

Responding With Hope to 9/11 A Talk With Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni About Her Latest Novel, *Queen of Dreams*

by Terry Hong

Three years after the tragic events of 9/11, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni remains haunted not only by the vivid images of what happened, but also by the repercussions felt throughout the country, especially in the South Asian American community. Indeed, in a report released by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium six months after the attacks, aptly titled “Backlash: When America Turned on Its Own,” the APA community witnessed a sudden spike in anti-Asian violence, especially against those of South Asian descent. Resembling the enemy literally became a threat to one’s life.

Divakaruni, author of such best-selling books as *The Mistress of Spices* and *Arranged Marriage*, uses her latest novel, the magical *Queen of Dreams*, to capture some of her confusion, fear, and sadness surrounding the events. Ultimately, though, the novel underscores human resilience through the power of hope and forgiveness. *Queen* is the story of a South Asian American artist in Berkeley who tries to come to terms with the people closest to her heart: her elusive dream-teller mother, her silent father, her growing daughter, and her enigmatic ex-husband. Divakaruni admits it’s her favorite of her own novels thus far.

“I want to touch people, to have them think about issues they haven’t considered before, to make them more compassionate towards other people,” she says. “That was my major intention with writing this book after 9/11: If I could make the pain and the hope powerful enough in the book, then maybe I might stop some of the prejudice out there, and have some sort of countereffect to what followed 9/11.” Divakaruni drew on her own experiences of being “other,” even as she has been in America for almost three decades: “I find that when I really care about a character from a particular background, when I look at those people in my own real life, then I feel differently about them. I feel more compassionate. And that’s my hope for *Queen* and for my community.”

The Bloomsbury Review: *I understand that you arrived in the United States at age 19 from India. What was that adjustment like?*

Chitra Divakaruni: It was a big adjustment, moving from a big city like Calcutta to Dayton, Ohio, which, at that time, didn’t have many Indians and was not cosmopolitan. I felt a real sense of being “other.” People were so startled to see an Indian person in Indian clothes—people actually stopped their cars to look when I walked down the street. I think all people come to a new country with preconceived notions. Mine were

Queen of Dreams

A Novel

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based on books and films I’d seen about America—and life was very different from the movies, as well. So there was an adjustment on both sides. When I got to Berkeley for graduate school, it was very cosmopolitan. People didn’t even look at me, just as I had gotten used to strangers staring!

TBR: *And now you’ve moved out of your beloved Bay Area and live in Houston, teaching in the creative writing program at University of Houston. That must be another period of adjustment. What are the two communities like for you?*

CD: I miss the Bay Area on many levels. The first is geographic: It’s so beautiful with the hills and water, so I’m homesick for the landscape. Second, I miss the people, not only my friends, but the fact that the Bay Area has so many people of different cultural backgrounds all intermingled. But I’ve found that Houston has a small liberal community, although it took me quite some time to find it. Now I’m happy in Texas, and I have good friends. Because it’s smaller, the liberal community tends to stick more closely together.

TBR: *And your teaching?*

CD: I love teaching at the University of Houston. It has the second best creative writing program in the nation. The program is very international, very multicultural, with students from all over the world. In a small way, I think my presence makes a difference to the students here. In the Bay Area, which is already so multicultural, you don’t have to push for diversity—basically, people agree on its importance. Here in Texas, you have to push, so maybe my presence here is more important than in the Bay Area.

TBR: *Do you think you might go back to California for good?*

CD: I’m only in Houston during the school year. In the summers, we go back to California. I have to keep in touch with my California community! Now I think of myself as having two homes. We’re here in Texas for at least a number of years. My boys are in middle school, and I don’t want to move them anymore. And I would like to help build the creative writing program here. But my secret dream is to have a cottage in the midst of the California redwoods.

TBR: *How did Queen come about?*

CD: I started writing *Queen* when we were still in the Bay Area. Right before 9/11, I was just putting together ideas for a new novel. Then 9/11 happened, and that affected me strongly on many levels: There was the national tragedy itself, and then there were the effects on my own community. The South Asian American community experienced quite a bit of violent hate crimes, which other communities felt as well, like Arab Americans. Those of Sikh background really suffered. I knew I had to write about it, but wasn’t sure how to do so. I did a number of nonfiction pieces around that time, but fiction is the most meaningful writing for me. I felt I had to create an imaginative piece about

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I also wanted to explore the sense of mystery about the universe. Reality is not as objective as we like to think it is. Reality is subjective: Different people come out of the same event seeing and feeling different things. 9/11 is such an example: Some reacted with great fear, others with violence.

For Rakhi, the book's central character, and her mother, reality operates very differently. More than anything else I've written, the novel questions how we arrive at our notion of reality and whether there is just one reality. That sense of mystery and magic is very important in this novel.

TBR: *You've spoken before about staying true to your cultural heritage in your writing. Are you ever tempted to try something different, to step out of the South Asian American community in your writing?*

CD: For major characters, I do stay within the community, because that's what I know best. These are the people I know, more so than people I might see or meet from the outside. And there's always something calling me, too, to the Bay Area. That's the place I know best; that's home. I know its hills, the streets, the markets, the smells, and the sounds. So I can write with more authority. The other place is Calcutta, because that's where I have spent most of my time when I'm in India. Both of those places have an emotional resonance for me.

TBR: *The Mistress of Spices and Sister of My Heart are being made into films. What has that process been like, seeing your characters literally come to life?*

CD: *Sister of My Heart* is already a film in India. It was made in an Indian language, and it won five major awards in India in 2002, the year it came out. For *Mistress*, I'm on the edge of the precipice: We're finishing contract details, and as soon as that's done, the filming will get started. I'm excited. Gurinder Chadha, who created the phenomenally successful *Bend It Like Beckham*, is such a fine filmmaker. She has written the script, which she sent to me, asking if I had any thoughts. Scriptwriting is not my medium, and I don't want to interfere. Gurinder understands the spirit of the book very well. I like her work; I like her artistic psyche; we're in synch. I realize that things in film always have to be changed from the book. As long as the film is true to the spirit of the book, then I'm happy.

Arranged Marriage was made into a play for the Sacramento Theatre Company this year. It was interesting to see the characters that were so familiar to me: I recognized the words, I recognized the characters, but they were also different because someone else's imagination had entered into their creation. They were at once familiar and a discovery. I was pleased and charmed.

TBR: *And what are you writing now?*

CD: I'm working on the second part of a children's trilogy—for grades four, five, and up. *The Conch Bearer* was the first; now I'm writing the second. It's really fun and wonderful. It continues the adventures of the main character from *Conch Bearer* and is set in contemporary Calcutta. It's both a mystical quest and an adventure. The two characters are named after my sons, which has increased my stock at home immensely. ■

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