

Dreaming as Inheritance in Divakaruni's Queen of Dreams

M. Hima Bindu^{1,2*}, Dr. N. Srinivasa Rao³

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Other Languages, GITAM School of Humanities and Social Sciences, GITAM (Deemed to be University), Visakhapatnam. himameduri@gmail.com

²Asst. Professor, Dept of BS&H, Vignan's Institute of Information Technology (A), Visakhapatnam. himameduri@gmail.com

³Asst. Professor, Department of English and Other Languages, GITAM School of Humanities and Social Sciences, GITAM (Deemed to be University), Visakhapatnam snalamar@gitam.edu

HOW TO CITE:

M. Hima Bindu, N. Srinivasa Rao
(2026). Dreaming as Inheritance in
Divakaruni's Queen of Dreams.
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(6s), 1115-1120.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the
terms and conditions
of the Creative Commons Attribution
(CC BY)
license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ABSTRACT:

In *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses dreams not as simple fantasies or private psychological episodes, but as meaningful cultural experiences that shape the lives of immigrant women. Dreams in the novel become a form of inherited knowledge, passed from mother to daughter, carrying memory, responsibility, and emotional survival across generations. Mrs. Gupta's work as a dream-teller is not treated as mystical decoration, but as a demanding kind of labour—one that connects her to her community while also isolating her. After Mrs. Gupta's death, Rakhi is drawn into her mother's dream journals, and the act of reading and interpreting them becomes central to her own journey. Dreaming thus becomes a space where grief, cultural belonging, and feminine inheritance are negotiated. Set in the tense atmosphere of post-9/11 America, the novel also suggests that dreams provide a language for immigrant vulnerability and racialized fear that cannot easily be expressed through realist narration. Through mythic symbols and magical realist textures, Divakaruni shows how cultural memory survives not only through visible traditions, but through intimate, nocturnal practices of interpretation passed quietly from mother to daughter. Ultimately, *Queen of Dreams* reimagines dreaming as a powerful medium of intergenerational continuity and cultural survival within diasporic life.

Keywords: Inclusive Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*, dream-work, magical realism, diaspora, feminine inheritance

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching, dreams in the *Queen of Dreams* written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are not the personalized fantasies but the culturally significant experiences that influence the

immigrant life, memory, and responsibility

The dreams in the *Queen of Dreams* written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are not the personalized fantasies but the culturally significant experiences that influence the immigrant life, memory, and responsibility. The

novel regards dreaming as a form of knowledge that cannot be entirely captured in the secular rationality but rather it is found in the spiritual inheritance and maternal tradition.

The logic of dreams in the novel is organized around mother-daughter relationship between Mrs. Gupta and Rakhi. Mrs. Gupta, known in Berkeley as a dream-teller, interprets the dreams of others and carries the ethical burden of this gift. Rakhi, an Indian American artist and single mother, initially resists her mother's dream-world, but after Mrs. Gupta's death she is drawn into the responsibility of interpreting the dream journals she leaves behind. Dreams thus become the narrative space through which maternal knowledge is inherited and negotiated across generations.

This article explores how Divakaruni develops dream-work (which is critical to the survival of the culture in the diasporic setting) through close analysis of major dream episodes, symbolic imagery, as well as journal fragments. It presents that dreams in *Queen of Dreams* are narrative spaces through which feminine inheritance, trauma, and belonging is negotiated in the context of immigrant experience.

Dreams and Magical Realism

The power of magical realism in *Queen of Dreams* lies in the fact that it draws on the mundane, which enables the commonplace to have a magical meaning. As Wendy B. Faris observes, magical realism "draws its strength from the ordinary, infusing it with the extraordinary" (17). The effect is not one of shock but of familiarity, as the magical is treated as part of everyday reality. Divakaruni's dream imagery produces a surreal atmosphere where the real and symbolic merge, a hallmark of enchanted realism (Hegerfeldt 142). Divakaruni's dream sequences operate within a magical realist frame in which the surreal appears as an extension of everyday life rather than an escape from it:

