

# Exploration of the Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the study of an emerging, potent voice of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*. Belonging to India, gives this writer certain common cultural traits and the fact that living abroad widens the mental horizons of Indian women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was conditioned by the Indian upbringing but has risen above the traditional constraints. Divakaruni's writing primarily deals with the immigrant women's quest for identity, freedom and independence. This paper attempts to analyze Korobi's exploration of the self in the novel *Oleander Girl*. The protagonist Korobi takes her journey from India to America on the quest to find her own father, ultimately her own self.

**Keywords:** Discovery, Exploration, Freedom, Identity, Journey, Self, Victimization.

Korobi Roy is the protagonist of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl* released on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Divakaruni a gifted story teller takes us on a journey of love, betrayal, family secrets and finally search for true identity of the central figure of the novel. *Oleander Girl* revolves around the plight of victimization and the quest for the lost self by the protagonist, Korobi, an eighteen years old orphan who is taken good care by her grandparents, stern and strict Bimal Roy, tender and sensible Sarojini. As an orphan, she spends a cloistered and secluded childhood far from home in a hostel. The absence of her parents is only an emotional lack, as we figure out that she's been raised by affluent and loving grandparents who had sent her to an expensive boarding school in the hills, who possess an antique Bentley and live in a grand mansion in north Kolkata neighbourhood. Her grandparents serve as a foster parents and bringing her up lovingly. Korobi's grandfather, Bimal Prasad Roy a famous barrister belonging to a reputed family and household 26 Tarak Prasad Roy strongly believed in Indian traditions and principles. He was very harsh to whosoever deviated from his principles. He somehow convinced or rather forced them emotionally to accept and act according to his own whims. Her grandfather's dictatorial temperament makes her impatient at times but her love and respect for him makes her obey his whimsical demands dutifully. Divakaruni to a certain extent was inspired by her own grandfather while portraying Korobi's grandfather who was externally tough but soft in his heart. Like Divakaruni, Korobi absolutely adored her grandfather.

Korobi who is named after the oleander flower which her mother loved is often filled with various thoughts and questions about her past, her father and mother, her present with her grandparents, and their startling silence about the circumstances surrounding the death of both her parents. Throughout her childhood Korobi has longed for her parent's love that she has never seen even. The only knowledge she had gathered about her parents (informed by her grandparents) was that her mother Anu Roy died while giving birth to her and her father who was a lawyer died in a car accident before three months to her mother's death. Though Korobi wanted to know much about her parents she could not explore as it would be painful to her grandparents. Her questions to Bimal and Sarojini often go unanswered. Korobi is an orphan, and the novel begins with her waking up on the day of her engagement, her mind fretful after a troublesome dream / vision of her dead mother.

As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I know at once that someone is in the room. My heart flails around. It's impossible. I always lock the door before going to sleep, and the window is barred. But there it is, in the armchair in the corner of the bedroom: a still female form, black against the darkness of the room, looking towards me. (OG 2)

Korobi has been shown to be conscious about herself like any other women characters in Divakaruni's fiction. In spite of being an adorable darling of grandparents, she muses over her mother and meaning of her own self and her name given to her by her mother. The Oleander, Korobi's namesake, is a beautiful but poisonous plant, and it is discovered that Korobi's mother gave her the name because she wanted her daughter to be able to protect herself from predators.

Rajat Bose and Korobi Roy are engaged in the age old temple of Roy's household and a party arranged in a swanky hotel for the couple. Korobi is engaged to Rajat Bose who belonged to one affluent Bengali family. He loved Korobi very much and her arrival in his life changed him into a responsible man taking interest in family business. During the engagement party, the news of Korobi's grandfather is admitted in the hospital, made her rush from the party with Rajat to hospital.

The dark clouds close in on her even as her engagement party is on full swing at a city hotel, with the news of Bimal Prasad Roy, her stern disciplinarian barrister grandfather, suffering a heart attack. On the day of her engagement, her grandfather Bimal has a massive heart attack and dies. Korobi felt her grandfather wanted to tell her something before his death in the hospital. He passes away and bereft with shock and sorrow. A thread's snapped from the spool of yarn, unraveling the fabric of lies that her grandparents had woven around her and convincing Korobi that she must embark on a journey to find the truth. The quest motif has been introduced and just like any archetypal protagonist Korobi's journey is immediately beset with challenges. Korobi learns a devastating secret about herself and her parents on the day of her engagement. Korobi, an orphaned young girl being brought up by her adoring grandparents in Kolkata, discovers a mystery about herself and her family. Her discovery shatters her sense of self and takes her out of her sheltered Kolkata life into a search.

