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## Father and Daughter: A Recovered Link in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*

**ABSTRACT:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an English-speaking writer who was born in India in 1956 and is currently living in the United States. In *Queen of Dreams* published in 2004 she depicts the conflicts between Rakhi, a young American in her thirties living in California, and her India-born parents. Rakhi reproaches them for refusing to initiate her to Indian culture, particularly blaming her father for not being able to communicate. However, the mother's death is the trigger for the father's story. The father becomes the one who tells his daughter about life in India, thus embodying the missing cultural link in Rakhi's family tree. The aim of this article is to offer an analysis of the father-daughter relationship as presented in *Queen of Dreams*. It intends to put into light the part played by the father in helping his daughter understand the way transgenerational loyalties work, and create a new identity of her own.

**KEY WORDS:** Father, daughter, Indian, America, transmission, transgenerational

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an English-speaking writer who was born in India in 1956 and is currently living in the United States<sup>1</sup>. Most of her fiction deals with Indian immigrants caught between two worlds, India and America. In one of her novels, *Queen of Dreams* published in 2004, she depicts the conflicts existing between Rakhi, a young American in her thirties living in California, and her India-born parents living in California, too. On the one hand, Rakhi reproaches her mother for obstinately refusing to initiate her to Indian culture, and on the other hand she blames her father for being an alcoholic who is unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni came to the USA to write a PhD thesis on British literature when she was nineteen. She now teaches creative writing in colleges. She has written numerous novels and short stories as well as poetry including *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and *One Amazing Thing* (2010). In *The Palace of Illusions* (2010) she has rewritten part of the *Mahabharata*, a famous Hindu epic, from the viewpoint of the heroine, Draupadi, who is not given voice in the original epic.

communicate – so she says. That is the reason why she does not consider him a story teller. However, after her mother dies in a car accident, her father becomes the one who tells his daughter about life in India and Indian culture. Therefore, he manages to embody the missing cultural link in Rakhi's family tree.

Until the mother dies, the father is rejected by both his daughter and his wife. And Rakhi keeps on siding with her mother. It is the unexpected role played by the father in a family where the mother-daughter relationship used to be privileged that aroused my interest. Besides, what I really found interesting is the way the father manages to help his daughter understand how unconscious transgenerational loyalties may work. The concept of transgenerational loyalties was developed during the twentieth century by different psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts such as Anne Ancelin Schützenberger,<sup>2</sup> who based part of her analysis on Ivàn Böszörményi-Nagy's theories and work.<sup>3</sup> According to them, we often unconsciously feel loyal towards our forebears, no matter how little we know about them; that is why we sometimes repeat our ancestors' actions without being aware of it, thus enacting repetitive patterns. They also assume that relationships within families depend on whether we were given more from our relatives than what we gave them. That is why both of them insist on what they call psychological debts. Indeed when relationships get tense within families, we sometimes ask ourselves questions such as: what do we owe our relatives? Or what can we blame them for?

As regards Rakhi, the question she asks herself is simple. She wonders "what cruel karma had placed" her "in the care of the only two Indians who never mentioned their homeland if they could help it" (BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI 82). Indeed, she reproaches her parents for not letting her have a true identity of her own by not telling her about India, thus causing a feeling of void within her. We can also wonder up to what point Rakhi, who has no brothers and sisters, may lack a brother's presence, her surname Rakhi meaning link in Sanskrit and referring to the little bracelet sisters usually offer their brothers in Hindu tradition. Had her parents, by giving her such a name, meant to make up for that absence? That is difficult to say as Rakhi herself is unable to offer any explanations concerning that point. All we know is that Rakhi's mother admits in her

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Ancelin Schützenberger is a French psychologist, born in Moscow in 1919, who is working on psychogenealogy. Her best-seller *Aïe, mes aïeux !* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, La Méridienne) published in 1993 has been translated into English under the title *The Ancestor Syndrome*. In that book, she takes up and develops Ivàn Böszörményi-Nagy's theory of transgenerational loyalties, that is, the theory dealing with the psychological patterns we inherit from our forerunners (BÖSZÖRMÉNYI-NAGY 1973). Anne Ancelin Schützenberger's most recent book, *La langue secrète du corps*, was published in 2015 (Paris, Payot).

