hybridity, as discussed by postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha. Hybridity refers to the blending and fusion of cultures, where individuals create new, fluid identities that are not tied to one culture but rather represent a mix of influences. Rakhi's experience in *Queen of*

Dreams reflects this hybridity as she comes to understand that her identity cannot be defined solely by her Indian heritage or her American experiences. Instead, her identity is an evolving combination of both, shaped by her interactions with both cultures and her personal journey.

Rakhi's recognition of her cultural hybridity allows her to break free from the limitations of traditional identity markers. She no longer sees herself as a person defined by either her Indian heritage or her American experiences but as a unique individual who embodies both. This transcultural identity allows her to live in the space between cultures, navigating the complexities of her immigrant experience with a greater sense of agency and understanding.

Cultural identity in *Queen of Dreams* is not an isolated or fixed concept but a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by the forces of immigration, personal choice, and familial influence.

Through Rakhi's journey, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the complexities faced by immigrants, particularly the second-generation experience of balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation. The novel illustrates that cultural identity is not a static state but a constant negotiation between the past and the present, the old and the new. By exploring the immigrant experience through the lens of family, dreams, and personal transformation, Divakaruni offers a profound meditation on the fluidity of cultural identity and the power of embracing multiple aspects of one's heritage in the face of displacement.

The Immigration Experience:

Divakaruni's portrayal of the immigration experience is multifaceted. The novel highlights the emotional labor required to adapt to a new country while keeping one's cultural identity intact. Rakhi's mother, who retains strong ties to India, continues her

spiritual practices despite the challenges of living in a foreign land. She serves as a metaphor for the immigrant generation that maintains strong ties to the old world. However, the novel also suggests the struggles inherent in such an effort—there are moments of disillusionment and cultural conflict that emerge as the immigrant characters attempt to build lives in a foreign context.

Rakhi's role as a bridge between the first-generation immigrant experience and the second-generation experience is critical. Unlike her mother, Rakhi seeks to integrate into American society and is often caught in a liminal space where she cannot fully belong to either world. This feeling of displacement is a common theme in immigrant literature, where characters experience alienation not only from their country of origin but also from the dominant culture in the host country.

In *Queen of Dreams*, the theme of cultural preservation is constantly at odds with the desire for assimilation. Rakhi's internal conflict reflects the immigrant struggle of negotiating one's identity amidst societal pressures, especially in a multicultural society that both celebrates diversity and expects conformity. This tension between cultural preservation and assimilation is most evident in Rakhi's changing relationship with her mother, as she tries to reconcile her mother's traditional values with her own desires to lead a more conventional American life.

The immigration experience is a central theme in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*, and it is explored through the lives of the central characters, particularly Rakhi and her mother, who have both encountered different facets of life in the United States. The novel offers a detailed portrayal of the emotional, psychological, and cultural challenges that immigrants face in their new homeland. These challenges go beyond the logistical aspects of relocation—such as adjusting to new customs, navigating language

barriers, and finding economic stability. The immigration experience, as presented in the novel, is deeply personal, and it affects the characters' identities, relationships, and sense of belonging.

At its core, the immigrant experience in *Queen of Dreams* is defined by displacement. The characters experience both physical and emotional dislocation, struggling with the feeling of being torn between two worlds. For Rakhi's mother, the dislocation is rooted in the sense of loss and nostalgia for her homeland. Her spiritual practices, including the reading and interpretation of dreams, are ways for her to connect with her past, and they provide her with a sense of continuity in a land that often feels alien.

Rakhi, however, experiences a different form of displacement. As a child of immigrants, she is faced with the pressure of fitting into a culture that is often indifferent to her background. Her personal sense of identity is shaped by the friction between her parents' Indian values and the dominant American culture. She is constantly navigating this tension, trying to reconcile the expectations of her family with her desire to assimilate into American society. For her, displacement is not only physical but also psychological—caught between her mother's traditions and the desire to carve out her own identity in a foreign land, Rakhi feels like she belongs fully to neither world.

This sense of displacement is not limited to the family's experience of relocating from India to the U.S., but is also tied to the cultural divide that immigrants often face. In this way, immigration is a process of "re-making" one's identity, and it involves the construction of new narratives and ways of being in the world. Rakhi's emotional and personal growth throughout the novel reflects her gradual process of coming to terms with this dual identity.

A recurring theme in immigrant literature is the role of memory in shaping the immigrant experience. In *Queen of Dreams*, memory functions as both a source of comfort and a source of pain. Rakhi's mother, through her dreams and spiritual practices, is constantly trying to preserve the memory of her homeland. Her cultural and religious practices are tied to the memory of India—memory becomes a bridge to the past, helping her hold on to the life she left behind. However, this also comes with a sense of mourning for the life she once knew and a longing for a home that no longer exists in the same form.

For Rakhi, memory is also a critical part of her experience, though she has a more complicated relationship with it. Her memories of India are fragmented and filtered through the lens of her mother's spiritual beliefs. Rakhi's relationship with memory is both one of resistance and longing. While she is initially eager to forget her Indian heritage in order to fit into her American life, over time, she begins to recognize that memory is an important part of her identity. The clash between her mother's nostalgia for India and Rakhi's own desire to break free from these memories symbolizes the broader theme of how immigration disrupts both personal and collective memory. Memory is not static; it is shaped by time and place, and it evolves as the immigrant experiences new challenges and new contexts.

