

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Queen of Dreams': A Typical Tale of Reconciliation of Intricate, Intertwined and Intimate Family Ties

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Abstract

A society is mirrored through a family. Family provides strong building blocks for an individual, which contributes to build a strong society and nation. David R Mace says that nothing in the world could make human life happier than to greatly increase the number of strong families. Since the dawn of civilization; humans have tried to cohabit in groups, tribes or families for physical, emotional and communal support. Over the ages this concept of family has undergone various transformations and changes, yet the essence of being in a family has survived throughout the world. Family is an important aspect in everyone's life. It is the basic unit of society. There is no stronger bond than family in an individual's life. Research studies also have shown that people with strong family support and happy relationships are found more confident and successful in their life. However there are also some flaws that break ties within the family itself. Misunderstanding, lack of communication and jealousy are some factors that lead to alienation amongst family members.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has weaved an amazing tale of intricate, intertwined, and intimate family relations by highlighting on the theme of reconciliation in her novel *Queen of Dreams*. Divakaruni has symbolized death as a retirement from the world by sketching the life of Mrs. Gupta. The protagonist's trauma after her mother's death leads her to discover herself by knitting the bonds which she had once discarded.

This research paper aims to focus on this theme of reconciliation by exploring the relationship among various characters, causes of distanced and alienated relations, isolation and strenuous relations, need and efforts of reconciliation and its impact in their lives.

Keywords

Reconciliation, Intricate, Intertwined, Isolation, Communication, Misunderstanding, Support, Protection

Marriage and family are the most important institutions of a society as they provide emotional, physical and social support to individuals. Family is the first school of the child and mother is the first teacher. To maintain healthy relationship is the core duty of parents by inculcating, imbibing and nurturing values in their children. The husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. As mentioned in the Bible ‘Children are a heritage of the Lord’ (Psalms 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the rules of society and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. In fact parents take the responsibility and put their heart and soul in rearing the children. Nobody wishes to have tumultuous and vulnerable family but due to misunderstanding, stress, higher expectations, mistrust, feelings of alienation, isolation, financial, social or physical reasons, job and career aspirations, quest for freedom and personal space etc. separation and break ups in the family occur many a times. But the universal fact cannot be denied that human beings always crave to be with their family to share their moments of success, happiness, grief or death. To maintain a family life is never easy, people need to use both their head as well as heart to make sure that their relationships stay strong.

Russ Harris MD says in his book ‘*ACT with Love*’, “Relationships are both wonderful and terrible. They can give us the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, send us soaring into the stratosphere on wings of love or drop us from on high to splat in the mud” (X, *ACT with love*).

In recent times, the Indian diaspora faces problems such as relocation, reconciliation and assimilation. Once separated reconciliation becomes difficult as it passes through the process of forgiveness that is quite painful. Reconciliation involves building a better relationship between people who cannot connect well, due to their daily share of misunderstandings and differences. One thing that human beings need to accept in life is change. Many of us are unprepared for this stage in life. We take life as well as the people in our life for granted, so that they live up to a certain standard that we have set for them. If they fail in this venture, it leads to conflict, pain and negative impressions about the people who have not lived up to our expectations.

True Reconciliation has its own unique features. It is not all about a simple ‘sorry’. The very act of reconciliation involves restoration, acceptance of one’s weaknesses and growth. The one to forgive first is the strongest and the person who is forgiven is the happiest.

This concept of reconciliation is strongly highlighted by Divakaruni in her best accomplished novel ‘*Queen of Dreams*’. She has crafted an amazing tale of familial relations depicting highs and lows of it. A family life is complicated; it comes with a lot of baggage. From the inception of the human civilization to globalization, people from all walks of life have always craved for familial love, attention and affection. Divakaruni has painted the need for the family love and support through the reconciliation of broken ties in a very natural and spontaneous way with the life of the protagonist, Rakhi, who is a struggling individual with the aim of discovering the purpose of her life.

Divakaruni has started ‘*Queen of Dreams*’ with a caring image of Rakhi’s mother, Mrs. Gupta, who is an interpreter of dreams. She sees a snake in her dream and starts worrying about. The snake in her dreams alarms her as it has come to foretell a great change and she fears something bad will happen to her household. Her anxiety and prayer that she does not wish ill for her family is clearly evident through these lines from the novel, “Don’t let it be Rakhi, Sonny or Jonaki. Don’t let it be my husband whom I have failed in many ways.” (p.2). This shows that she is a protective mother who is a shade for her entire family. She is not willing to risk the lives of her immediate family members; rather she prefers to sacrifice her own life, if the situation demands it. She always takes up responsibility as a wife and mother towards her family members. She serves her husband, cooks and cares. Thus Rakhi’ as a child seems to blossom with loving and caring mother and father. She says ‘At dinner Father admired the creative shapes we’d made and said it was a meal at once delicious and instructive. He cleaned up the kitchen afterward, humming a Hindi song as he scrubbed the sink with Comet, his hands encased in Neon Yellow Rubber one, always kind with music’ (p.8).

