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POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM'S REINSCRIPTION OF DIASPORIC FEMALE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT: *The current article studies a fictional South Asian female character in diasporic space by arguing that it is vital to consider her racial, cultural and historical orientation to understand the struggle in carving an identity in the host culture. Postcolonial feminist theory forms the background of this work. The locus of the main argument of this article is how Rakhi, the main character of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel Queen of Dreams, dealing with her inner conflict between tradition and culture, develops as a South Asian American in the mainstream US society. Understanding herself as a postcolonial subject enables her to assimilate the fractured parts of her being towards the end of the novel.*

KEY WORDS: Postcolonial feminism, identity, racial, cultural and historical differences

INTRODUCTION

In studying the character of an American born second-generation Indian woman, this article makes use of postcolonial feminism in a specific sense. Since the text of *Queen of Dreams* deals with racial politics from the beginning, it seems pertinent to enquire about how Rakhi's ethnic identity had shaped the formation of her identity in the USA. Certain postcolonial feminists observe how postcolonial feminism promotes a racial view of mainstream feminist theory in order to introduce feminist anti-racist politics that recognizes the differences between women. Such anti-racist politics is a reaction against the second wave Anglo-American feminist theory that standardized Western middle-class women's experiences and developed a form of global sisterhood which assumed that those white concerns were the concerns of women everywhere. Postcolonial feminism reconfigures history and neocolonialism by tagging them with feminist issues. It revisits colonial history to view women as preservers of national identity. How this attribution of tradition on women obstructs the development of their empowerment as a group is also a concern of postcolonial feminism. It also studies the role of neocolonial enterprises in the fettering of women. As a part of its critique of neocolonialism, postcolonial feminism unmasks the double standard maintained in certain diasporic spaces to subjugate women. In this unmasking process postcolonial feminism encounters Western feminist theory's generalization of diasporic South Asian women's struggle in sculpting identities in diasporic space. Such generalization happens as an outcome of Western feminist theory's failure to recognize racial, cultural and historical differences among women of the Global South. Thus postcolonial feminism, when studied in accordance with diaspora, destabilizes the idea of the universality of Western cultures by making us aware of the circular power relationships between the Global North and South. Identities are contaminated in

the global context to such an extent that the centrality of Western culture is now questionable. Hence, postcolonial feminism's emphasis on plurality of race, culture and other defining agencies of identity formation is more apparent in the diaspora. This article argues that postcolonial feminism's questioning of global sisterhood is pertinent in understanding the challenges faced by subjects belonging to a non-Western historical position.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before moving to any textual analysis it is imperative to revisit what others have been saying about the process of identity formation as portrayed by Divakaruni in *Queen of Dreams*. In her two essays on the novel Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru (2012, 2019) highlights the interrelation of human, dreams and nature. She believes that dreams weave generational ties across cultures in diasporic space. At the same time dreams bridge humans with nature with a view to creating a gateway to the mystical natural world that lies beyond urban landscapes. Alexandru's reading of *Queen of Dreams* attempts to show how diasporic subjects, by rejecting urban alienation, search for and embrace the healing power of harmonious nature. Doris Kezia (2009) discusses the immigrant subject's need to reestablish her connection with the roots in order to create a meaningfully negotiated self. How her father's stories and mother's dreams enable Rakhi, the protagonist of the novel, to refashion her identity, so that a reconciliation among her binary culture can happen, is observed by Klarina Priborkin (2008). Showkat Ahmad Naik, A. Saburunnisa, B. Priya and S.L. Sathia Sali (2017, 2019,2018) study Rakhi's struggle to assimilate her past and present cultures. Cynthia Leenerts' "American Nightmares in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*" (2007) explores how immigrants are affected by racial tension, an aftermath of events like the catastrophes of the 1989 Oakland earthquake and the 9/11terrorist attack. This article, informed by existing literature, extends the thread of discussion by analyzing the appropriateness of postcolonial feminist theory to understand the nature of Rakhi's predicament as a second-generation female migrant in the United States. A parallelism is also suggested in the present work between the mental growth of Rakhi and her tea house as opposed to its formidable competitor Java coffee shop chain.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the introduction of *South Asian Feminisms*, its editors, Ania Loomba and Ritty A Lukose (2012) explain the title of the anthology by saying that "there are necessarily enormous debates and divergences between feminists in the region and beyond, that we used the word "feminisms" in the book's title and in this introduction" (Loomba and Lukose, 2012, p.2). Plurality and differences in feminist theories emphasize the necessity of specific scrutiny of regional and individual study of women. The postcolonial feminist discourse thus coins the concept of plurality against the backdrop of a global, universal idea of feminist criticism that tends to overlook the racial and regional factors related to women issues.

