

# Exploring Postcolonial Feminist Identity: Analysis of Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*

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## Abstract

The intersections of gender, race, caste, class, diaspora etc., are well addressed in the postcolonial feminist discourses apart from the first and second wave Anglo American feminist theories. It is true that the visibility of heterogenous third world women and gendered identities in literary and cultural discourses is a result of post -colonial feminist theorizations than the existing first or second wave women's movements. South Asian Women writers bring out the diasporic women characters into the discursive realm giving more platforms for the portrayal of their selves than the creation of binaries as white and black with a westernized eye. This paper explores the re- inscription of post migrant diasporic female identity in the fictional space through the analysis of Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminist discourse, South Asian women writers, postcolonial female identity, post migrant women identity

Postcolonial feminism, as a critical framework, unveils the intricate intersections of colonialism, race, gender, and diaspora. Postcolonial feminism criticises second wave Anglo-American feminist theory, which predominantly focuses on the experiences of white middle-class women, for generalizing women's issues globally. It asks for the incorporation of racial disparities in the mainstream feminist discourses and contests the idea of a universal sisterhood. Instead of dismissing or homogenising women's diversity, this strategy places a strong emphasis on their value. Postcolonial feminism also concerns how Western feminists portray third-world women as a single, homogeneous group. The reductionism which ignores the

ethnic, cultural, and historical distinctions among women from various places is criticized by post-colonial feminists. It attempts to confront and demolish the repressive institutions, that uphold the marginalisation of third world women, by revealing the colonising mission of white feminists.

Additionally, postcolonial feminism investigates the connection between diaspora and postcolonial studies. Destabilising the idea of Western culture's primacy, it looks at the exchanges of economic and intellectual property between the first and third cultures. Postcolonial feminism further undermines the notion of universality in the context of the diaspora by highlighting the diversity of race, culture, and women agencies. Postcolonial feminism recognises the effects of colonialism on the social, cultural, and economic reality of South Asian women and illuminates the historical context of their lives. It critically investigates the ways in which colonial forces upheld patriarchal norms and sustained oppressive institutions.

This analysis is crucial in understanding the ways in which South Asian women's identities have been constructed and constrained by external forces. In postcolonialism, themes of cultural displacement, hybridity, and the enduring consequences of colonial power structures are all addressed as they relate to the repercussions of colonialism and imperialism on colonised cultures. In the wake of colonial rule, Divakaruni examines the experiences of South Asian women characters as they negotiate the intricacies of identity creation and cultural hybridity. Her writings illuminate the ways in which colonial legacies shape both individual and group identities and the difficulties that the characters encounter in balancing many cultural influences.

The impact of colonialism on South Asian women's lives is highlighted by postcolonial feminism, which acknowledges how colonial rule imposed patriarchal standards and stifled women's agency. The writings of Chitra Banerjee critically connects with this tradition by highlighting South Asian women's hardships and resistance to repressive power structures. Through her stories, she contests the prevalent cultural myths and present alternate viewpoints that give marginalised women a voice.

In this study, the focus is given to the female character from the novel *Queen of Dreams* using postcolonial feminist perspective to understand how South Asian women identities are formed within the context of diaspora. The mirroring of Postcolonial Feminism in Rakhi of *Queen of Dreams* is explored in this study which employs postcolonial feminism in a particular

way in order to analyse the character of a second generation Indian woman born in the United States.

The fourth book by Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams* (2004), centres on Rakhi, an American-born Indian woman who battles with both her unknowable Indian ancestry and the people in her life. Another significant theme in the book that calls into question the citizenship of Rakhi and her family as well as their rights in the United States is, the terrorist incident of September 11, 2001.

In an interview with Luan Gaines, a contributory reviewer to the online review site *Curled Up with a Good Book*, Divakaruni explains Rakhi's bafflement about her identity by noting that: "Rakhi's parents have been typical in not telling her much about India—which causes her hunger for it. India becomes looming and mythical in her imagination. In some ways she has been denied her heritage, she longs to recreate it for herself" (Gaines). Rakhi Gupta, who was born and raised in the United States, has a romanticised perception of the native country of her parents. Rakhi's parents, unlike other immigrant parents, are not eager to impart Indian culture to their daughter, as Divakaruni notes. Rakhi, however, is eager to understand and absorb the local culture that had escaped from her her due to her parents' reluctance, unlike usual second-generation immigrant children. Rakhi's character can be evaluated in the light of postcolonial feminism because it makes it clear that she faces difficulties in her diasporic life as a result of her prior experiences. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park assert in their essay "*Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism*" that "postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights" (Rajan and Park 53). Postcolonial feminism is therefore not just limited to colonial backgrounds. It rather spans a wide range of topics, including gender, nation, class, race, sexualities, and the various situations that women find themselves in.