Sarojini her docile grandmother, later, informed Korobi about her father and mother. After the death of her husband she is released from the promise she had made to him. She bares her heart and tells her how her mother Anu an intelligent girl defied her father's intention to get her married after she completed her college. She asked him to let her study in America before her marriage. A smart Anu secured scholarship too for her studies and then Bimal Roy had to reluctantly agree. He asked her to swear in front of Goddess "never to marry without his approval" (OG 57). He wanted to control the life of his daughter and to a certain extent he could make her do what he wanted. As fate had something else in store for Anu, she fell in love with an American man. All hell broke loose for Bimal Roy. He couldn't control his anger and angrily stopped all contact with her. Korobi's grandmother lets slip the truth about her father.

"No, Korobi...that's what I am saying...It was a lie," she says slowly and clearly, looking in my eyes. "Your dear grandfather lied to you- and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive. His name is Rob. Yes, Rob. He lives in America." (OG 52)

Anu wanted to marry that man who also loved her dearly but did not get the permission from her father Bimal Roy. Anu had to come back in hope of getting her father's consent but she was already carrying Korobi then. But when Anu became pregnant and she wished to meet her parents, soft nature of a father emerged and he allowed her to visit them. But when the delivery date neared she wanted to go back to America to the father of her baby. Though she tried all possible ways of convincing her rigid, conservative father, it was all futile. In a temper of arguments she slipped from the staircase and started bleeding. That is how she died in the hospital giving birth to Korobi. Korobi was born but Anu died. It was a severe heartbreak for Bimal Roy and Sarojini

losing their only loving child in front of their eyes and the only light of hope for them to survive was the newly born baby, Korobi whom they would not lose at any cost and who was the only one to tie Anu with them.

Bimal Roy and Sarojini were devastated by the loss of their only daughter but took solace in the birth of their granddaughter. He was not ready to part with Korobi. So when her father came to India in search of his child, Bimal Roy told him both the mother and child had died. Korobi and her grandmother had been sent to their ancestral home in the village for first one year. Meanwhile Bimal Roy had managed to arrange a death certificate to avoid further problems and had also managed many other things for which he had paid huge money. Once in a month he visited the village and most of the time spent holding Korobi, loving her the most as he could see Anu's reflection within her. But this love cannot cover the crude reality that caused Anu's death. Korobi looks away. Bimal Roy took a promise from Sarojini in their temple not to reveal these facts to anyone not even to Korobi as she grows or to leave him for good which again reveals patriarchal attitude and strong desire of cultural and traditional clutch in Bimal Prasad Roy's psyche.

Korobi realizes that it is difficult for her to begin a new life with Rajat and not wise also until she finds out the true identity of her fragmented self. She could feel her heart heavy with anger, sorrow, disappointment and distaste. Even if she wanted also she could not burst on her grandmother for her folly, as she was the one who dared to cut the silence of so many years and speak the unspoken words that were forbidden to come to light. The answer to Korobi's identity lies across the ocean, the United States, where Anu had spent a few years as a student. Her intellect doesn't take the advice of Sarojini not to reveal anything to Rajat, to forget everything and begin a new life. If she does, it would be the continuation of the same deception against the loyal love of her parents and one of whom is still alive now with the knowledge that his daughter is no more. She realizes that it is difficult for her to begin a new life with Rajat and not wise also until she finds out the true identity. No amount of reasoning by Rajat, his mother and grandmother could persuade her to change her resolve. She declared to Rajat "I need to understand my parents' marriage before I can enter my own." (OG 72)

Korobi's upbringing parallels the upbringing of the mythical princess who is brought up by snakes in an underground lake. Her quest for her father shatters many of her illusions about herself just like the princess's quest for life is destroyed by the harsh realities of the outer world. This folktale is a part of the Bengal folk tradition and has been utilized by Divakaruni as a literary device to bring out the contradiction that exists between fact and fiction.