In the introduction to *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* the editors Reina Lewis and Sara Mills critique the overgeneralization of feminist issues across the world by proponents of second wave Anglo-American feminist theory. Considering white middle-class women's experiences, second wave feminists have developed a theory of global sisterhood. Lewis and Mills note, "[t]his type of essentialising led to a silencing of Black and third world women's interventions within early Anglo-American feminist theory" (Lewis and Mills, 2003, p. 4). Postcolonial feminists raise questions about the Western campaign of homogeneity of women issues across the globe. Critics opine that feminist anti-racist politics was born out of "recognition of the differences between women and out of the anti-imperialist campaigns of 'first-' and 'third-world' women" (Lewis and Mills, 2003, p 4). This recognition, being intricately related to postcolonial awakenings, can be considered an offshoot of the larger ideological backdrop of anti-imperialism in formerly colonized countries. As a part of this legacy, feminism in South Asia is naturally more prone to plurality and differences.

The postcolonial women as well as women of color call for recognition of their plurality as opposed to the idea of global sisterhood posed by second wave Western feminism. The identity formation of the diasporic South Asian women in the US is a complicated combination of history, race, culture, class, politics, and gender. To understand the specific situation of these diasporic women it is crucial to consider the issues of plurality in different brands of feminism. These women have to deal with problems, first as women, then as diasporic women. Obviously, this twofold identity makes things more complicated for them than their native and foreign counterparts. Any analysis of how they learn to survive in the new situation reveals that their transformation is still in process. They struggle between tradition and acculturation.

Traditional Western feminism has proved inadequate in understanding the socio-psychological trajectories of South Asian women migrants' lives in the US. Racial and cultural multiplicities play a crucial role in their identity formation. Branches of non-Western feminism such as postcolonial and postmodern feminism emphasize the necessity of "feminisms" over "feminism". Their stress on plurality incorporates the particularities of feminist issues, as opposed to the universalist representation of them. These brands of feminism also stress the question of diversity among women worldwide.

Traditional Western feminism, especially second-wave feminism, refers to third world women as a homogenous, singular group. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the representation of third world women as a "singular, monolithic" subject in Western feminist texts because this representation assumes "an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 51, 64). The homogenizing of women across the globe is founded on the notion of a shared oppression. This homogeneity produces a problem for the collective term "women." In her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", Mohanty observes that when the term "women" denotes a discursively constructed group, the other denotation of the term is neglected, which is, women "as material subjects of their own history" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56). Thus the discursively formulated definition undermines the "historically specific material reality of groups of women" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56).

The historically specific material reality of women brings forth the importance of particular local contexts in their identity formation. The questions of social class and ethnic identities cannot be bypassed in the matter of presenting third world women as distinctive group. Women do not only have gender identities; rather, they are a complex combination of socioeconomic and political factors. It is absurd to try to address the conflicting histories and diverse struggles of third world women under a single rubric. Therefore, the idea of "universal sisterhood" coined by Robin Morgan (1996), instead of being universal, becomes a particular self-presentation of Western women (Morgan, 1996, p.1).

However, the rigid opposition between the first and third world, between Western feminism and feminism of color, is no longer tenable in the fast-moving present-day world of global capitalism. The plurality of South Asian feminism now has to be redefined in the light of the changed socio-economic politics of the modern world. Feminism in the Global South cannot be presented as a homogenous block of plurality in contrast to Western, white, middle-class feminism. Overemphasizing plurality makes one run the risk of being interpreted as exotic. Bell Hooks (1992) refers to this risk by saying that "the commodification of difference," is the representation of diversity as a form of exotica, "a spice, seasoning that livens up the dull dish that is main-stream white culture"(Hooks, 1992, p. 21). Therefore, overemphasizing differences does not seem to be a wise course to undertake by women of the Global South. However, sometimes it is the inevitable way to take to decipher the particular challenges of non-Western women. The next section of the article interlaces postcolonial feminist theory's tenets with the refashioning of Rakhi's identity as a South Asian American who eventually synchronizes her binary cultural roots.

TEXTUAL DISCUSSION

Postcolonial feminism's emphasis on considering "differences" among women as the primary factor in understanding the particular challenges they encounter becomes evident from the framework of the previous discussion. Based on this, the following part of the article studies the growth of a South Asian American protagonist from a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The main strand of thought which navigates the discussion is that, postcolonial feminism is more suited to analyze the socio-cultural challenges of a diasporic female of Indian origin. Postcolonial feminist viewpoint can adeptly comment on the development of such a character and also better interprets the socio-political challenges she faces.

