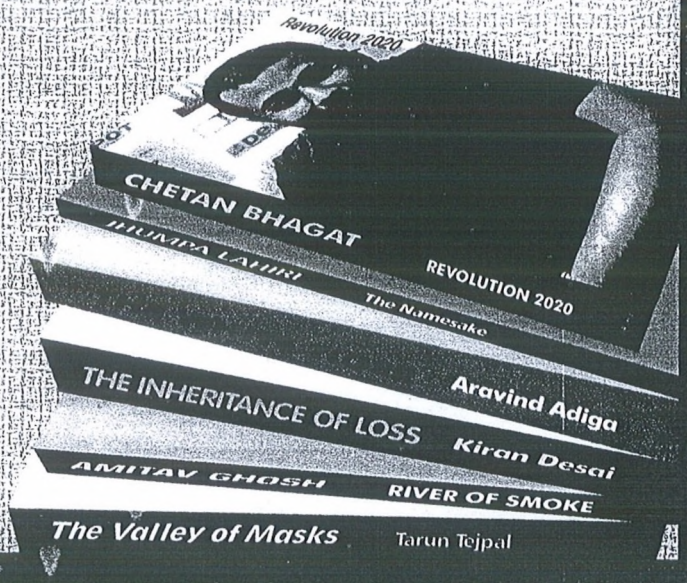
21st Century Indian Novel

In English

Emerging Issues and Challenges

Edited by

Jagdish Batra



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These gaps are filled in by the readers' imagination and ensure reader's interest in the text, for if everything is explained, the result could be boredom.

Indian Dreams, thus, notes in great detail the wide differences in lifestyle and attitude of people belonging to two different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds, separated by thousands of miles. It also provides glimpses into the lives of the now-impoverished former kings. In this, the novel approximates the colonial discourse meant to fix into pre-conceived image of the western tourist. Style-wise, it is an accomplished novel. The narrative is shaped by the romantic relationship between Akash and Norma, which is, however, explored mainly at the physical level: the moment they are together, they can think only of sex. There still seems scope for probe into the deeper emotional aspect of this relationship. Also, the turmoil in the life of Akash's wife, who loses her unborn child and takes it to heart so that she is never able to come out of the trance-like state, is also not adequately realized.

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Existential Immigrant Lives: Alienated Protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

C. BHARATHI & S. KALAMANI

Existentialism, broadly defined, is a set of philosophical systems concerned with free will, choice and personal responsibility. Existentialism does not deal with the state of existence; it depicts the act of existing of the individual. According to Sheikh Mushtaq Ahmad, "Existentialism, in the strict sense, is not a system of philosophy but an approach to the study of man [. . .], it is not only the expression of the moods and experiences of man but also an agonized cry against all the processes of dehumanization, essentialism, objectivization, bad faith, alienation and an all-embracing intellectualism." (14)

The existentialists firmly believe that every individual is unique and free to define himself. But his freedom is limited and laden with responsibility. The existential attitude does not show any faith in determinism. It is seen that in the moments of crisis and complications, the existential protagonist feels quite alienated and forlorn. This sense of alienation, along with the feeling that his very existence is threatened, deepens his sense of desperation.

The existential writers are of two classes—theistic or Christian and atheistic. The Christian existentialists believe in the supremacy of God. They maintain that an individual is inseparable from God, the Ultimate Reality. He has true being in the Being of God. The atheists, on the other hand, do not believe in the existence of God. According to them, the relationship between men and the world may be explained without any reference to such reality as God or Being. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus are atheists while Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Marcel are theists. Existentialism may perhaps be considered most fruitfully as a historical movement in which connec-

tions of dependence and influence can be traced from one writer to another. Thus, even if two writers who are both rightly called existentialist differ enormously in doctrine; they can be placed in the same family tree.

Existentialism deals with the problems faced by man in his acts of choice which is not the case with religion. Perhaps the most prominent theme in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humanity's primary distinction according to most existentialists is freedom to choose. They have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices and that creates his or her own nature. Choice is, therefore, central to human existence; and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose a choice.

> Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. Since individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists argued, they must accept the responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads. The roots of existential freedom lie in the soil of authentic commitment. Renunciation of abstract freedom leads one to make free choice by committing oneself to real freedom. Sartre accordingly proclaims, "What is at the very heart and center of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which everyman realises himself in realising a type of humanity. (qtd. Ahmad 117)

According to Camus, the human being has to directly and readily encounter the absurdity of universe in all aspects. For the human being, the absurd is the real relationship arising from the dialectic unity of his nostalgia and the irrationality inherent in the universe. The absurdity of the human existence lies in its insecurity, its rejections, its agony and its disappointments.

Hence man suffers alienation, which is yet another feature of the existentialist thought pattern. The concept of alienation has been in use in theology, philosophy, politics and psychology for long but the feeling of alienation has become more subtle and pronounced in the modern age. Moved by the harsh realities of modern life, man experiences alienation. The sense of unreality and purposelessness is prevalent in the whole ethos of modern age.

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 [illegible]erjee Divakaruni's posi-

tion as a South Asian writer in English is 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, set in the Bay Area of California, deal with the experience of immigrants in the United States, whose voice is rarely heard in other writings of Indian writers in English. It may be suggested that the personal odyssey of Chitra Banerjee from the position of an immigrant is reflected in her writings at the thematic level. This ongoing journey becomes a metaphor for the universal quest from alienation to integration. Immigration becomes a metaphor for existential alienation in the novel *Queen of Dreams*.

Cultural alienation is a world phenomenon today. The tremendous difference between two ways of life leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. This could be called cultural shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones. The USA, it must be borne in mind, is a nation of immigrants: at first colonized by the British and the French, who had made the native inhabitants an endangered minority in their own land. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become a multi-racial country, for its population was enlarged by the descendants of African slaves and by people emigrating to the New World from all over the Old one, from Central and East Europe and from Asia.

Chitra Banerjee describes the American experience as one of "fusion" and immigration—a "two-way process," in which both the whites and the immigrants grew by interchange and experience. The immigrants in an alien land recognized in great dismay, the loneliness of their condition. The uncertain hazards of new lands exposed them to risks. In such a helpless condition, they needed to be friends, for unaided, they knew they were doomed. These compulsions made the aliens live in crowded tenements, thus generating associations. The common situation that cut them from the rest of the city helped in uniting them, for within the ghetto grew understanding, sympathy and co-operation. According to Oscar Handlin: "It is hard to believe, but true that so much pleasure should come of talk. She spoke next door of events in an unknown place, of the misfortunes of someone else's village and her talk and emotional force. So

strangers became friends. No need to ask what antecedents; the ability to communicate with each other was bond enough" (149).

The immigrant, alienated from his homeland, his people and his family, feels the wrench of separation. The following lines of Oscar Handlin throw light on the lonely condition of the immigrants:

> You are alone in a society without order; you miss the support of the community, the assurance of a defined rank. But you are also quit of traditional obligations, of the confinement of a given station. This is no less a liberation because you arrived at it not through joyful striving but through a cataclysmic plunge into the unknown, because it was not welcome but thrust upon you. (192)

Unlike the expatriate with his nostalgia for the past, the immigrant plunges into the present and gets enthusiastically involved in the environment around him. While the exile parades pain and grievances, the immigrant celebrates the fact of being alive in a new world, of being reborn. Immigrants are energetic, resilient, and able to accept changes. They themselves change in the encounter of cultures and they also bring about change in their environment. The assimilation involved in immigration does not mean a denial of the past. It only means giving up a rigid holding on to the past.

One might even go to the extent of saying that the movement from repatriation to immigration is a movement from alienation to integration. The newcomers are not compelled to conform to existing patterns or to accept existing standards. They feel free to criticize many aspects of life they discover in the New World—the excessive concern with the material goods, the inadequate attention to religion, the pushiness and restlessness of the people, and the transitory quality of family relationships. The boldness of such judgment testifies to the voluntary nature of immigrant adjustment. The strangers do not swallow America in one gulp; through their own associations they discover how to live in the new place and still be themselves. But the second generation creates problems, for it does not have a fixed place in the society. It stands between the culture of its parents and the culture of old America, it bares the inadequacies of the assumption that the fusion of the multitude of strains in the melting pot would come about as a matter of course. The moments of revelation, though rare, are shocking.

