

The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 9 & Issue 1 (February, 2024)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 29th February, 2024

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract Received on: 25th January 2024 | Full Article Received on: 26th January 2024 | Revision received on: 29th January 2024 | Plagiarism Checked on 29th January 2024 | Peer Review Completed on: 20th February 2024 | Article Accepted on 20th February 2024 | First Published on: 29st February 2024

Research Article



Identity Crisis and Human Predicament in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Chitra Banerjee's *Queen of Dreams*

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2024.9.1.06>

Pages: 42-48

Abstract

Several factors contribute significantly to shaping an individual's identity and distinguishing the cultural ethos of a particular group or community from others. These factors intricately interconnect with the evolution of diverse cultural practices and beliefs within a given community or geographical area. This complex interplay includes elements such as the ecological context of a region, the foundational functioning of economic institutions, the structure of family units, upbringing practices for children, as well as the narratives woven through tales, myths, legends, and historical events. This research paper

dives into the exploration of identity crisis and human predicament as depicted in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993). Vikram Seth aims to explore his profound and committed humanistic concerns evident in his novel, *A Suitable Boy* (1993). Seth's works delve into the human condition within a chaotic society. He dedicates his art and craft to the study and observation of characters, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals he encounters in contemporary life. Seth's primary focus revolves around universal human elements like loneliness, alienation, love, passion, marriage, family, music, changing times, corruption, realism, nuclear madness, and disarmament. Seth's literary world often portrays frustration, destruction, and disappointment. He emphasizes fulfilled love that leads to marriage and family, prioritizing rational love over superficial or romantic notions. Each of his novels concludes with a sense of disappointment and withdrawal from happiness. His vision of love and relationships centres on social stability, security, togetherness, and social order. Seth distinctly favours the institution of marriage and family, forming a thematic cluster that characterizes his works. Divakaruni's novels stand as a testament to the preservation of her homeland's cultural heritage. Her literary works vividly depict characters embracing a bicultural identity. Divakaruni skilfully interweaves Indian heritage with the American experience, offering a unique perspective on the South Asian Diaspora. These diasporic cultures arise from the dispersion of diverse communities across the globe, driven by various historical and obligatory factors. Throughout her body of work, Divakaruni delves into the profound identity crisis experienced by women, as they embark on a quest to discover their genuine selves. In her capacity as an immigrant writer, she stands out from her contemporaries, as she skilfully brings together women from diverse backgrounds, communities, ages, and nationalities. These women find a common bond in their shared experiences and relationships while residing in foreign lands.

Keywords: Identity, Immigrants, Predicament, Humanistic Concerns, Cultural identity, Human Predicament, Gender Roles, Diaspora and Displacement

Introduction

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, the protagonist Lata finds herself in a vulnerable position in 1950s India, where marriage is often seen as a marketplace in which women attract potential suitors. Seth also uses irony to highlight the social issues present in middle-class Indian society, particularly the negative aspects of the institution of marriage, such as dowry harassment and dowry-related deaths. These problems have turned marriage into an ugly and perilous institution. Seth also underscores the issue of corruption within the social system, with widows like Mrs. Mehra struggling without support. Vikram Seth's character Lata is emblematic of the women in 1950s India, a time when women often had limited choices and had to accept the circumstances of their lives, no matter how uninspiring they might be. These women lived their lives guided by a strong moral code that provided them with spiritual sustenance.

However, in Vikram Seth's novels, a recurring concern among characters is their inner emptiness and emotional instability. The lack of compatibility often leads to misunderstandings, resulting in a dearth of love and, subsequently, loneliness. Consequently, passionate love emerges as a central preoccupation in Seth's works. Faced with the trials of a solitary existence, his characters seek companionship to fill the void in their lives, often turning to passionate love in the hope that it will bring meaning to their world.

Chitra Banerjee's transformation of marginalized women into symbols of independence within her novels underscores the notion that women possess the capacity to reshape their communities. She highlights two key advantages of women's liberation. Firstly, it empowers them to recognize their

individual potential within the broader societal framework. Secondly, it emphasizes that this empowerment is the primary avenue through which they can attain personal recognition and establish their unique identities. Consequently, she aligns herself with the term 'womanist' as a writer and her literary works serve as critiques of the female identity in both India and America.

Divakaruni delves into the concerns and perspectives of the 'new women' in her work, illustrating their dissatisfaction with the traditional roles of housewives that the male-dominated society assigns to them. Her women characters emerge as 'new women' or 'virangana,' asserting their own space and identity. In this narrative, Divakaruni crafts a fresh myth about women, symbolizing a new realm for them, a world beyond the confines of the traditional role of women.