Divakaruni's fourth novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) revolves around the life an American born Indian woman Rakhi, whose struggles with the other people of her life and with her unknown Indian heritage is the locus of the novel. The terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 is another important trope of the novel that brings into question the status of Rakhi and her family's citizenship, as well as their rights in the United States.

Born and brought up in the United States, Rakhi Gupta cherishes a romanticized view of her parents' homeland. As Divakaruni points out, Rakhi's parents, unlike other immigrant parents, are unwilling to instill Indian culture into their daughter. Unlike typical second-generation immigrant children, however, Rakhi is eager to learn and absorb the native culture that had eluded her earlier

due to the reticence of her parents. Postcolonial feminism is relevant in assessing Rakhi's character since it allows us to see that in her diasporic life she has to face challenges due to her past experiences. In their essay "Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism" Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park opine 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, 2000, p. 53). Therefore, postcolonial feminism is not only confined to colonial backgrounds. It rather encompasses a host of issues such as gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities and the differing circumstances of women's lives.

Rakhi's parents were mostly reticent about India in dealing with their growing daughter; the mother, nevertheless, retained many cultural practices within the home space such as wearing saris and cooking Indian food. Rakhi remembers such things by saying "[a]t home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture" (Divakaruni, 2004, p.7). She also remembers how her father hummed Hindi songs while doing dishes in the kitchen. Undoubtedly, because of the traditional atmosphere at home Rakhi is tied to her past subconsciously. Later, she chooses Indian themes as the subjects for her paintings like temples, cityscapes, women in a marketplace and bus drivers at lunch. When she was still married to Sonny, Rakhi used to cook elaborate Indian meals, "appetizers, rotis rolled out fresh, rich curries in almond sauce, traditional Indian desserts that required hours of culinary acrobatics" (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 12). The most outstanding example of her Indianness is that she and her friend Belle (shortened from Balwant Kaur) named their joint-venture restaurant 'Chai House'. The business of this restaurant is threatened by the launching of an "authentic" American coffee shop named "The Java Chain", a franchise of one of the fastest-growing café chains in America. Symbolically, this coffee shop becomes the binary of Rakhi's Chai House. Faced with its vibrant presence, Rakhi's shop fails to retain its customers. This is a significant phenomenon in Rakhi's growth as a human being because metaphorically the Chai House represented her own fragmented identity.

Rakhi's mother Mrs. Gupta has a special power of dreaming and interpreting truths about other people's life. In addition, she is also a woman of extraordinary sharpness of intellect and wisdom. When Rakhi and Belle seek her help about their falling business, Mrs. Gupta says something that applies equally to Rakhi and 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, 2004, p. 89)

Since Rakhi could never develop firsthand knowledge about India from her parents, especially her mother, she cherishes a Westerner's notion of what is Indian, a concocted notion that makes her the person she is. Though she is a second-generation Indian-American born in California, she does not and cannot erase her Indian origin. Rakhi's identity formation is inseparably linked to her past; she cannot form a coherent self unless she too, like the Chai House, can achieve authenticity.

Indian parentage has self-contradictory implication on Rakhi. For example, she is haunted by the unknown homeland that eludes her yearning of learning more of its mysteries. In fact, her inability to learn about India makes it a place of immense mystery and romance to her. When she was in college, Rakhi borrowed a tape full of songs about the Bengal monsoon from its South Asian library. When she asked her parents about the authenticity of the beauty of Bengal monsoon described in the songs, her father disillusioned her by saying that Calcutta city became flooded with every downpour, and people died of cholera in the rainy season. However, this information failed to daunt Rakhi in the end since she thought: "[b]ut I was not fooled. They were hiding things from me, beautiful, mysterious, important things, as they always had" (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 82). Her longing for learning Bengali makes Belle consider her to be insane and her repeated attempt to visit India is something her parents disapprove of. However, Rakhi vows to visit India before her death, "if only to lay to rest the ghosts that dance in my head like will-o'-the-wisps over a rippling sea" (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 83).

Rakhi's constant struggle to synthesize her American present and Indian past is evident in the fact that both her husband and best friend are of Indian origin, albeit acculturated to the host land. The way Rakhi dresses at an important event of her life like the first exhibition of her paintings at the Atelier is a reminder of the cultural duality she is going 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, 2004, p. 93)