<sup>3</sup> Ivàn Böszörményi-Nagy is an American psychiatrist born in Hungary in 1920. He worked on family therapy and based his analysis both on the study of transgenerational loyalties and on the way familial ethics work, insisting on the importance of justice and equality within families.

private journal that she had thought of having an abortion instead of letting her daughter be born and that she had finally resolved not to do so. However, she had never told her daughter about it. What Rakhi does not know is that she might never have been born because of her mother's need for independence, her mother feeling the need to dedicate herself to her gift for dream reading and shamanism. Ironically, Rakhi's father was ignorant about these things too and it is him, the long rejected father who, thanks to his patient care and natural gift for cultural transmission, allows Rakhi to start on a long and gradual process of introspection leading to solving her identity problems.

This article particularly intends to put into light the part played by the father in helping his daughter understand the way transgenerational loyalties work and create a new identity of her own.

### Unreliable Parents: Rakhi's Feeling of Estrangement

Rakhi's major difficulty in life is to be able to understand who she is. She has the feeling she is too American and has no other cultural background than the American one to rely on, although her parents are of Indian descent: "My mother told me that she didn't know any good stories and that India wasn't all that mysterious" (4). That is why she resents her parents' lack of concern for the country where they were born. Rakhi is a divorced woman and the mother of a six-year-old girl, Jona. She is constantly at war with her ex-husband Sonny. However, thanks to the money she earns as a coffee shop owner, she has been able to obtain the custody of her daughter after her divorce. Rakhi is nonetheless restless, worried, constantly preoccupied with her art, painting, and above all the identity void she feels within herself.

Unfortunately, although the name of her coffee shop sounds Indian – it is called the Chai House, in reference to the hot spicy Chai tea that is made in India – it is not a real Indian coffee shop according to her mother who claims that: "This isn't a real cha shop [...] but a mishmash, a Westerner's notion of what's Indian" (89). Rakhi resents that judgment inasmuch as, as far as she remembers, she has always tried to put her steps into her mother's ever since she was a child, literally clinging to her: "Children my own age did not seem particularly interesting to me. I preferred to follow my mother around the house" (6). But she is unaware of the fact that it is her mother who deliberately severed her from India and imposed her own conception of life on her: "I tried to draw her attention from the long ago and far away, to get her to focus on her American life" (49). Similarly, what Rakhi does not know is that her mother, who is a medium and a decipherer of dreams, did all she could to prevent her from dreaming, so as not

to pass on to her the burden of being able to decipher dreams, an exceptional gift that she had developed in India.

Unluckily, Rakhi's mother understands her daughter's trauma too late: "[...] by not telling you about India as it really was, I made it into something far bigger. It crowded other things out of your mind. It pressed against your brain like a tumor" (89). In a way, by severing her daughter's legitimate links with Mother India she has ignored what could have helped her find her way among the mesh of her mixed roots. She explains: "I didn't want to be like those other mothers, splitting you between here and there" (89). Even her best friend Belle, a young American of Indian descent just like her, tells Rakhi one day: "You need help [...]. You are one sick person" (82).

By having an overprotective attitude towards her daughter, Rakhi's mother has always kept her in her own sphere, driving Rakhi to reject her father. Rakhi admits she is more attracted to her mother's secretive attitude than to her father's domestic and artistic achievements: "[My father] he 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). Thus Rakhi makes clear-cut distinctions between her parents. Before her mother's death, Rakhi considers her father as "a hazy presence" (55). She is so admiring of her mother that she considers her the "buffer zone", the "translator" who softens "the combative edges of their words" and clarifies "their questions, even to themselves" (165). Rakhi's statement is all the more confusing as, contrary to what she says, she has difficulties clarifying her own questions and finding a true identity for herself.