Vikram Seth skilfully portrays the generational gap between Lata and her mother, characterized by the tension arising from the clash between traditional values and the daughter's refusal to adhere to them. Seth also uses irony to highlight the social issues present in middle-class Indian society, particularly the negative aspects of the institution of marriage, such as dowry harassment and dowry-related deaths. These problems have turned marriage into an ugly and perilous institution. Seth also underscores the issue of corruption within the social system, with widows like Mrs. Mehra struggling without support.

In *A Suitable Boy*, the protagonist Lata finds herself in a vulnerable position in 1950s India, where marriage is often seen as a marketplace in which women attract potential suitors. Vikram Seth's character Lata is emblematic of the women in 1950s India, a time when women often had limited choices and had to accept the circumstances of their lives, no matter how uninspiring they might be. These women navigated their existence with a robust ethical compass that offered them spiritual nourishment.

Chitra Banerjee and Vikram Seth portray a conventional Indian society, marked by a dominant patriarchal framework. This structure places Indian women under the weight of tradition and unawareness, affecting both their representation in literature and their everyday experiences. Their lives were devoid of independence, heavily influenced by the established social customs.

However, the winds of change swept through India with the influence of Western education and culture, leading to the emergence of a transformed Indian woman.

The quest for identity is a challenging and sometimes rewarding journey for Indian women. Their works vividly portray the intricate tug-of-war within society, with one side embracing traditional culture and nationalism, while the other side leans toward modernization and, in some cases, westernization.

In the chosen novel by Divakaruni, the pursuit of identity frequently evolves into an existential matter. When individuals depart from their native land to establish themselves in a foreign environment, they bring with them an "authentic baggage" comprising their worldviews, beliefs, and aspirations. This "authentic baggage" functions as a protective mechanism, ultimately aiding migrants in their struggle to survive in an unfamiliar and alien setting. In the words of N. Jayaram: "Migrated individuals find in their culture a defense mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien settings" (22).

An individual's sense of belonging is often closely tied to their place of birth, and the strength of this connection can vary significantly from person to person. It depends on the deep-seated roots they have established in that place over time. The initial excitement and exhilaration experienced by an immigrant upon arriving in a foreign land can quickly diminish, replaced by emotions of insecurity and displacement. Nostalgia for the past becomes a prominent sentiment, with both home and nation taking on significant roles in the immigrant's memories. Suddenly, the immigrant feels a sense of dislocation and displacement.

In Chitra Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*, the protagonist Rakhi remains deeply captivated by India, her country of origin, even though she has never visited it. She attempts to conjure a mental

image of India based on the stories her mother used to tell her. Rakhi's mother, Mrs. Gupta, is a professional dream teller, and she moved to America with her husband, Mr. Gupta, where Rakhi was born and raised. Rakhi finds herself torn between two worlds: India, a land of myths, mysticism, and legends in her imagination, and America, where she has fully assimilated into the culture. Despite her physical presence in America, Rakhi continues to look towards India as a place filled with enchanting myths and timeless legends. *Queen of Dreams* delves deeply into the intricate lives of immigrants across two distinct generations: the pioneers who were the first to venture forth and their successors who comprise the second wave.

Divakaruni's literary work eloquently captures a dual narrative: one that illustrates the growing assimilation of Indian migrants within Western societies and simultaneously delves into the nuanced journey of these diasporic individuals as they navigate a dynamic realm of acceptance. Central to this narrative is the ongoing and intricate process of identity formation, as these individuals continually craft and redefine their sense of self in response to the evolving landscape of their adopted homes.

In the context of migration, women who relocate alongside their husbands to unfamiliar territories contend with a distinct set of challenges, distinct from those faced by their partners. The transition to a new country often doesn't prompt a corresponding shift in the traditional mindset of Indian men, exacerbating the complexities experienced by their female counterparts. This incongruity between the conservatism upheld at home and the liberties sought in the outside world engenders internal conflicts within the female characters' psyche.

Moreover, there exists another predicament for women who relinquish thriving careers in their home country to support their husbands abroad. The husbands secure lucrative positions, particularly in the Middle East, where the deeply conservative and traditional environment presents a daunting landscape for women. This environment can become almost inhospitable, triggering feelings of distress among Indian women. Struggling to secure employment that matches their qualifications and failing to seamlessly integrate into a culturally divergent society, these women often find themselves isolated, their interactions limited primarily to their immediate families due to cultural differences that hinder broader social connections.

To sustain herself, Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* opens a Chai House in partnership with her friend Belle. Despite her Western upbringing, Rakhi's artistic expression revolves around creating images of the enigmatic India she has conjured from her mother's stories. Her only connection to Indianness is her name, as she was raised in the West by her mother. Rakhi has never physically experienced India; instead, her understanding of the country is shaped by her mother's vivid narratives. She expresses a preference for her mother's stories to have originated in India, the land of her mother's upbringing, which she perceives as steeped in endless mystery. Her mother maintains a gap with her daughter and her husband so that her dreaming talent does not suffer. Rakhi mourns, "What cruel karma had placed me in the care of the only two Indians who never mentioned their homeland if they could help it? (82)".