The protagonist Korobi takes her journey from India to America in order to search for her identity. Most of the diaspora characters face the problem of identity in the foreign land due to cultural differences. Here the question of identity arises due to the shocking discovery of Korobi's father's identity of not being Indian. Consequently, her own identity pauses a question. Her identity gets diluted due to her mother's migration, cultural as well as geographical. Having discovered a letter from her mother to her father, full of fancy but never sent, Korobi sets out on the quest to find her own father, ultimately her own self.

Korobi, partly because of her longing to know her true identity and meet the man whom her mother loved dearly set on her journey to America. She sets on the journey with just the name of her father "Rob" who lived in Berkley and an old photograph of her mother. She was arranged to live with Mitras, employee of Bose family in America. Korobi, like any other migrant, faces her own struggles. Her stay at his place was not exactly very comfortable. More so he was not polite to Korobi. His wife Seema was quite supportive and informs Korobi the impact of post 9/11 America on the business with Muslim names. Mitra is quite evasive in his ways. Later korobi discovered he was not faithful to his employer and cheated them. He spied on Korobi and blamed her for making his wife Seema like herself. Firstly from Mitra who seems to be spying on her. He does not even co-operate to provide her with a cell phone. However she meets one young man Vic at Desai's office who is his nephew and works as a part time assistant who extends all his support. Desai shortlists three names on the basis of his findings. Rob Evanston, an architect; Rob Mariner, an estate lawyer in San Francisco;



and Rob Davis, a writer, in the Santacruz club. She meets all three and discovers to her disappointment that they are not related to her. In fact one of them tries to physically abuse her and one thinks that she is out there for some kind of money.

Korobi is almost shattered and disappointed when she receives a call from a lady namely Meera Anand who had room partner of Anu Roy. She recognizes the photo given in some newspaper and calls her. Through her, Korobi comes to know about her father Robin Lacey, an African–American. In spite of being well educated, literate and a socially eminent person, he was not acceptable to her grandfather. Formerly, Lacey does not believe Korobi, but somehow he is convinced and meets Korobi. It's shocking to Korobi that her parents were never married as it was the violation of Indian values. She learns from her father the meaning behind her name: "Because the oleander was beautiful- but also tough. It knew how to protect itself from predators. Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough it in herself" (289)

Korobi promises to return India and marry Rajat. It has been noted that in America, Korobi does feel enlightened and soon gets tuned to American way of life. She walks with the remembrances of promises and family values of India, but when required she is seen to adjust, assimilate and accept American way of living. Her journey to find her father makes her plunge all the unwanted burdens she used to carry as part of her personality of being completely Indian. Her attitude is neither western nor modern, but it is her ability in fixing her status in her family and at home. With the same consciousness of being independent and self, she proves that she alone has the right over her body and her identity.

It can be seen that how hard it is for Korobi the newly found facts about her identity and it paves a way to a different aspect to the existence of life. On one hand she had been broken with the heartbreaking reality but at the same time she also dared to stand in fetching the true identity to her fragmented self. In the course of action of her search for identity in the foreign land the truth she faces is hard for her to believe. Values of India, faithfulness for would be husband and many other feelings about being Indian bring back Korobi in India. She returns to India as a better person who knows what is right for her, who knows how to resist temptations.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni proposes a different approach to present her girl protagonists. Korobi's identity is entangled with the reputation of the family and the good old family name. She finds herself worthless when she knows the true identity of her father and her racial inferiority considered by Indians, being the daughter of an African American man because she enjoyed and admired her status of being the granddaughter of the Roy's and also being the fiancée of the most desired and the richest man of the town. Except that the harmony of the near-perfect life and surroundings must be broken by the one false note in her life-the truth about her parents- and she must embark on a journey, partly out of curiosity and partly out of a sense of self-fulfillment to add substance and depth to her fairy tale.

Finally, *Oleander Girl* is a classic example of diasporic consciousness especially in the sphere of identity and empowerment. The protagonist Korobi's search for identity makes her a mature and powerful girl to bring reconciliation between two worlds. Korobi, not only comes to a point of independence and success but also a support system and his family. She is not weak like a mother. As an Indo–American woman, she succeeds as an individual, as a member of new community and as an Indian woman.

## Reference

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