Additionally, Rakhi cannot help projecting the resentment she feels towards her father onto her former husband Sonny. She feels offended by the good relationship that Sonny has with their own daughter Jona. She constantly belittles Sonny. That is why she is taken aback when one day her six-year-old daughter explains: "Sonny says I'm all grown up now, and we're friends more than father and daughter, so I can call him by his name" (58). Despite her bitterness and constant bickering with Sonny, Rakhi does not succeed in influencing her daughter, and Jona trusts both her parents, breaking the infernal circle of the reduplication of resentful parent-child relationships.

However, Rakhi has unconsciously paid a tribute to her forebears by marrying Sonny: "[s]he wonders what it was that drew them to each other. Was it their similarity? They were both of Indian origin, though he never spoke of his past" (70). Let us note that Belle, Rakhi's best friend, did the same. Belle's boyfriend is a devout Sikh, named Jespal, wearing his long hair in a turban. First, Belle is reluctant to go out with him: "Do you see me covering my head and following him to the gurdwara<sup>4</sup> every weekend? And he'd probably faint from shock if

<sup>4</sup> A *gurdwara* is a Sikh temple.

I took him to my favorite club” (160). And when he asks her to marry him after several weeks of courting she is disconcerted: “I’m crazy about him. [...] But he’s so traditional. Like his turban. Did you know, he really does have long hair under it [...] like that man in *The English Patient*,<sup>5</sup> remember?” (219). Rakhi then realizes that personal choices, even those concerning private lives, are not made at random and often proceed from deep unconscious forces and invisible links.

It takes a drama, her mother’s death in a car accident, to make Rakhi change her mind and feelings towards her father. After her mother dies, Rakhi, whose tea shop has started losing clients due to the opening of another tea shop just in front of hers, is unable to curb the shop’s decline. Before her death, Rakhi’s mother told Rakhi that her tea shop was not a real Indian tea shop but did not explain why and what to do. It is Rakhi’s father who, after the mother’s death, timidly starts explaining what could be done to change the tea shop.

Gradually, her father tells her about his childhood in India and the way his parents lived, which allows Rakhi to be “plunged into her first Indian story” (166). He tells her about how his father, who used to be a clerk, fell ill and had to stay at home, and about how his beautiful mother, who started working in a factory, reluctantly became the mistress of her overseer so that her son could stop working in a tea shop. He also explains how she finally decided to poison herself so as to escape from disgrace and shame. However, he does not clearly state that point, he just explains that: “Her third choice involved poison mixed into a drink – But that’s another story, and will have to wait for another day” (168). Rapidly, Rakhi’s father starts cooking for his daughter, as he used to be a cook in India, telling her all he knows about Hindu myths and epics, singing old songs, which leads Rakhi to finally say: “[...] my chameleon father is turning out to have a few surprises in him” (161).

The more Rakhi’s father unveils himself and brings transformations to the shop, the more Rakhi changes. Truly, the changes in the shop parallel Rakhi’s own transformation, letting her old self gradually be replaced by a new self. However, she acknowledges that she has difficulties evolving and understanding what is going on. To refer to her mother’s words, “transformation is an erratic phenomenon. It strikes people in different ways” (262). Before finally recognizing the benefits brought about by her father’s helping hand, she still clings to the old allegiance she had pledged to her mother: “While I’m beginning to like the man I’m finding as I peel away that old label *father*, I have no doubt as to where my loyalties lie” (164). In reality, she is still unable to understand the fact that mothers often project their own aspirations or failures onto their daughters, and

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<sup>5</sup> *The English Patient* (1996) is a film directed by British producer Anthony Minghella based on the novel by Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian writer of Sri Lankan descent. It takes place during the Italian World War II Campaign. At one point of the story, Hana, a Canadian nurse, falls in love with a long-haired Sikh soldier wearing a turban, serving in the British Army.

that fathers do the same with their sons, all the more as Rakhi is an only child and used to be her mother's only daughter.