Mr. Gupta is left to raise their troubled family, and he spirals into alcoholism. In this disarrayed family, Rakhi futilely attempts to gain her mother's attention. She and her father, Mr. Gupta, have lacked a father-daughter bond since her childhood. Rakhi feels like an orphan when she cannot accompany her mother on her dream-filled journey. She loses faith in her mother as she realizes her mother's primary focus is on her world of dreams and mysteries rather than her own family.

Upbringing plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's identity. A person's development is intricately tied to their environment and the culture they are exposed to while growing up. Rakhi, born and raised in America, considers it her homeland, although she has inherited Indian culture through her ancestry. As a second-generation migrant, she regards America as her true home. She feels the influence of both cultures in her life but grapples with understanding her true sense of belonging.

In a similar manner, Vikram Seth in *A Suitable Boy*, skilfully portrays the generational gap between Lata and her mother, characterized by the tension arising from the clash between traditional values and the daughter's refusal to adhere to them. Lata dismisses her mother's opinions as outdated and unfounded, further exacerbating the conflict between the two. Seth introduces an engaging mother-daughter rift, with both parties holding their ground firmly and steadfastly. The struggle and conflict between them become a central and enlightening theme throughout the novel.

Seth also uses irony to highlight the social issues present in middle-class Indian society, particularly the negative aspects of the institution of marriage, such as dowry harassment and dowry-related deaths. These problems have turned marriage into an ugly and perilous institution. Seth also underscores the issue of corruption within the social system, with widows like Mrs. Mehra struggling without support. Despite her son Arun's decent income, he is unable to provide much assistance. Mrs. Mehra is well aware of her daughter-in-law Meenakshi's self-centred and careless nature. Meenakshi, who is an anglophile, never attempts to curtail her extravagant spending. Arun, influenced by the Chatterjee family, is no better in his financial responsibilities. This portrayal highlights the various social challenges and complexities present within the story.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra's situation is undeniably unfortunate, and Vikram Seth employs a clever narrative strategy by portraying her as boorish and somewhat foolish to mask the harsh realities of her life. Through instances like her struggles to wear colourful saris or indulge in sweets despite being diabetic, Seth infuses humour into her character. This humour effectively underscores the social taboos and restrictions imposed on widows in Indian society, exposing the hypocrisy of a culture that seeks to keep women subjugated to men.

Despite the comedic elements, Mrs. Rupa Mehra's character is portrayed as lively, vital, and deeply serious, making a profound impact on the reader's sensibilities. Her life has been marked by struggles and sacrifices, particularly in her quest to provide the best possible education for her four children. Seth's portrayal of her underscores the challenges and pressures faced by women in Indian society.

Lata's marriage serves as a microcosm of two prominent issues in India. First, there is the matter of the girl's personality, and second, the status of the family, which hinges on economic and social considerations. Lata is found wanting in both aspects, highlighting the complex nature of arranged marriages in India.

Lata herself becomes a victim of this hypocritical Indian society, which simultaneously reveres women as selfless figures and goddesses like Durga and Lakshmi, while subjecting them to oppression and humiliation. The harsh realities of women's lives inevitably lead Mrs. Mehra to desperation and restlessness. Her attempts to find *A Suitable Boy* for Lata take her to Mr. Sahgal, her sister's husband. It is here that Lata encounters a shocking incident when Mr. Sahgal, who outwardly appears as a doting husband to his wife, attempts to sexually assault her, revealing the darker side of some individuals within this society.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra torn between the need to protect her younger daughter and the inappropriateness of one of her generations, particularly a widow, forming a part of the downstairs audience, had disappeared upstairs. She was looking through a gap in the cane screen and saying to Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, 'In my time, no women would have been allowed in the courtyard for such an evening' (81-82)

Lata is aware that her mother would find it challenging to accept Kabir as a potential match. This is primarily because Kabir does not belong to their caste, nor does he have a stable job. Moreover, Vikram Seth does not seem to endorse Kabir as a suitable partner for Lata due to his perceived lack of decisiveness. Instead of confronting this issue head-on, Seth chooses to withdraw from the situation.