Like the fusion represented by her dress, Rakhi feels inwardly the strong pull from both her little-known heritage and present. To study the complex strands of Rakhi's character it is necessary to place her in the cultural context she has woven around her. For a better understanding of women of the Global South, Rajan and Park (2000) emphasize the importance of race, class, nationality, religion, and sexualities that "intersect with gender, and the hierarchies, epistemic as well as political, social, and economic, that exist among women" (Rajan and Park, 2000, p. 54). These critics hold that postcolonial feminist critics, like other US women of color, dismiss the idea of the universal woman but do not promote the reification "of the Third World "difference" that produces the "monolithic" Third World woman" (Rajan and Park, 2000, p. 54). This observation of Rajan and Park applies in particular to Rakhi's situation as her multi-dimensional personality eschews labels such as "universal" or "monolithic" and encourages an analysis based on her particular subject position as a colored American-Indian woman. It is interesting to note that despite her romanticized view of India, and her yearning to go there one day, Rakhi wishes that after her death she would become part of the Pacific in Northern California. She ruminates on the issue thus, "[i]f 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, 2004, p. 133,134). This co-existence of an inherent contradiction in her, her yearning to embrace both the known present and the unknown past marks Rakhi's identity as unique. It is neither like a white

American's nor like her first-generation immigrant parents. She is even different from Belle who does not fantasize India the way Rakhi does. Her disposition can be categorized as "transnational feminism", to borrow a phrase from Rajan and Park. According to them, transnational feminism 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, 2000, p. 57). Afterwards, the competition Rakhi's Chai House fails to withstand comes from a neocolonial agent, the Java Chain Coffee shop. Later in the narrative, the treatment Rakhi and her family get from some Americans after 9/11, also reminds the reader of the neocolonial racial conflicts in that traumatized diasporic American space.

Rakhi's Chai House lacked authenticity, says her mother Mrs. Gupta. The narrative reveals that business picks up when Rakhi's father takes charge of it and gives it an Indian as well as an international texture. It is interesting to observe how Rakhi as a person develops in a manner parallel to the shifting identity of the restaurant. Divakaruni gives an account of Rakhi's mutation in her interview with Luan Gaines in the following words: "[s]he 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, paragraph 12).

The deathly disaster of 9/11, resulting from the destruction of the World Trade Center in a terrorist attack, induces a life-changing experience in Rakhi. When they open their restaurant after the attack Rakhi refuses to put up an American flag, saying that she does not want to show off her love for America under pressure by displaying it. Soon after its re-opening, the restaurant is attacked by some American men who badly injure Jespal and Sonny. Afterwards, Rakhi ruminates that when one of the men had said "You ain't no American". She had tried to dismiss him by calling him "a racist idiot". However, she questions herself "[b]ut if I wasn't an American, then what was I?" (Divakaruni, 2004, p. 271). She feels that she has lost the sense of belonging she had previously. Her feeling of insecurity about her identity is further intensified over the next few days when she gets e-mails circulated by Indian organizations. She cannot make up her mind whether she should pray to an American or Indian deity and feels like a guest in America, the country of her birth, when sympathetic Americans welcome her presence in their community.

CONCLUSION

The postcolonial diasporic subject lets go of the watertight compartmentalization of her/his multiple cultural selves to form an inclusive self. In *Queen of Dreams,* Rakhi mentions a series of identities she possesses within herself. However, finally the last segment of the novel marks a final shift in her character that contains diasporic fluidity, achieved only after she learns to own the implication of her postcolonial position. This fluidity noticeably makes her more adaptable to changing circumstances. The last few pages of the novel chronicle how she overcomes her past trauma by visiting the night club where Sonny (her stranded husband), works as DJ. Rakhi's blending in the multi-racial crowd of the club symbolizes her acceptance of a diasporic identity

that crosses over to the other side and out of her comfort zone. In fact, eventually she learns that her past, as well as her diasporic present, is essential to her identity formation.

In the last chapter of the novel, Rakhi visits the club where Sonny plays as the DJ. She finds a mixed-up crowd there. Her blending in the crowd of the club and enjoying the multicultural music proves her openness to the hybridity that is so integral to diasporic subjectivity. In her essay "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)" Sunaina Maira (1999) gives an in-depth account of how the bhangra club nights promote the kind of Indian American Youth Subculture that can create "a new site for the collision of identity politics and the marketing of ethnic styles" (Maira, 1999, p. 30). Maira analyzes this element of the second-generation popular culture with a view to linking it "to the specific identity questions that loom large for second-generation Indian Americans and in locating these two dimensions in particular historical and cultural contexts" (Maira, 1999, p. 30). She goes on to say that the fusion of music sometimes extends to a performance of culturally hybrid styles like the use of bindi or a dot on the forehead and an Indian-style nose ring with hip-hop. Divakaruni finishes *Queen of Dreams* with her heroine's self-discovery in the bhangra dance club to suggest a similar kind of transcendence. Rakhi encompasses both essentialization and hybridity but is capable of avoiding being stuck within these identity markers; she is the new woman who is prepared to explore new horizons of self- definition. Postcolonial feminism, with its focus on historical specificity of a particular subject, appears to be an appropriate marker of such a character's search for individual identity.

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