We are in an underwater cafe, filled with a deep, bottom-of-the-ocean blue. Everything sways and shivers in this space, and words echo like sonic booms. The table we sit at is made of coral – or is it porous bones? There's no one in the room except for my mother, Belle and myself. I turn to speak to them and find that they have turned into sea creatures....The manager swims in, but she is outside my line of vision,

and I'm not sure what kind of creature she is. (Divakaruni 90)

The conflict that Divakaruni creates regarding forms of knowing is what makes the magical realism especially potent in a diasporic context. Hosseinpour and Moghadam argue that magical realism produces a hesitation between belief and disbelief in the reader (89). *Queen of Dreams* places this uncertainty in the immigrant family itself. Rakhi's secular, Americanized worldview remains at odds with Mrs. Gupta's belief that dreams are meaningful communications rather than fantasy or psychological distortion. The interpretive divide can be traced in Rakhi's early description of her family as "weird": "Finally, I was forced to conclude that my family was, indeed, weird... My mother was a dream teller" (Divakaruni 6). Despite the humour in the comment, there is also a cultural clash presented. The dream-reading can be viewed as an eccentric/irrational practice in the ordinary American life, yet the novel gradually reveals dream-reading as a disciplined practice grounded in ethical accountability and cultural knowledge.

Linda Hutcheon observes that postmodern narratives often allow for "a plurality of realities" to co-exist (25), which is the framework that can be used to explain the narrative strategy of Divakaruni. In *Queen of Dreams*, the dream-world does not negate the ordinary rhythms of Berkeley life; its cafes, divorces, and small-business worries, but instead exists alongside them as another mode of meaning. This coexistence is not an exercise in abstract relativism. Rather, it is culturally based pluralism that is formed by myths that are inherited, maternalism and the daily life of the immigrant household.

Dream-Work as Feminine Inheritance

Mrs. Gupta is the most vividly represented in the novel as the dream power. Dreaming is not brought forth as a rare mystical gift, but rather as a tedious and hard work. This is evidently stated through her own words: "My work is to dream" (Divakaruni 7). The phrasing is important. Dreaming is not described as a private or self-indulgent activity but as labour that is repetitive, demanding, and directed toward others. Mrs. Gupta explains this responsibility when she says, "I dream the dreams of other people... so I can help them live their lives" (Divakaruni 7). Dreaming here is not private expression but ethical responsibility.

Dreaming becomes a form of service offered to a community that benefits from it without fully understanding its emotional cost.

The mother's dream practice also represents a form of feminine authority that doesn't exist in formal institutions. According to Wenying Xu, Divakaruni introduces the character of Mrs. Gupta as a figure of feminine mysticism who challenges patriarchal power by placing supernatural power in women's hands (186). In *Queen of Dreams*, the dream teller's authority does not have to rely on religious offices, male approval, or professional credentials. Rather, it is the result of long practice, inherited knowledge and personal sacrifice-types of labour commonly associated with the lives of women that have hardly been considered a source of valid knowledge. The power of Mrs. Gupta is thus not merely mystical, but cultural and gendered, which is rooted in a system of meaning that the American secular society cannot comprehend or appreciate.

Throughout the novel, Divakaruni makes it clear that dream-reading is meant to be a form of communication rather than entertainment. Rakhi remembers her mother saying, "A dream is a telegram from the hidden world... Only a fool or an illiterate person ignores it" (Divakaruni 34). The image of a telegram suggests something brief but urgent, a message that demands attention and careful interpretation. With this metaphor, the novel puts dreams in the context of social exchange - as messages that are sent and received and acted on, not personal experiences that are only to be contemplated by the individual. In diaspora, where heritage is often reduced to "culture" as performance (food, festivals, decor), Divakaruni insists that cultural inheritance also includes interpretive responsibilities: to read signs, to respond to warning, to hold knowledge that cannot be domesticated into aesthetic nostalgia.