On a separate occasion, Amit Chatterjee, who is Meenakshi's brother and Lata's potential suitor, also expresses interest in Lata. However, once again, Lata's mother intervenes and puts an end to the relationship. This time, the reason is that Amit is Bengali, and more importantly, he is viewed as a wasteful individual who has never earned an honest living.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra's behaviour in the story showcases her becoming excessively controlling to the point of nearly jeopardizing her mental well-being. She feels the constant need to be watchful and involved in every aspect of Lata's life, including her desires and choices. This is a common portrayal of the highly protective, and at times overly protective, nature of Indian mothers.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary focus, especially concerning Indian women, revolves around these very themes of cross-cultural experiences and identity struggles. Her work illustrates the clashes between Eastern and Western cultures, detailing the protagonist's endeavours to overcome cultural barriers while establishing a novel and cohesive identity in a foreign land, particularly in America. The decision to migrate to a foreign country invariably brings one into contact with the host country's culture. This encounter often triggers a clash between an individual's original culture and the adopted culture, ultimately giving rise to an identity crisis. The tensions born from this contradiction frequently become a defining factor in the narrative of an individual's journey.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni explores the complexities of identity and coexistence faced by South Asian Americans in the United States. The character of Mrs. Gupta maintains a strong connection to her Indian culture, particularly through culinary practices and clothing choices. Her dreams serve as a powerful link to her roots, and she maintains a sense of cultural identity while adapting to her new life in America.

Mrs. Gupta's adaptation and adjustment to her surroundings reflect her willingness to coexist with the changes in her life, all while preserving her cultural identity. Her dream journals provide a glimpse into her past and cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of maintaining one's roots in a diasporic context. Overall, Divakaruni's works highlight the diverse experiences of Indian women in the context of migration and cultural adaptation, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities they encounter as they navigate their new lives in foreign lands.

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 mishmash, a westerner's notion of what's Indian. May be that's the problem. May be if you can make it into something authentic you'll survive (QD 89).

Rakhi's unwavering perception of America as her home undergoes a jarring transformation after a pivotal incident: an attack that forces her to confront her identity as Indian rather than exclusively American. Despite being born on American soil, she finds herself compelled to validate her American identity. Tragically, Rakhi becomes a casualty of this hyphenated identity, grappling with the intricate interplay of her Indian heritage and her American environment.

Chitra Divakaruni and Vikram Seth's literary contributions exemplify a truly cross-cultural dimension. Their novels consistently engage with the "quest for cultural identity" as a central motif, delving into the intricacies of individuals' journeys to establish a sense of belonging within shifting contexts. In the realm of English literature critique, the preceding century has been characterized as an era marked by uncertainty and solitude. Consequently, an exploration of the inner intellectual landscapes of protagonists has emerged as a paramount focus for writers. As the fabric of traditional family structures undergoes transformation amidst the surge of modernization, the resultant erosion of conventional setups contributes to a pervasive identity crisis, especially among the upcoming generation. Moreover, the ongoing flux of people migrating in pursuit of improved prospects further disrupts the stability of contemporary environments. This phenomenon poses challenges in acclimating to new

surroundings and disentangling oneself from one's original roots. The act of migration encompasses a profound ordeal, encompassing mental, spiritual, and psychological distress, often leading to cultural and personal seclusion. Their literature, adeptly navigating these multifaceted themes, serves as an exploration of the human experience within the intricate tapestry of cultural transitions and self-discovery.

Conclusion

This research paper offers a discerning perspective on the immigrant journey, presenting a detailed portrayal of the complexities, challenges, and tumult within the homeland. The characters grapple with the dilemma of preserving their traditional roots or adopting a more progressive outlook. Ultimately, they find a harmonious middle ground, preserving their cultural values while carving out unique identities in the new world. Functioning as healers within their societies, they prioritize humanity over rigid cultural boundaries, thereby rediscovering their hyphenated identities in the process.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Vikram Seth adeptly navigate their protagonists through a transformative journey, evolving from a state of limited self-perception largely shaped by external perspectives to a profound understanding of their inner selves. The narratives crafted by these authors do not romanticize this transformative journey, portraying it as neither pleasurable nor straightforward. Instead, they underscore the inevitability of change in an individual's life. As societal norms and ideologies undergo evolution, individuals are compelled to adapt and respond to these changes, thereby reflecting their "attitude towards change" as a pivotal determinant of self-awareness.

Divakaruni and Seth strategically utilize the parameters of self-awareness as transformative portals, guiding their characters from a reliance on external influences towards a profound understanding of their inner selves and those of others. These characters traverse diverse societal norms and cultures, embarking on a journey of self-discovery within an envisioned utopian world. Nonetheless, the storytelling approaches of the two authors diverge. Vikram Seth employs a highly realistic style of narration, whereas Chitra Banerjee weaves together elements of reality and fantasy in her narratives. Seth's novels predominantly explore the conflicts encountered by male protagonists, while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the narratives and adversities of female characters. Both authors conclude their novels with open endings, neither purely joyful nor sorrowful. The characters come to terms with their diasporic identity, adapting through compromises.

The research outcomes not only offer theoretical insights but also hold practical relevance in comprehending the perspectives, probabilities, and operational dynamics associated with the journey, settlement, and pursuit of personal or impersonal objectives. The findings and hypotheses derived from this research work contribute significantly to understanding the intricate interplay of cultural and transnational elements

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