The experience of adapting to a new society is a process unique for each person. Writers like Divakaruni have suffered a literal geographical displacement and are confronted with social and cultural alienation. Her metaphorical reference to "uprooting" and "unhousement" of the immigrants in their attempt to construct a future by dealing with the present and struggling out of the past is suggestive of the notion of place and displacement prevalent in her writings. As an immigrant, Divakaruni seems to take pride in being less of an Indian and more of a westerner. Alienation and unreal existence are the main concerns of this expatriate novelist who has set out to make a deliberate distortion of Indian womanhood.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the American reality: the souring of the American Dream, fears and anxieties that the Americans are vulnerable to, and the immigrant Indian's response to the emptiness and loneliness that haunts the inhabitants of this modern wasteland. Many novelists have dramatized the protagonists' search of identity in an alien country. If one were to thread the stories by underlining an aspect common to them, then it might be possible to suggest that it is the theme of immigration and transformation which is at their centre. The immigrants' dream of wedding themselves to the American soil and becoming Americans, the troubles and tribulations they have to go through for achieving this goal notwithstanding. The novelist depicts the problems of the people emigrating to America and the dream of new life which tempts them to go there. 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.

My object in this paper is to show how the immigrants in Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* try to adapt to American society and how, in consequence, are portrayed as rootless. The novelist seizes upon the moment as it is lived in all its intensity and desperation by people who have broken away from their cultural and historical roots.

The novel utilizes the magic realist mode. Like Tilo of *The Mistress of Spices*, who uses spices to help customers solve their problems, she tries to vivify the image of women who have tried to assimi[illegible] the alien culture and have tried to accept the changed identity, overthrowing the Indian cultural heritage in which they took

their first breath. What is most important is Mrs. Gupta's spirit of solving others' problems not by overthrowing her old culture but adjusting herself with the surroundings and her family members.

This gift of vision and ability to foresee and guide people through their fates fascinates her daughter, Rakhi, who as a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, is struggling to keep her footing with her family and with a world in alarming transition. 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 with 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 divine 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 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 of her family.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* reveals independent, introspective women who have accepted their life as immigrants and observe the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. The novel gives intimate first person accounts of first and second generation immigrant existence. The psyche of an immigrant is always alienated as a result of the tension created in the mind between the socio-cultural environment and the feeling of rootlessness. When a person visits the unknown land, he is an outsider in a no-man's land and there he has to struggle a lot for his survival. While conquering the new socio-cultural environment, she carves out a new territory and wraps herself totally with the lure of the west. She creates herself into a

new personality and forms emotional ties with the place she lives in and helps the people around her.

Mrs. Gupta, the 'queen' of dreams, retains much of her Indianness. In fact, it is imperative she does so, in order to retain the powers she had acquired in India—the power of interpreting dreams—which otherwise would desert her. Not 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" (175). But she was to promise never to marry though she could live with a man because only then, "In the eye of the Great Power, then, my spiritual essence would not be joined to his" (176). So rejecting the ceremonial wedding in the temple, she legally weds Gupta making him deeply displeased and making him feel they were not really married. To let the dream-spirit invade her, she is forbidden to squander her body in search of physical pleasures. Later, the couple leaves for the United States, where the young dream-teller's powers leave her almost completely. Unable to dream, Mrs. Gupta loses her identity and sinks into depression.

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" (176). She had 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 to no avail. Her dreams would not come. Desperately she places the pouch of Indian soil under her pillow and lo! kaleidoscopic dreams scented with home things burst on her. Her beautiful dreams are contrasted with her husband's bloody ones which end their nuptial life. She mourns for the price she had to pay, lonely nights without her husband's physical touch. Thus, from then on she leads the life of a wife without being a wife.

It is at this time that the snake, the mother's guiding dream-spirit, comes to her in a dream. He tells her that "each time I [the dream-teller] had sex with my husband, or even slept in same bed, my powers—already weakened by being so far from the caves—dwindled further" (283). She decides to "break off all ties with [her] husband" and return to the caves to regain her talent. Shortly after, however, the dream-teller discovers that she is pregnant with Rakhi

and cancels her plans. She tries to make up for it by concentrating on household duties.