The novel also dramatizes the limits and vulnerabilities of dream power. Mrs. Gupta can interpret the dreams of strangers, yet she is devastated by her inability to protect her daughter from certain forms of harm. Her grief is concentrated in an admission that reverses the fantasy of total spiritual control: "It was a hard fact to come to terms with-that I, who interpreted dreams for a worldful of strangers would never be able to explain to my daughter what her dreams meant" (Divakaruni

52). It is a practice shadowed by the possibility of failure: understanding a dream does not always mean being able to prevent harm, and interpretation alone is not enough to stop a disaster. Dream-work is not introduced as a process of empowerment effortlessly, but rather as a draining emotional work. Mrs. Gupta's gift isolates her, showing that cultural survival often comes at a personal cost.

Cultural Memory and Mythic Transmission

Divakaruni first introduces dream knowledge through natural and mythic imagery, where symbolic figures appear not as abstract metaphors but as lived presences within the dream-world: "Last night the snake came to me... His plated green skin shone like rainwater on banana plants... But maybe as I grow older, I begin to see beauty where I never expected it before" (Divakaruni 1). The snake in this case is not merely a symbol of danger. It is a symbol of revisiting and bringing the current world into comprehension of the dreamer. The narrator's quiet familiarity- "it's been a while, friend"-further softens the image, presenting the snake not as something to fear but as a presence linked to spiritual growth and renewed perception.

Within Hindu symbolic economies, the snake often signifies transformation, cyclical time, and latent spiritual energy. To create her dream-world, Divakaruni does not stick to one and the same element, i.e., the image of the snake. Throughout the novel, the dreams are characterized by animals and other signs of nature that have meanings that are not deeply rooted in the personal psychology, but in the cultural tradition. Mrs. Gupta often suggests that dream symbols have their own language, one that has been passed down and learned over time. She speaks, for instance, about creatures like the cockatoo, the eagle, the deer, and the snake as important dream figures that appear repeatedly and must be read carefully. It is particularly impressive that these icons are not universal: the meaning varies with gender and social context. This cultural coding is depicted by Divakaruni by her description of the cockatoo:

You asked about the cockatoo, which occurs often in dreams. It is a symbol of luck for men, foretelling the end of a long-drawn family quarrel. For women, however, it foretells the birth of a girl-child, which may become the cause of new contention in a household. Enough now for you to know that the eagle, the deer

and the snake are the most important of them all. (Divakaruni 77)

These facts demonstrate that the interpretation of dreams in *Queen of Dreams* is thoroughly influenced by cultural constructs, although it is women who are the main transmitters of the information. By stressing that “the eagle, the deer and the snake are the most important of them all,” Divakaruni places dreaming within a wider mythic system that preserves collective memory through feminine inheritance (77).

Divakaruni does not explain this symbolism didactically; instead, she embeds it in the affective textures of the dream. The result is a magical realist effect: the symbol functions simultaneously as mythic sign and lived encounter. When the narrator notes that “little surprises me nowadays” (Divakaruni 1), the line performs the normalization central to Faris’s account of magical realism (17): the extraordinary becomes ordinary not because it is trivial, but because it belongs to the world’s expanded ontology.

This mythic transmission is also gendered. Xu notes that Hindu traditions of goddess veneration articulate a cosmology in which divine feminine power permeates the world (186). In *Queen of Dreams*, dream symbols repeatedly orbit feminine agency—women dream, interpret, inherit, and pay the price of dream knowledge. The dream-world thus becomes a matrilineal archive, preserving forms of knowledge that may otherwise be lost in the second generation’s push toward American secularism. Crucially, this archive is not stored in museums or public rituals; it is stored in the body’s sleep, in the mother’s journal, in the daughter’s reluctant reading, and eventually in the granddaughter’s emerging gift.

Divakaruni’s emphasis on domestic practices reinforces this cultural preservation. One of the most significant mediums of the retention and reactivation of cultural memory is food. Although the food scenes might seem initially as being merely realist details, the novel frames them as ritualized forms of inheritance that sit beside dreams as parallel conduits of memory. The fact that pastries such as “chocolate chip, blueberry, bran, carrot, and almond” are listed in detail and the time-consuming nature of the preparation of Indian dishes (Divakaruni 22; 29) underlines the way the diasporic identity is preserved due to the repetitive character of deeds performed by people. According to

Krishnendu Ray, food practices among the immigrants can be regarded as emotional attachment to the homeland with memories and feeling of belonging (12). In *Queen of Dreams*, these household rituals are associated with the dream-telling. They are both modes of cultural labour and are mostly performed by women at home and both contribute to maintaining tradition not as something stable or frozen but rather as a practice that evolves and serves to survive in new environments.