### The Father as a Storyteller and a Cultural Conveyor

Getting to know her father better makes Rakhi wonder about his true personality: "I didn't expect to hear of dark inner closets from my father – but now that I give it some thought, it fits. Perhaps that's where he disappeared to when he went on his drinking binges" (163). First, their relations are tense and Rakhi hardly trusts him: "Our talks are painful, stuttery, like learning to walk after your bones have been broken" (133). But it is her father who casts a new light on the family relationships and who gives his own point of view to his daughter for the first time in his life: "I worry about you. I always have. But until now your mother was there to take care of your problems. That's the way she wanted it, without any interference from me, so I let her be" (155).

Progressively Rakhi agrees to let her father turn the Chai House into a real snack shop as in Calcutta, a "*chaer dokan*" (165) as her father calls it: "He'll teach Belle and her to brew tea and coffee the right way, and he'll cook the snacks himself. He lists them on a sheet of paper: pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana" (165). She is fascinated by her father's dexterity when he pours "another cup of tea for Belle, raising the pot high with the practiced hand to let the amber stream froth into her cup without spilling a drop" (161).

Thanks to her father, the shop is eventually re-named and becomes the Kurma House, in reference to Hindu mythology and to Kurma, the turtle that was an incarnation of Vishnu, one of the three gods of the Hindu *trimurti*.<sup>6</sup> Kurma supported Mount Mandara during the churning of the ocean of milk that had been initiated by various gods and demons who wished to possess the *amrita*, the liquor of immortality, in India's ancient and mystical times. Thus Kurma is a good representation of solid roots and strong foundations, which is everything Rakhi needs. It is Rakhi's father who deliberately chooses that name: "He likes the pun, the idea of a word hidden beneath another word" (181). He knows how to explain the origin of each dish and their relation with mystical Hindu texts. For example, "The rice pudding, he says, is one of the oldest desserts of India, mentioned even in the Ramayan.<sup>7</sup> It is what the gods sent to King Dasharath's

<sup>6</sup> The Hindu *trimurti* is composed of Brahma, the supreme god, Vishnu, the keeper of the world's balance, and Shiva, the destroyer thanks to whom everything dies and is reborn.

<sup>7</sup> The Ramayan or Ramayana is a Hindu epic poem relating the story and journey of mythical King Rama, an *avatara*, a reincarnation, of Vishnu.

barren queens to make them fruitful” (189). He manages to draw Indian immigrants to the shop, men who are “lined, unabashedly showing their age” (194), which makes Rakhi reflect about her mixed identity again: “The word *foreign* comes to me again, though I know it’s ironic. They’re my countrymen. We share the same skin colour” (194).

Step by step, Rakhi discovers what being Indian means to other Indians. It means sharing the same knowledge, the same culture, the same language, but it also means sharing the same skin colour which is something Rakhi had so far totally obliterated. Neither her mother nor her father had ever tackled that issue with her. Rakhi had never paid attention to coloured people, although she had obeyed transgenerational loyalties by marrying a man of Indian descent whose skin colour she had always been perfectly aware of. Rakhi better understands who she is thanks to her encounters with Indian people. Rakhi is American, but her parents are not. Both of them possess their own culture and have family secrets.

According to Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, “when people manage to decipher events and draw the right thread, when people speak their secrets, they finally [...] recover” (my translation, 145). In Rakhi’s case, it is when her father starts telling her about both his own story in India and his own secrets that she starts feeling better. Accordingly, it is her encounters with the Indian customers and her discovery of her father’s past that enable Rakhi to understand what being Indian means:

Indian [...]! All this time she’s been putting boundaries around that word [...], what it can mean. Why, that word encompasses her the way she is with all the gaps in her education, all her insufficiencies. She doesn’t have to change to claim her Indianness; she doesn’t have to try to become her mother. Things are breaking down inside of her. She waits to see if she can build new, satisfying shapes from them.