The dream-teller's distance from her husband and daughter creates a malfunctioning family in which the daughter vainly strives for her mother's attention, and the father periodically sinks into drinking. Rakhi's relationship with her father is largely dysfunctional throughout her childhood. The intensity of the mother/ daughter relationship overshadows the father's frail attempts to connect with his daughter. Although Rakhi realizes that her father is far more accessible to her than her mysterious mother, she often disregards him, preferring the company of her mother. Rakhi's curious description of the differences between her parents illuminates the dynamics of the family. As Rakhi puts it, father "was the tidy one in our household, the methodical one, always kind, the one with music. My mother—secretive, stubborn, unreliable—couldn't hold a tune to save her life. I wanted to be just like her" (8). Even though she can easily relate to her father, it is the mother-daughter bond that both fascinates Rakhi and makes her uneasy.

Mrs. Gupta maintains her culture by mostly cooking Indian food. "At home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture," says Rakhi (7). Mrs. Gupta clads herself as Indians do either in a saree or salwar-kameez. She usually restricts herself to the confinement of her house and ventures out only to pass the message of her dreams to her clients. Mrs. Gupta follows both the strategy of segregating and integrating in order to enforce an existentialist sense of identity. To her, her identity is no issue as she maintains most of her Indian traditions. She adjusts and accommodates expediently though her sense of uprootedness disturbs her peripherally. According to Edward Said, an exile is tender in the beginning, becomes stronger in the process and then becomes perfect. He says, "The person who finds his homeland sweet is still tender beginner, he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong but he is perfect to whom the entire world is foreign place" (407). Mrs. Gupta remains tender, accepting most of the changes and adapting to them. She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter. Her unfathom[illegible]e past and her clandestine working of the present are brought to light through her

dream journals posthumously. Her dream journals are nostalgic reminiscences of her past life in the caves with the elders which actually establishes her cultural identity, as Homi Bhabha points out, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a pulling together of the disembodied past to make sense of the present" (63).

Mrs. Gupta does not bury herself into the myth of America, and her journals sharply resurrect the long forgotten Indian myths, beliefs, tradition, culture and why, even dreams which are so essential for existence. The pivotal point of the whole novel rests on the words of Mrs. Gupta as she elucidates the dream and interprets the meaning of it. Instead of reminiscing about her past in India, she is stubbornly reticent about it.

Although she hides her past in an attempt to prevent her daughter from experiencing an inevitable split between her Indian and American identities, she eventually realizes that her reticence causes her daughter to imagine her own ethnicity as well as her mother's native country through the western perspective of the majority culture. Tragically, it is only after the mother dies in a car accident that Rakhi and her father discover the mother's confessional dream-journal in which she finally allows her family a glimpse of her real self. Writing in Bengali and providing little cultural background regarding her native country, the mother assumes that the daughter will turn to her father to fill in the gaps in her narrative. Hence, the task of cultural transmission is finally redirected to the father. Explaining Indian culture to his daughter through the stories of his own life, the father answers Rakhi's basic need for ethnic belonging, mutuality, and continuity, thus helping her reconstruct her identity.

Rakhi desperately wants to succeed as a painter or as a lucrative shop owner. As a diasporic subject, she 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 adjusted with the host culture. To her, assimilation into the host culture does not fully restore a sense of equilibrium. The trauma of the mother's life as an orphan remains largely unspoken; even in her journals she does not tell much about her childhood. Living as an orphan in the slums, [illegible]ing hunger and deprivation, the mother is saved by her

talent of dream-telling: "It afforded me some protection in that place where orphans were used in cruel ways" (230).

The gap between the mother and the daughter shapes existential alienation throughout the novel. Not only Rakhi, but her mother, too, is forced to confront her weaknesses through her relationship with her daughter. Ironically, although Mrs. Gupta apparently possesses the sort of superhuman mind-reading ability that enables her to decipher the dreams of other people, she fails to interpret the mind of her own daughter. When Rakhi has a nightmare that haunts her for several nights, the mother cannot interpret her daughter's dream. She then decides to see the dream for herself; the dream-teller enters her daughter's consciousness and tries to help her, but she is powerless in the face of the threats she sees in the dream. In Rakhi's nightmare, a man is pursuing her in the lingerie section of a department store; his words somehow seduce Rakhi; she turns towards him, and they kiss. The mother fails to warn her daughter, and later on, cannot "decipher what the man symbolized. When in her life he would appear, or where" (52).