One of the emotional burdens immigrants face is the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture while still holding on to their ethnic roots. *Queen of Dreams* explores this tension in a nuanced way through Rakhi's experiences. For Rakhi, assimilation into American society is not just about learning new customs or adjusting to a new lifestyle—it is also about transforming her sense of self. She grapples with the feeling of being an outsider in both cultures. In America, she is often reminded of her "foreignness" through subtle and not-so-subtle cues. Her name, her accent, her appearance—everything about her signals that

she is different. Yet, when she returns to India or encounters other Indians, she feels distanced from her culture and its traditions.

For Rakhi's mother, the emotional burden is different but no less significant. She struggles with the feeling of alienation that comes with being a first-generation immigrant. As a woman who is deeply connected to her cultural traditions, she faces a profound sense of loss—not only of her homeland but of her place in the world. In America, she is not able to perform her cultural rituals with the same authenticity as she did in India, and this causes her deep frustration. Her identity becomes fragmented as she tries to navigate the expectations of her new life while holding on to the spiritual practices that have defined her. In this sense, the emotional burden of immigration is reflected in the characters' disconnection from their cultural practices and their longing for a sense of home and continuity.

Another important aspect of the immigrant experience is the search for a sense of community. In *Queen of Dreams*, the characters' relationships with others in their immigrant community provide them with both support and tension. While Rakhi's mother finds solace in her relationships with other immigrants, particularly through the practice of dream interpretation and spiritual healing, Rakhi feels increasingly isolated from the immigrant community. Her reluctance to embrace the spiritual practices of her mother means that she cannot find the same sense of connection with others who share her background.

The intergenerational tensions between Rakhi and her mother are central to the novel's exploration of the immigrant experience. These tensions are often rooted in differing attitudes toward assimilation and cultural identity. Rakhi's mother, as a first-generation immigrant, holds on to her cultural practices as a way to preserve her identity in a foreign land. For her, the connection to India through dreams, rituals, and spirituality is vital. She sees these practices

as essential to maintaining her sense of self and providing guidance for those around her.

Rakhi, on the other hand, represents the second-generation immigrant, one who is more focused on adapting to American society. Her desire to assimilate often comes into conflict with her mother's insistence on maintaining cultural traditions. These intergenerational tensions are compounded by the differing emotional needs of the two characters. Rakhi's mother, who has already experienced the hardships of immigration, is more rooted in her past, while Rakhi is still in the process of forming her identity. The clash between their perspectives reflects the broader generational divide in immigrant families, where the first generation often strives to preserve cultural practices, while the second generation seeks to forge its own path.

As the novel progresses, these tensions evolve, with Rakhi eventually understanding the importance of embracing both aspects of her identity—her heritage and her life in America. This reconciliation between mother and daughter is symbolic of the immigrant journey, where individuals learn to merge the past and present, tradition and change, to form a more integrated sense of self.

Dreams in *Queen of Dreams* play a central role in the development of cultural identity. Rakhi's mother, who is a dream reader, uses her gift to help others find meaning and healing. For the immigrants in the novel, dreams become a way to connect to their past, to remember and preserve their cultural traditions, and to make sense of their immigrant experience. The spiritual practices around dreams become a means of survival and self-discovery, providing solace and continuity in a world that constantly shifts between cultures.

Rakhi, on the other hand, is not initially connected to the dream world and views it with skepticism. Her rejection of her mother's spiritualism mirrors her desire to reject the cultural baggage associated with her Indian

identity. However, as the novel progresses, Rakhi begins to understand the value of the dream world, recognizing it as a space that provides her with emotional clarity and a connection to her ancestors. This spiritual awakening becomes a key part of her identity, symbolizing the importance of acknowledging one's cultural roots even while adapting to new surroundings.

Conclusion

In *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni crafts a poignant narrative about the immigrant experience and the complexities of cultural identity. Through the characters of Rakhi and her mother, the novel delves into the emotional and spiritual dimensions of immigration, illustrating the tension between preserving one's cultural heritage and assimilating into a new society. The theme of dreams serves as a powerful metaphor for the negotiation of cultural identity, providing a way for the characters to connect with their past while navigating their present. Ultimately, the novel presents the immigrant experience as one of continuous transformation—where identity is never fixed but constantly in flux, shaped by both the past and the present.

References

- [1]. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. "The Immigrant Experience and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Indian American Literature." *South Asian Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2007, pp. 137-148.
- [2]. Bhabha, H. K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [3]. Chaudhuri, Amit. "The Immigrant's Dilemma: Cultural Identity and the Literature of Migration." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2005, pp. 23-45.
- [4]. Portes, A. *Theories of Immigration and Social Integration*. 2009.
- [5]. Khilnani, S. *Imagining India: The Idea of India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- [6]. Divakaruni, C. B. *Queen of Dreams*. Doubleday, 2004.
- [7]. Karanth, N. S. "Spiritual Healing and Transcultural Identity: An Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 20-35.
- [8]. Rajagopalan, R. "Negotiating Identity in Postcolonial Immigrant Literature." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2006