Rakhi’s gradual inheritance of dream-work becomes central once her mother is gone, as the journals force her into interpretation. Her journey is central to the novel’s suggestion that dream power does not end with the mother but crosses generations—neither yielded to, nor moulded by, but finally recovered. In the first part of the novel, Rakhi maintains an ironic detachment to the work of her mother in which she treats it as a household oddity and not a serious method of knowing (Divakaruni 6). This reaction is not mere cynicism. It is a form of self-defense projected by the stresses of immigrant existence in which the second generation tends to learn to recognize a difference between culturally transmitted ideas and what may be safely articulated in a culture of an American where reasoned elucidation is valued. The fact that Rakhi does not want to admit that dream logic brings about is, in turn, a sign of a negotiation between heredity and survival in a social environment.

The dream journals become the negotiation point. They are also a source of communication as the death of the mother and a history of culture. Mrs. Gupta’s dream journals are not merely records of events, but archives of dream knowledge. As Rakhi picks up these journals to begin reading, it is not only that she is reuniting, on an emotional plane, with her mother. This is a means of knowing that she is being questioned to fight and it comes with an ethical burden. The visions make her see the life of her mother not as a personal mystery that has no solution, but as a part of a larger process of cultural transmission.

Divakaruni also explains that this inheritance is unsettling. Rakhi’s response to the phrase “My work is to dream” captures both attraction and fear: “I didn’t understand [the words], but I was in love with them already... At the same time, they frightened me”

(Divakaruni 7). It is an issue of one of the battles of the diaspora the attraction of tradition, the fear of what it involves, which is echoed in this scene.

Rakhi believes that dream knowledge is not only beautiful or poetic but it carries with it responsibility, loneliness and danger. This ironic distance remains, though, and over time, when her mother dies, her dream logic becomes harder to ignore. The thing she previously dismissed as unreal slowly becomes the only form that is capable of holding the overpoweringness of her loss.

DREAMS, TRAUMA, AND THE POST-9/11 ATMOSPHERE

Divakaruni locates dream-work in the political climate of the post 9/11 America in which immigrant populations feel more susceptible and subject to suspicion. Instead of the traumatic expression of the documentary realism the novel directs fear and insecurity into the dream symbolism and enables the manifestation of what cannot be articulated in the vernacular.

In this context, dreams are a narrative area where the racialized apprehension and displacement can be recorded in an indirect manner, with the help of symbols of confinement, disaster, and nameless threat. A striking moment that reveals both the protective power of dreams and their limits occurs when Rakhi is sedated and falls into sleep: "The dreams that her mother had protected her from all these years, positioning herself between her and them like a fortress wall, crash over her" (Divakaruni 108). The visual effect stresses on the physical force of inherited dream knowledge. Mrs. Gupta's maternal care is seen not only as emotional protection but as metaphysical labour- an effort to protect her daughter against too heavy a burden. Once that wall goes down, Rakhi is subdued by the entire burden of dream inheritance.

Divakaruni also suggests that dream knowledge does not disappear in the modern world but adapts to contemporary conditions. Technology, surveillance, and rationalist "solutions" cannot address certain forms of harm that immigrants experience. When Rakhi wonders whether the absence of dream tellers in America reflects a faith in technology as cure-all, the novel implicitly critiques modernity's refusal of spiritual and cultural knowledge systems (Divakaruni 281). In

this respect, dream power turns into critique of a public sphere which insists that everything meaningful must be measurable.

MATRILINEAL CONTINUITY AND FEMININE KNOWLEDGE

One of the novel's most striking moves is its presentation of dreams as a specifically feminine way of knowing. This form of knowledge is not rooted in institutions or formal authority, but in intuition, care, and embodied inheritance. Mrs. Gupta's job of a dream teller is highly connected with gendered expectations: she is absorbing the pain of others, understanding what cannot be said, and holding hard information secret to save her loved ones. Meanwhile, Divakaruni does not idealize this work. The knowledge of dreams is expensive. It isolates a dream narrator, exposes her to suffering and places her in such a situation where no one can provide certain moral resolutions.