Though Rakhi is unaware of her mother's unintentional damage concealed just because of hiding her past, she subconsciously knows her mother better than the mother knows herself and it leads both the protagonists as existentially alienated. Rakhi's consciousness propels her mother to confront her own past in relation to her daughter's present and future. Realizing that her daughter possesses a subconscious knowledge of her secrets, the mother tries to block the images of her past from appearing in the daughter's mind. In an attempt to preserve the separateness of their consciousness, and thereby prevent her daughter from accessing all of her secrets, she attempts to push Rakhi back into her body. Yet failing to find the "prickle of otherness" that would indicate her daughter's awareness, the dream-teller panics:

> What if I can't find her and send her back before her body awakens? I imagine her vacuous face, her limp limbs following me through the rest of her life. And I, bearing her within me on and on, a pregnancy without end. . . . Perhaps it is impossible to differentiate oneself from one's own blood? (234)

Since Mrs. Gupta never shares her sorrows with Rakhi, the daughter does not develop the social skills necessary for effective communication with her family and friends. Moreover, since the mother teaches her daughter that "the best way to love people is not to need them" (45), Rakhi avoids turning to the people she loves for help. The mother's message undermines Rakhi's relationship with her husband Sonny, whom she has attempted to love in that "needless way" (45). Rakhi wonders if her mother's words indirectly caused her to separate from her husband. Being accustomed to Rakhi's independence, Sonny "couldn't come through when she finally did require help?" (45). A DJ in a famous nightclub, Sonny invites Rakhi to come and hear him play. The evening, however, ends in a disaster; Rakhi is drugged and raped: the loud music and the commotion prevent Sonny from hearing his wife's cries for help. When, a week later, Rakhi tells her husband about the rape, Sonny refuses to believe her. Although it is hard for Rakhi to share her traumatic experience, Sonny does not notice the paralinguistic signals that reveal his wife's anxiety: "She kept running out of breath, her mouth grew dry and her face was hot as though it was she who'd done something shameful" (202). The husband's failure to interpret his wife's mental state correctly indicates the couple's basic inability to communicate that results in further alienation. Sonny's dismissal infuriates his wife; they have a fight, yet she never gets to the main reason for their separation. For Rakhi, "the worst part of the night wasn't the assault but the fact that he [Sonny] hadn't been there to rescue her from it. She'd called to him for help, and he'd failed her. She never brought it up again. Soon after that, she moved out" (202).

The gap of silence Rakhi intentionally creates between herself and her husband parallels her detachment from her mother that Rakhi has experienced throughout her life. This dysfunctional pattern of communication replicates itself with Rakhi's daughter, Jonaki, who inherits her grandmother's dream-telling talent. When Rakhi finds out that her daughter can predict the future by seeing other people's dreams, she realizes that just as she did not know her mother, she does not know her daughter as fully as she thought she did. In Rakhi's words:

> She who had come out of my body, tiny and crumpled and containable—even she now has parts to her life that I can't enter. It doesn't matter whether they're real or imagined. I feel excluded all the same. Like the rest of the family—my mother, my father, Sonny—she too has become an enigma. (65)

Socially and culturally positioning herself as an immigrant Indian, Mrs. Gupta neither acculturates nor assimilates but just adapts or adjusts with life around her, without changing or transforming herself. Her adaptation and her will to be an authentic Indian surfaces when Rakhi's Chai Shop was at the point of crumbling and Mrs. Gupta's valuable suggestions were called for. Referring to Chai Shop's rival Java, Mrs. Gupta says:

> The reason you don't have enough power to fight that woman there is that she knows exactly who she is, and you don't. This isn't a real cha shop—she pronounces the word in the Bengali way—but a mishmash, a Westerners' notion of what's Indian. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe if you can make it into something authentic, you'll survive. (89)

Having imbibed the American culture by birth and Indian culture through blood, Rakhi trapezes between the two cultures. Tossed to and fro, Rakhi does not know who she actually is or where she actually belongs. Born and educated in America, Rakhi perceives America as her home, and she wants to be accepted on her own terms. However, she faces a sense of alienation in the sense of insider-outsider. Though ignorant, she constantly bickers after her non-existent past, and contemplates a visit to the mysterious land India which she would never make. Devoid of any knowledge about her ancestral home, she possesses only a warped sense of what is Indian.