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What is more, among the various customers that come to the shop, many are old, even older than her own father, which allows Rakhi to meet generations that may stand for her grandparents’ generation: “I suspect that the listeners keep coming back because they’re drawn, like me, to the old men. There’s an enigma about them – where they’ve come from, why they left those distant places” (196). In fact, the soirees initiated by her father and his Indian friends at the tea shop, during which they eat and sing old Indian songs, progressively become multi-racial evenings that start drawing African Americans, South Americans, and people of various origins who all bring new instruments: “There are a few South Asians here, but our audience is mostly a mix of various races” (196). And when the Kurma House is partly destroyed by an accidental fire, Rakhi, her father, Belle, Jespal and even Sonny rebuild and redecorate it with the help of their cus-

tomers who bring rugs, furniture, paintings, as if they finally started considering it their home. Consequently, Rakhi becomes aware of the fact that all these gifts must be “precious to their owners, who carried them all the way to this country from their past lives” (240) and that they wish to share their own past experiences, while making the store unique thanks to its multi-cultural qualities.

Little by little, Rakhi identifies herself with her multi-cultural shop: “My Kurma House is undergoing a sea change, growing into something very different from what I had envisioned. I feel as if I’m losing control. But [...] I find that I quite like the creature it has become, this many-chambered nautilus” (240). Rakhi finally gets acquainted with the concept of mixed cultures that had certainly laid within her for so long. Consequently, she steadily shapes a new identity of her own, piece by piece, inserting her father’s story into hers: “As she meanders toward sleep, her thoughts settle on her father’s story [...]. Now, finally, she has a way to bring it all into her own American life” (172).

### Communicating, Translating and Transmitting

As days go by, Rakhi cannot help being fascinated by her father. What is worth noticing is that, at the same time, she is quite attracted to an old man who practices Tai Chi and yoga in the forest where she goes painting: “He turns, and I see that he is much older than I thought. [...] it is hard to tell his race –his skin is brown, but his eyes are a startling green” (287). Obviously, this stranger stands for all the novelties that are now part of Rakhi’s life. First, he is an old man, then he seems to be a half-breed. Yet Rakhi has just found out how much wisdom old age can bring, as well as how important old people are as regards cultural transmission. Besides, taking benefits from mixed cultures is what Rakhi has just learned to do. In fact, just like her father who teaches her how to enjoy being the daughter of Indian immigrants, this old man teaches her how to find peace and equilibrium thanks to yoga: “He has let his hands fall away. I stand alone, balanced, and for a split second I have the strangest sensation [...]. Right now some new force – wind, gravity, planetary influence – has brought us near each other” (289). For the first time in her life, Rakhi understands what being a link in a human chain means: not only does this old man pass his meditating knowledge onto her, but she also accepts this unexpected gift. That is why meeting the old man in the forest has meant opening a new window onto the world and communicating differently. She realizes that human beings are part of a larger universe and that human encounters transcend our simple understanding of familiar connections. This concept echoes that developed by American writer Eudora Welty who claimed that “in writing as in life, the connections of all sorts

of relationships and kinds lie in wait of discovery, and give out their signals to the Geiger counter of the charged imagination, once it is drawn into the right field” (WELTY 10).

By accepting her father’s and his friends’ helping hands Rakhi manages to step out of her old claustrophobic sphere. She starts turning to strangers and accepting what they have to give. By leading a sheltered and secluded life and following into her mother’s steps only Rakhi had cut herself from the rest of the world.