Rakhi's parents were often reserved when it came to India when interacting with their developing daughter, but the mother nevertheless maintained numerous cultural customs in the home, such as donning saris and making Indian food. According to Rakhi's recollection of such events, "at home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture" (Divakaruni 7). She also recalls her father humming Hindi tunes in the kitchen as he did the dishes. Undoubtedly, Rakhi is connected to her history subliminally because of the traditional environment at home. Later, she decides to use Indian motifs for her paintings, including temples, cityscapes, women shopping, and bus drivers having lunch. Rakhi used to prepare lavish Indian dishes while she was still married to Sonny, including "appetisers, rotis,

rolled out fresh, rich curries in almond sauce, and traditional Indian desserts that required hours of culinary acrobatics" (Divakaruni 12). The most notable indication of her Indianness is the name of the restaurant they opened together, "Chai House," which she and her companion Belle (whose full name is Balwant Kaur) chose. The opening of "The Java Chain", a franchise of one of America's fastest-growing café chains, poses a danger to the viability of this restaurant's operation. In a symbolic sense, this coffee shop replaces Rakhi's Chai House. Rakhi's shop struggles to keep customers in the face of its energetic presence. The Chai House figuratively symbolised Rakhi's own disjointed identity, making this a crucial development in her development.

Mrs. Gupta, mother of Rakhi, possesses a unique ability to read dreams and reveal realities about the lives of others. She is a remarkable woman with exceptional intelligence and knowledge. Mrs. Gupta offers advice to Rakhi and Belle when they ask for assistance with their failing company, but her advice also applies to the Chai House.

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 Westerner's notion of what's Indian. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe if you can make it into something authentic. You'll survive. (Divakaruni 89).

Rakhi treasures a Westerner's conception of what is Indian, a constructed notion that shapes who she is because she was never able to learn about India personally from her parents, especially from her mother. She does not and cannot conceal her Indian ancestry, despite being an Indian-American of second generation born in California. Rakhi's identity development is inextricably related to her past; without achieving authenticity herself, just like the Chai House, she is unable to develop a coherent self.

Indian parentage has self-contradictory implication on Rakhi. For instance, her desire to understand more about the secrets of the unknown homeland haunts her. In fact, she finds India as a location of great mystery and romance because of her inability to learn about it. Rakhi acquired a tape from the college's South Asian library when she was a student that was packed with songs about the Bengal monsoon. Her father demoralised her when she questioned her parents about the veracity of the Bengal monsoon beauty depicted in the songs by telling her that Calcutta city flooded with every rainstorm and cholera deaths occurred during the rainy season. However, this information failed to daunt Rakhi in the end since she thought: "...But I was not fooled. They were hiding things from me, beautiful, mysterious, important things, as

they always had” (Divakaruni 82). Belle thinks she's crazy since she wants to learn Bengali, and her parents are against her repeated attempts to travel to India. But before she passes away, Rakhi promises to travel to India, "if only to lay to rest the ghosts that dance in my head like will-o'- the-wisps over a rippling sea" (Divakaruni 83).

Both Rakhi's husband and best friend are of Indian descent, despite having been acclimated to the host country, which highlights how difficult it is for Rakhi to reconcile her American present with her Indian past. Rakhi's attire at a significant life event, such as the opening of her paintings at the Atelier, serves as a constant reminder of the cultural transition she is through.

So here I am, dressed in a black sheath of a gown with a slit up the side of one leg and spaghetti straps that live up to their name....The one thing in the ensemble that's mine is a gauzy Indian black-and-silver scarf Belle found in the back of my closet.

‘Perfect,’ she’d crooned, arranging it around my shoulders. ‘Just the right fusion of East and West!’ (Divakaruni 93)

Rakhi has an intense internal pull from both her little-known ancestry and the present, much like the fusion symbolised by her attire. The multifaceted character of Rakhi must be studied in the cultural milieu she has built around her. For a better understanding of women of the Global South, Rajan and Park stress the significance of race, class, nationality, religion, and sexuality that "intersect with gender, and the hierarchies, epistemic as well as political, social, and economic, that exist among women" (Rajan and Park 54). According to these critics, postcolonial feminists reject the notion of the universal woman, much like other US women of colour, but they do not support the reification “of the Third World "diversity" that produces the "monolithic" Third World woman" (Rajan and Park 54). In particular, Rakhi's situation is affected by Rajan and Park's observation because Rakhi has a multifaceted personality that avoids labels like "universal" or "monolithic" and encourages examination based on her unique subject position as a woman of colour who is American-Indian. It's fascinating to note that Rakhi desires to pass into the Pacific in Northern California after she dies, despite her romanticised perception of India and her desire to visit it one day. She ruminates on the issue thus, “if I died, I, too, would want my remains to become part of this land, this water, because there's a way in which the geography of one's childhood makes its way into one's bones” (Divakaruni 133,134). The identity of Rakhi is distinct due to the inherent contradiction she possesses and her desire to embrace both the known present and the unknowable past. It's not like a white American's or like her parents, who are first-generation immigrants. Even Belle, who does not fantasise about India the way Rakhi does, cannot compare to her. To use a term

from Rajan and Park, her behaviour can be categorised as "transnational feminism". Transnational feminism, they claim, shares "major concerns, subject matter, theoretical interests, and political agendas with what is commonly understood to be postcolonial feminism even though it does not explicitly deal with colonialism; it is, however, centrally engaged with its successor, neocolonialism" (Rajan and Park 57).