Brought up in the wrong way by her mother, through miscalculation as her mother admits in clear Bengali which Rakhi has to concentrate to understand, Rakhi foregrounds the myriad issues that inevitably follow a diasporic subject. Thus, Rakhi confronts the prejudice and animosity of the majority for the minority culture when Java, the notorious coffee shop, appears in their vicinity, whose policy was opening new stores in the vicinity of existing coffee shops, and lure their customers. Shortly before her death, the

mother admits that her decision not to tell her daughter about India was a mistake. Unable to restrain her reaction, Rakhi snaps at her mother: "And whose fault is it if I don't know who I am? If I have a warped Western sense of what's Indian?" (89) Mrs. Gupta's reaction is initially expressed through her body language: she "bites her lip" (89), something she has never done before. Rakhi also notices that "her teeth are small, with serrated edges like a child's" (89). This facial expression provides the daughter with a vivid picture of her mother's underlying mental state and reveals her vulnerability.

Rakhi's assumptions about her mother's intentions prove to be quite accurate. In one of the final sections of her journal, the dream-teller admits: "I was not a good mother to Rakhi. I loved her, but not fully. To love someone fully is to give up selfhood, and I could not risk that. She knew this. Perhaps that is why she constantly longed to understand who I am, to become who I am" (297). The gap between mother and daughter was indeed initiated and sustained by the mother, so that she could maintain her powers as a dream-teller. The journal reveals that as a child, the mother was taken away from the slums to the caves of dream-tellers where she was taught to use her talent.

> Since the mother [Mrs. Gupta] cannot actively participate in the familial reconciliation, it remains somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, the mother's journals initiate the reconstruction of the father-daughter bond. As the father translates the journals to Rakhi, the daughter comes to terms with her mother's death and slowly rediscovers her father's unique character and talent. Although at first, Rakhi blames her father for her mother's death, when the father and daughter start cooperating to save Rakhi's coffee shop, the daughter learns to trust her father and gradually relinquishes her anger.

After the death of her mother in the mysterious car accident, her father volunteers to help resuscitate the Chai House into "an Indian snack shop, a *chaer dokan*, as it would be called in Calcutta. They're going to model it after the shop the father worked in so many years ago, with a few American sanitary touches thrown in" (165). The intermingling of two cultures is strongly felt in the new emergence of the resplendent coffee shop under the banner 'Kurma Shop.' The resuscitation of the 'Chai House' and its survival was so crucial to Rakhi because the trusteeship of her daughter Jona de-

pended on it. Married and separated --which is common in American culture—from Sonny, the number one DJ of popular night club, the rearing of her child swung in her favour because of the shop.

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 immigrants. Branded as terrorists for keeping the shop open, they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. 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, Rakhi reflects "But if I wasn't American, then what was I?" (271) Rakhi, thus, suffers from multiple stresses and is forced to construct a gender identity where she has to locate herself.

After the catastrophe of fire in the 'Kurma Shop,' she realizes her mother's words, "Calamity happens so we can understand caring" (237). The bond of affinity develops after the calamity. Disaster makes the customers more informal in their relationship to Rakhi. The fact that they all belong to one country makes them relate and they form a distinct ethnic group and community. Robert Cohen remarks that distinct diaspora communities are constructed out of the "confluence of narratives of the old country to the new which create the sense of shared history" (38). The customers begin to flock around the 'Kurma Shop' to hear Gupta sing their cherished old, loved Hindi songs. They rediscover the joy like an "unexpected oasis tucked into an arid stretch of dunes" (196), a pleasure they thought they would never find in America. By doing so, "they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or other and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such relationship" (84).