According to Brofenbrenner, “In the complete process that contributes to the development of a healthy child’s personality, adaptability appears to be one of the key characteristics.

(Brofenbrenner, 1970, 1989) The micro system is the most central circle and includes those settings of which the child has direct personal experience—most crucially, the family as well as school, day care and the like.” (*Exploring the Child’s Personality* p.268)

Divakaruni has emphasized this issue by showing the impact of Rakhi’s mother and father’s relations and family environment on the development of Rakhi’s complete personality. Rakhi always saw her mother sleeping alone. She says ‘My mother always sleeps alone’. (p.4) Though they stay together in the same house as a family, a big gap is maintained silently in

their hearts. Every day after telling a tale or listening to Rakhi's tales, her mother would kiss and go to Rakhi's father's room, talk to him, close the door and go to her room known as the 'sewing room' to sleep.

At the young age of eight, Rakhi does not understand anything about her family's lifestyle but curiosity led her to observe how a typical family life functioned. She explored deeply in her friends' houses about new ways and arrangements of how a real family would be. One afternoon when she went to play in one of her classmate's house, she comes to know something strange. Her friend tells her not to jump on her parents' bed. Rakhi was shocked to know this; she asks her friend 'you mean your mother sleeps here – with your dad?' I asked surprised and faintly disgusted.' (p.6) When the girl replies yes she feels so guilty and after this incident she goes to the homes of her friends to casually monitor the sleeping arrangements of their parents and finally concluded that her family was indeed weird. This deeply affects her innocent mind. She asks her mother 'Why don't you sleep with dad? I kept asking, or at least with me, like Mallika's mother does? Don't you love us?' (p.6) and the mother replies that though she loves them, she can't sleep with them because she is a dream teller and she cannot concentrate if someone is in bed with her'' (p.7) and still Rakhi was confused and shocked, her curiosity was not satisfied. Here words of Mrs. Gupta, reveals that she made her profession of dream telling a top priority in comparison to her daughter, husband and family life.

'How might generic factors contribute to the chances that one will experience a divorce, the most commonly identified factor is personality characteristics. For women and men, Jockin, McGee, and Lykken (1996) found that 30% and 42% respectively of the heritability of divorce risk was due to personality characteristics that are genetically transmitted, In sum genetic factors are related to divorce proneness, primarily because personality characteristics and psychiatric disorders lead to difficulties in relationship functioning.' (*Family Influence on Childhood Behaviour and Development* p.148) Divakaruni reveals the same factors and shows us that due to the observations seen in her mother from childhood Rakhi became suspicious, secretive, and silent. She turned out to be a pessimist, who found a fault with almost everyone she knew. Rakhi' says 'my mother- secretive, stubborn, and unreliable - couldn't hold a tune to save her life. I wanted to be just like her'. (p.8) This resulted in, to her divorce or separation with Sonny. Rakhi admits that a relationship doesn't spoil in one night, like milk, there had been hints for a while, but she has chosen not to see. (p.12) Relationships in a family turn sour when turmoil arises. The environment of her family had a deep impact

in shaping her personality and life as well. She became introvert, sensitive and secretive. In Rakhi's eye, everything and everyone who is directly linked to her is against her, this also includes her husband, Sonny a popular DJ in town. When it came to her marital life, she followed her mother's advice that one should not need the other, for this would not be termed as pure love. She tried to live her life without needing Sonny's help in anything.

Thus we see Rakhi deeply impressed by her mother, who is now divorced and a single parent having a seven year old daughter named Jonaki, a struggling artist by profession and an entrepreneur of a coffee shop in Berkeley, California, trying to maintain her career and family life in an independent manner but her family life is imbalanced as she cannot relate to her family members on an emotional level. Rakhi longs to be like her mother. She too wants to read dreams in the same manner as her mother does. But she is not successful here also as she doesn't possess the gift of dream reading and other aspects her mother keeps it secretive.

She accepted her parents' discordant relationship and never tried to probe into her father's life or was never close to him. She never realized his pain and loneliness until her father translates her mother's dream journals for her. As Rakhi reveals 'Year later after she died, my father would say, 'Not true, she didn't love me, not really, she never let me get that closer, the place right at the center of her – that was reserved for her dreams, gods or demons, whoever they were, she never shared that with anyone Not even you,...and I would forced to admit that he too was right'.(p.8)

Her Mother's dream journals offers her with few revelations: Her mother was an orphan, she was chosen by an aunt who had a gift of dream telling, she had seen the same in Rakhi's mother and had taken her along with her to the dream caves where she could refine her gift to help society.