The matrilineality of dream power is drawn to attention in a noticeable way by Jona. It is a pointer that it is not her personal quality, but a family quality that can be passed across the generations of a family when she starts narrating her dreams. This inheritance which is portrayed by the novel is not biology by any means but rather an emotional bind. Rakhi recalls moments of shared sleep during illness, describing a "special bond" that allows dreams to move between mother and daughter: "I wanted to buy that dream from you... Did I ever tell you I used to have a nightmare... until your grandma bought it from me?" (Divakaruni 205). The recurring image of "buying" dreams across generations implies that dreams exist as shared burdens within the family. This exchange is not material quite literally; it is a ritual of taking on fear, redistribution of pain, and acting care, which is performed.

This lineage comes into sharp focus when Rakhi realizes that Jona's dream may be prophetic: "Was the dream sent to her to warn me? Is my daughter a dream teller, then?" (Divakaruni 224). It is a terrifying and enlightening moment. Rakhi cannot now stand a distance between the knowledge of dreams and herself, because now it is the possession of her daughter. In this case, dream power is expressed in the form of continuity, and threat: the tradition remains, but now it carries with itself the weight of the same.

It is here that Divakaruni's feminist point is determined. Dreams are not introduced as vague "female intuition," but as a kind of knowledge having its symbols, principles, and moral duties. Transmitted to women, and based on cultural memory, dream work transcends the dominant, patriarchal conceptions of what is considered valid knowledge. Simultaneously, it opposes to assimilationist ideology that immigrant survival entails the non-secular abandonment of the non-secular mode of perception of the world.

CONCLUSION

In *Queen of Dreams*, dreaming is not a decorative motif or a private psychological escape. Rather, Divakaruni builds dreams as embedded knowledge of the culture in which immigrant women are challenged to deal with grief, heritage and belonging. Mrs. Gupta's work as a dream teller demonstrates that dream-reading is not merely mystical intuition but an ethical and interpretive labour shaped by tradition, responsibility, and sacrifice. Through Rakhi's gradual engagement with her mother's journals, the novel frames dream-work as a matrilineal practice that survives across generations even when the second generation initially resists it. The symbolic vocabulary of the novel—its snakes, birds, and mythic creatures—

locates dreaming within a collective semiotic system rather than an individual subconscious. Dreams become a space where cultural memory persists, not through public rituals or institutional histories, but through intimate feminine transmission: the mother's body, the dream journal, and the daughter's reluctant inheritance. In this regard, magical realism created by Divakaruni does not merely flatten the line between the normal and the extraordinary; it requires that alternative epistemologies, which are practiced through women, must continue to be important in the diasporic experience. Placed within the context of post-9/11 vulnerability, the novel also indicates that dreams are a language of the manifestations of traumas that cannot be easily expressed in the realist discourse. Fear, racialized insecurity, and displacement are put into the dream-world as an indirect register, which enables the immigrant experience to manifest without being discredited into spectacle or documentary exposition. Finally, *Queen of Dreams* is a redefinition of dreaming as a form of cultural survival and female power. The novel by Divakaruni challenges the reader to appreciate the fact the most sustainable legacies of diaspora might not necessarily reside in the visible traditions alone, but the nocturnal traditions of interpretation which are passed quietly from mother to daughter.

REFERENCES

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Queen of Dreams*. Anchor Books, 2004.
- Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Vanderbilt UP, 2004.
- Hegerfeldt, Anne C. *Lies That Tell the Truth: Magical Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction*. Rodopi, 2005.
- Hosseinpour, Nasser, and Saeed Moghadam. "Magical Realism in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*." *Prague Journal of English Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, pp. 87–101.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
- Ray, Krishnendu. *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*. Temple UP, 2004.
- Xu, Wenying. "Reading Feminine Mysticism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*." *South Asian Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2010, pp. 186–207.