Rakhi's adaptation to America starts as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one. Yet, living as an immigrant offers her immense possibility of creativity and she is empowered enough to create new narratives of belonging and identity. Her problem of complete assimilation to the host culture and tradition is complicated and complex. Though born in America, America does not offer her the passport of be an American. Yet,

the stamp of a true American is seen in her. Her resilience of spirit while facing odds in life and accepting challenges creatively reflect the individualistic trait of the American. She makes acculturation her strength, as towards the end of the novel she learns to appreciate Indian instruments produce music that are not purely Indian but an American mix. She moves from here to a deeper philosophy of life which equips her to set right her estranged life with Sonny, her husband, in the dance hall "on the web of the world where Sonny and she have touched orbits once more" (307), paving the way for an integrated family life, very much similar to that in an Indian set-up. By adopting American ways, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life, although temporarily she suffers a setback due to doubts about her sense of belonging and identity. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, on the other hand, chooses to adapt, to keep herself Indian to the core on American soil, to merely adjust to the American ways for a cause—a cause that is important to her, a high cost that she is willing to pay in order to preserve the power of dreams that enable her to reach out to people around her, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems. Her stance of adopting, though it breaks her normal home-life, becomes the channel of building up the homes of all and sundry.

Art and identity are shown as interdependent components in Rakhi's self. It is only when she absorbs the new ways of artistic expression that she is capable of breaking the binaries between what traditionally is seen as American or Indian. Her mother's writing and her father's stories, as well as the band's cosmopolitan music and the Indian-American paintings, provide Rakhi with alternative ways of self-definition. It is therefore through these meaningful exchanges with others that she realizes that there is more than one legitimate way to be ethnic or Indian American. The relational identity Rakhi finally constructs allows her to reinterpret the ethnic other not as different, exotic or inexplicable, but rather as an equal subject that has the power to acknowledge another individual as an independent self. After discarding the western, individualistic approach to her self, Rakhi succeeds in developing her unique painting style and starts creating authentic works of art that relate to her Indian-American experience. The novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the possibility for establishing a bicultural identity in spite of Mrs. Gupta's

initial refusal to transmit her culture. Divakaruni's approach to existential alienation is contingent on the South Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience.

Divakaruni has herself claimed in many of her interviews that the diasporic subjects especially women are concerned about their identity, an identity which they try to reinvent constantly. Their diasporic status changes their lives and consequently they become hybrid immigrants. It is apparently a deeper wound for the women of India, who struggle to achieve a new identity in an alien culture. Perhaps this struggle results from their sudden freedom from the bonds of superstition and chauvinism that held them fast in their old, familiar cultures, freedom that seems to leave them floating; unbalanced, in the complex, sometimes treacherous air of this new and unfamiliar culture.

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A Study of Indian Parsi Community in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

VIJAY NEGI

Rohinton Mistry living in Toronto for the past thirty-six years has remained deeply attached to India, his native land. His fiction is set in Bombay as he "recreates and agonizes over with the close attention to detail of homesick exile" (Jha 155). Mistry has been described as a genius and a "true literary Map Maker" (Ondaatje). About the novel, Mistry himself has said, "this book does not try to take on all the complexity of India as *A Fine Balance* did. It journeys inward into domestic life, a profound journey as far as the writing is concerned" (www.smh.com.au).

Nariman Vakeel, the protagonist of the novel *Family Matters*, is a widowed patriarch of an extended family—a former professor of English, who lives with his step-daughter Coomy and stepson Jal, in a large flat named Chateau Felicity in politically charged Bombay of the 1990s (re-named Mumbai in 1995). His gradually debilitating Parkinson's disease and a broken ankle cause him to need Coomy and Jal's help for nearly everything. Coomy and Jal's half-sister and Nariman's biological daughter Roxana lives with her husband Yezad and two sons Murad and Jehangir in a two-room flat called Pleasant Villa, which Nariman purchased as Roxana's dowry. Unlike many writers of the South Asian diaspora, Mistry's stories are, in the words of a critic "careful, patient accounts of people trying to find answers in a world that seldom offers any. Reading his simple, moving tales of struggle and affliction, you are less in the company of Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy than in the company of Victor Hugo, perhaps or Thomas Hardy" (Ondaatje).

An autobiographical touch is noticed about the story as Mistry is on record having stated that he has never taken care of a dying parent. His five fictional works prove him to be a realist who mas-