



FRACTURED IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

K.MUTHAMIL SELVI

Part-time Research Scholar

M.K.University, Madurai & Associate Professor of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi

ABSTRACT



One of the vital features in the development of humane quality is identity. This paper is concerned about the stranded identity of those who left their homes and got integrated in an alien culture. While trying to assimilate with the other culture, in a salad bowl model, they maintain certain basic traits of their indigenous culture. The settlers are literally cut off from their roots and try to acclimatize to a new culture. But their disappointment the transition could not be done smoothly and perfectly which is expressed in the conflicting identity. This leads to a sense of alienation, a sense of loss nostalgic desires. Chitra Banerjee herself an immigrant to the USA, focuses on this conflict. She is adept in describing the plight of immigrants in a realistic, harmonious manner in her novels. *Queen of Dreams* presents the fractured identity of both Mrs. Gupta, the queen of dreams and her daughter Rakhi which is equally congruent.

Key Words: Identity crisis, immigrant, dual culture, conflict, generation, dreams.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Immigrant literature captures the wrenching experience of relocation in an alien country. The most acute obsessions of the settlers include nostalgia as well as intergenerational conflicts between immigrant parents and American born children. Chitra Banerjee as a writer, has enormous raw material, portrays the conflicting identity drawn from dual cultures with two sets of views and paradigms juxtaposing each other. Her literary outputs treat all shades of these such as alienation, marginalization, despair, nostalgia, readjustment and assimilation. She deliberates about the cultural-in-betweenness which her characters experience and the resultant, identity crisis.

In the United States of America, a cross fertilization of culture takes place among the settlers. It is a land of opportunities and a culturally pluralistic society. It is a land that opens up avenues for aspiring community from all over the world, who

are after wealth and prosperity. The ambitious in pursuit of economic betterment, doesn't bother to uproot themselves from their cultural moorings. Green pastures and an opulent life style woo them to migrate to countries which offer them better living conditions. The immigrant population which relocates with dreams and aspirations also carries with them their native identity. The very reluctance to disrobe his material and cultural identity makes it hard for him to assimilate in the land of aspiration. The natives are not inclined to accept them without reservation. The harsh reality causes innumerable problems which lead them to various tensions in the social fabric.

Chitra Banerjee's works are solicitous about the women of all races and faiths who share the common female experience. In an article, "Dissolving Boundaries" she states,

My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibility and individual happiness, which is in a way, at the centre of the conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, as the nurturer and as sacrificing himself for the good of the family, and the western concept of self happiness(3).

She also contrasts the lines and perceptions of first-generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in a foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian-American experience of grappling with two identities. She highlights the trans-cultural pulse beating with ups and downs in the fusion of eastern values and western ethos. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity.

Queen of Dreams, considers issues which finds an immigrant at the cross road in search of identity. What does it mean to be a woman of colour in the U.S? How does contemporary India appear to an U.S. immigrant? How far does the American education and Freedom support the immigrant women? *Queen of Dreams* explores these issues and depicts the common experiences of the Indian diaspora with excellent melody.

The author depicts an enchanting story of a second generation immigrant trying to divine her identity, with her mother who has the gift of interpreting dreams. The picture of ancient India and contemporary America is simultaneously projected through the mother, who migrated to the U.S with her husband and daughter Rakhi. The young artist Rakhi is a divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, trying to find her footing in a world which is alarmingly in the process of transition, torn by violence and horror.

Mrs.Gupta, the 'queen' of dreams, retains her Indianness in order to retain the powers she has acquired in India-the power of interpreting dreams-which otherwise would desert her.

Dreams would not come to me in California because it was too new place. Its people had settled there only few hundred years ago and neither its air nor its earth, the

elements from which we most draw sustenance was weighed yet with dreams. (QD 177)

She is also forbidden to squander her body in search of physical pleasures. Nevertheless she falls in love, marries and moves across the oceans to America with her husband. Not wishing to give up the powers, nor willing to reside in the caves with elders, Mrs.Gupta strikes a balance between the two choices. She resolves to choose the third where she could keep, "the lesser ones so that I might help others in the world" (QD 175).

Meanwhile Rakhi is born and the tinsel sheen of her marriage who no longer holds her attention. The night before she had left Calcutta, her aunt had given her a gift- a pouch with a handful of earth collected from the walkway in front of the caves, "ground that centuries of dream tellers had stepped on"(QD177). She wondered how it would be of any use to her in America. She had tried scattering some in her garden, and even added a pinch with her food but of no avail. Desperately she places the pouch under her pillow and to her wonder dreams began to surface. The dreams-the other people's lives- descend on her, warned her to warm them and help them because for her, "a dream is a telegraph from the hidden world"(QD 34).

Her link is inextricably bound with Indian soil as the California soil does not possess the essential ingredients to provide power to dream dreams. Culture, which includes food habits, dress, language and rituals became some of the essential constituents of any immigrant. Mrs. Gupta maintains her culture by mostly cooking Indian food. Raki confesses,

At home we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture. (QD 7)

Mrs.Gupta clad herself as Indians do either a saree or salwarkameez. She usually restricts herself within the confinement of her house and only ventures out to pass the message of her dreams to her clients. She adapts the strategy of segregation and integration in order to enforce an existentialist sense of identity. To her, her identity is no great an issue as she maintains most of her Indian culture

and tradition. She adjusts and accommodates conveniently, yet her sense of alienation disturbs her. According to Edward Said in his popular essay *Culture and Imperialism*, "an exile is tender in the beginning, becomes stronger in the process and then becomes perfect"(407). Mrs.Gupta remains tender accepting most of the changes revolutionizing America and adapting to it, not so much affected by it. She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter.

The dream-teller's family life is wanting in interpersonal relationship. Her forced distance between her husband and her daughter creates a malfunctioning family where Rakhi longs for maternal love and the husband plumps into a habit of drinking. The paternal relationship is amiss and alarming. Rakhi is aware of the accessibility to her father but she disregards him and prefers the company of her mysterious mother. The differences between her parents leave her in a sense of isolation leading to identity crisis. She experiences herself as an abandoned child when she could not follow her mother and win her affection. As she talks about her mother, she says,

...My mother-secretive, stubborn,
unreliable-couldn't hold a tune to save her
life. I wanted to be just like her. (QD8)

Moreover the consequences of the choice of Mrs.Gupta to practice her talent of interpreting dream proves to be devastating..., Mrs.Gupta and Rakhi are anguishing under the banner of Identity crisis which affects the genuine intensity of the mother daughter relationship. Familial reconciliation remains at large and neither of them could reconstruct the affected relationship. This leads them head on into the crisis of eluding a stable identity, thereby results in projecting them as victims of identity crisis, which forms the central theme of Chitra Banerjee's *Queen of Dreams*.

Works Cited

- Divakaurni, Chitra Banerjee. *Queen of Dreams*.
United States of America: Double Day. 2004.
_____. "Dissolving Boundaries." *Personal Essays*
(1997). www.chitradivakaruni.com.

Jaidka, Manju. "Expatriate writing from India". *The Expatriate Indian Writing in English*,
Eds.T.Vinoda and P.Shaijata. New Delhi:
Prestige, 2006.

Kezia, Doris. "Self-Identity through Adapting and Adopting of Host Culture by Immigrants: A Study of Chitra Banerjee's *Queen of Dreams*". *Poetcrit* 22.1 (Jan 2009): 53-60.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London.
Vintage, 1994.