The challenge Rakhi's Chai House is unable to stave off later comes from the Java Chain Coffee shop, a neocolonial agent. The treatment Rakhi and her family receive from some Americans following 9/11, which occurs later in the story, also serves to remind the reader of the neocolonial racial conflicts that existed in that traumatised diasporic American territory.

Rakhi's mother Mrs. Gupta claims that Rakhi's Chai House lacked credibility. According to the story, when Rakhi's father takes over and gives the company both an Indian and an international feel, sales improves. It's fascinating to see how Rakhi changes through time, much like the way the restaurant's image changes. In her interview with Luan Gaines, Divakaruni describes Rakhi's transformation as follows: "She needs to stop blaming others, first of all. She needs to find her "voice" as an artist. She needs to learn to feel OK about unsolved mysteries. She needs to forgive and trust again. I think she learns all of these, to some extent, as the book goes along" (Divakaruni 12).

Rakhi undergoes a life-altering event as a result of the terrible tragedy of 9/11, which was brought on by the destruction of the World Trade Centre by terrorists. Rakhi refuses to fly an American flag when they reopen their restaurant following the attack, claiming that she does not want to demonstrate her support for the country under duress. Soon after it reopens, some American guys attack the establishment and severely hurt Jespal and Sonny. Afterwards, Rakhi ruminates that when one of the men had said "You ain't no American". She had attempted to dismiss him by referring him "a racist idiot". However, she asks herself "but if I wasn't an American, then what was I?" (Divakaruni 271). Her sense of belonging, which she once possessed, seems to have slipped away. Over the following few days, she receives emails sent by Indian organisations, which makes her already uneasy feeling about her identity even more intense. She is unsure whether to pray to an American or Indian deity and feels like a visitor in America, her birth nation, when sympathetic Americans welcome her presence in their community.

Rakhi's journey of self-discovery and the difficulties she has in discovering her genuine self are explored in the book. Her mother, who has the ability to see facts in dreams, provides a crucial perspective. She counsels Rakhi that because she doesn't fully grasp her own identity, she lacks the ability to resist external demands. This is in line with the postcolonial feminist

viewpoint of accepting and embracing one's true self. Rakhi's artistic endeavours also play a role in her transformation. She is a skilled painter who has opened a restaurant named "Chai House" that honours Indian culture through cuisine and art. This creative outlet allows Rakhi to express herself and connect with her history on a deeper level.

The Chai House represents transformation of Rakhi. She goes through a process of blending her cultural influences and personal experiences to establish her own identity, just like the Chai House blends different flavours and ingredients to produce a unique experience. Journey of Rakhi becomes embodied with the restaurant, which combines her Indian roots with her American upbringing. Rakhi employs the Chai House as a forum to combat prejudice against South Asian women. She challenges stereotypes that restrict South Asian women to particular roles or identities through her culinary powers and artistic expressions. The patriarchal narratives that minimise women's contributions is challenged by Rakhi's success in running the Chai House, which also supports the notion that women may achieve success in a variety of fields outside of domesticity. Rakhi acquires a sense of empowerment and autonomy through the Chai House. She takes control of her own destiny by starting and running her own business. As she navigates the trials and triumphs of running the restaurant, she gains renewed confidence. Participation of Rakhi in the Chai House allows her to assert her independence, make decisions, and establish herself as a self-sufficient individual capable of attaining her goals. The Chai House becomes a meeting place for people of many backgrounds, fostering a sense of community. People from many backgrounds and cultures gather to enjoy the food, atmosphere, and cultural experiences that Rakhi offers. Rakhi can make connections, learn from others, and broaden her views in this social setting. It gives her a platform to celebrate diversity and combat stereotypes about cultural identity. Rakhi uses the Chai House to immerse herself in her Indian background. She introduces the neighbourhood to the flavours, fragrances, and traditions of Indian cuisine through her restaurant. This endeavour helps Rakhi to reconnect with her ethnic roots and share them with others. It strengthens her feeling of identity and her understanding of her Indian ancestry. Postcolonial feminism opposes the homogeneity of traditional feminist theories and promotes anti-racist tactics that take into account the variety of women's experiences.

Rakhi's ethnic identity and her battles with race, nation, class, and sexuality provide as an example of how postcolonial feminist rhetoric is intersectional. The idea of a shared universal female experience is contested by postcolonial feminism, which emphasises the value of recognising and appreciating individual female distinctions. Rakhi's encounters with mainstream American society as a South Asian woman are consistent with postcolonial

feminism. She negotiates racial, national, social class, and gender difficulties, which influence her subjectivity and identity. Rakhi, as portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a prime example of the difficulties South Asian women encounter when negotiating their identities and the complexities of their lives. The character's development reflects the need for cultural identity and cultural relocation in a transnational scenario, the conflict between tradition and modernity in a post-colonial world order, and the new ways of looking at gendered identity in the South Asian Women characterisations. Through the portrayal of Rakhi, the novel pictures how the socio cultural and historical orientations are valid in understanding the struggles of formation of an identity in the host country especially among migrants.

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