Rakhi had understood her mother's pain in breaking away from her family and it was never easy for her as she loved her family. She had sacrificed the joys of her personal life in order to uphold her professional one. Thus after knowing all these Rakhi felt relieved and started understanding her father also.

Here Divakaruni emphasizes in a seamless manner the need and importance of family relationships and support in one's life. Reconciliation of family relationships are cleverly knitted through Rakhi's mother's sudden accidental death and the horror of 9/11 tragedy. The 9/11 tragedy sets Rakhi and her family wondering if they really belong to America. Even when they strongly insist that they are born and bred in America, they are put off by American people due to the tone of their skin. The statement, "You ain't no American"

constantly rings in Rakhi's mind. Adversities in life cannot be faced alone. "Since the assault at the Kurma house, she'd been too afraid to go anywhere alone at night. Things she'd hardly noticed before – a group of people waiting at an intersection, footsteps behind her as she walked to her car, someone asking her if she had the time – loomed in her mind, throwing out monstrous shadows. Just thinking about them made her breath fast and shallow." (PP 299-300).

Family is not only the source of true happiness but it is also a refuge where one can gain strength and support during times of hardship. When Rakhi's mother passes away, her ex-husband Sonny makes sure to handle most of Rakhi's family life and takes it as his own responsibility by treating Rakhi's home as if it were his own. He is a source of support in Rakhi's career by suggesting tips to improve it, he brings home their daughter Jonaki so that Rakhi has a chance to nurture her and groom her to be a responsible individual in society which would take her mind off her mother's immediate and unexpected death.

Her father Mr. Gupta whose personality she never liked and consciously tried to maintain distance came out as a big strong umbrella to protect her from the storm, when her Chai house was on sale. She experienced his encouragement in terms of financial, emotional and physical support when her business was crashing. He helped Rakhi to completely re-establish the chai house with a new name known as Kurma House. When she reopens the chai house waiting for the customers, Sonny is the one who enters first and places the order, and further brings his band and DJ team as customers. Sonny silently supports her in this manner.

Thus the process of reconciliation was going on. All were ready to forget and forgive and stay united at the time of crisis. Now Rakhi starts feeling happy from within. 'She invites Sonny over and cooks for him –something she'd vowed she'd never do again. But there is warmth to being in her small kitchen, Jona and he and she crowded around the counter top.' (p.276) 'One night she finds herself thanking Sonny for saving her life. He takes her hand and says he's happy for what little he was able to do- this time at least. He asks her again to come to the club to hear him. She doesn't say yes or no. She bends forward a little to allow him to kiss her cheek before he leaves. She goes to his club stands in the long line waiting for the doors to open. (p.298) it had taken all her courage to tell Sonny that she would like to come to hear him. She likes everything there and enjoys. She dances her way, but she is content to enjoy this transient mote of glitter- dust on the web of the world where Sonny and she have touched orbits once more. (p.307)

The restoration of the central characters – Rakhi and Sonny is a miracle as they had ‘almost’ lost out on their family life. Forgiveness and repentance again act as a pillar between Rakhi and her father. Since they are a family, the chances of hurting each other more increases. With the passage of time, Divakaruni’s characters develop a strong reconciliation habit that breaks all barriers and offers hope to survive in a new land.

Thus Family remains a binding force in all circumstances connecting the past and present, the old and the new. It is easy to separate a bond with little energy but how can one separate a familial bond that is invisible and simultaneously intertwined. This fact is very well brought out by Divakaruni, through her wisely crafted tale in ‘*Queen of dreams*’. Divakaruni has refined the theme of reconciliation through the life of her protagonist Rakhi, she stresses on the importance of family in an individual’s life. Though Rakhi as a struggling individual did not try to accept or seek the support of her family in matters related to her, tragedies brought them together; she shed her ego and dropped her pride by reconciling with her family whole heartedly as she understood the fact that when life comes crashing down, only one’s family is there to support and help in regaining and retaining happiness. She experiences the bliss of completeness once she reunites with her family. It shows that family relations always comes first and remains universal. “You can kiss your family and friends goodbye and put miles between you but at the same time you carry them with you, in your heart, your mind, your stomach because you don’t just live in a world, the world lives in you.” Divakaruni has proved the saying of Fredrich Buchner in a very lively manner by reconciling the familial ties in ‘*Queen of dreams*’.

Notes:

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Queen of Dreams*. Doubleday: ABACUS, 2005, Print.
2. Frain, John De et al. “*Creating a strong family, why are families so important*” in Neb Guide. University of NEBRASKA LINCianrpubs.unl.edu/live/g1890/build/g1890.pdf.
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4. ‘*Family influence on childhood behavior and development*’, Page 148, [http://books .google.co.in/books?isbn=1135889864](http://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=1135889864).
5. ‘*Exploring the child’s personality*’, Page 268, [http:// books.google.co.in/books?isbn=039807805](http://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=039807805).