Then one day the old man disappears: “I never saw the man in white again – maybe because I didn’t need to. Something in me had been satisfied by our encounter. [...] This is how it is all the time – people go skittering out of our lives, never to be found. But they’re all still somewhere” (289). Clearly, Rakhi acknowledges that, although she never sees the old man again, she can still feel his presence, suggesting that what he transmitted to her was so important that he came to be part of her life, turning his physical absence into a continuing presence. Similarly, she still maintains a link with her mother by keeping an old *dupatta*, an Indian shawl her mother gave her just before she got married: “She’d opened an old trunk [...] but my eyes had been caught by the scarf, balled into a corner. I’d lifted it up and its silver threads had shimmered the way a web might” (95). This *dupatta* came from India and from what Rakhi calls her mother’s “other life”, which Rakhi describes as follows: “[...] the one that’s magic, the one you won’t let me enter” (95). Considering the soothing effect this *dupatta* has on Rakhi, we understand that it may have been passed on to Rakhi’s mother by her own mother or grandmother.

But above all, it is Rakhi’s father who manages to keep that presence alive as he starts translating Rakhi’s mother’s private journals into English, thus giving a voice to his deceased wife. He dedicates himself to finding out the right English word each time he finds a word that has no direct equivalent in English: “I hope I’m able to do them justice” (162). Ironically, he becomes the translator who enables Rakhi to create a new link with her mother, while all those past years Rakhi thought that it was her mother who was their “translator” (165) as previously mentioned. Surprisingly, it turns out that Rakhi had misjudged her mother as she had failed to understand how secretive she was: “From what I recall, she never had difficulty telling me exactly what was on her mind” (163), to which her father replies, “Those were just the surface things [...]. But the important things – the ones that live in dark closets within us – I think everyone has trouble speaking about them” (163).

He is the one who realizes that his wife, Rakhi’s mother, had never told them the truth about her personal life: “[...] it’s like reading a novel written by a stranger – I don’t recognize anyone, especially myself [...]. Then she has those entries about clients coming to her for help. I can’t believe that all of that went right in my house [...]. But they must have happened. At least in her mind” (163).

As a result, Rakhi finally considers her father to be “a consummate storyteller” (180). She even talks of something that is “being resuscitated between herself and her father” (172), which leads us to understand that communication between Rakhi and her father had not been entirely absent before her mother died. Communication must have been present, although not expressed through words.

## Conclusion

Recovering her link with her father allows Rakhi to step out of her very private sphere. She manages to “resuscitate the Chai House with the tastes and smells of the old country, with the whispers of stories learned by heart” (172). In other words, thanks to her father’s storytelling, she lets herself be submerged by her ancestors’ voices that are eventually reborn. What is worth noticing too is that, ironically, Rakhi unconsciously follows into her father’s steps by working in a tea shop just like him, thus obeying transgenerational loyalties.

Interestingly, Rakhi is aware of the moment when she realizes she has really changed. She has the feeling that a release mechanism goes off inside her:

Immerse yourself in the moment, I tell myself. The brittleness of dry twigs under you, the scratchy bark behind your back. The sky is very pale, white rather than blue. It pulls at my chest until something pops, like a cork.

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Rakhi’s inner discourse is rife with plosives such as /p/, /t/, /b/, /d/ and /k/ that evoke both the suddenness and the unexpectedness of her full rebirth. At last Rakhi understands what it means to be alive and at peace both with oneself and with one’s father.

The bridge between America and India that her father has taught her to create helps Rakhi understand that binary cultural oppositions can be undone and eventually lead to a cultural in-between space<sup>8</sup>. Her discovery of Indian culture being rather late, she has not had enough time yet to be the inheritor of two merged cultures. But, thanks to her father, Rakhi now knows how to let those two cultures slowly interfere.

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of an in-between cultural space has been developed by Indian philosopher Homi Bhabha, a Parsi, born in India in 1949, and actually teaching postcolonial studies in the USA. He has been working on the development of new cultural forms issued from multiculturalism.

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## Bio-Bibliographical Note

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