
**‘NEW WOMAN’ & INDIAN TRADITION IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKURNI’S *OLEANDER GIRL***

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Abstract: An attempt has been made in this paper to chart out the journey of the protagonist to discover her ‘self’, roots and lineage leading to a fair understanding. This paper analyses the way tradition and upbringing which is passed on from the older generation values helps fight the challenges. The varied roles of a woman both outside the home and inside the home are neatly balanced. As a South Asian diasporic writer, Divakaruni has through her novel tried to peek into the life of women straddling between the cultural and traditional heritage and tech-savvy world marred by doubt and mistrust. She has also tried to present the women as symbols of strength and solidarity. Even in this twenty first century the women have to fight through the narrow boundaries of caste, class, race, religion and try to achieve a balance between expectations and desires.

Divakaruni’s *Oleander Girl* (2013) is about a girl Korobi who has been brought up by her grandparents and it is after the death of her grandfather that she embarks on a journey to discover her father whom she had thought to be dead. She puts her engagement into a state of question and withholds her plan to marry to discover her roots. The discovery that her father was an Afro-American and that she is an illegitimate child though shatters her, she still accepts and confesses the truth before her fiancé and his family.

Korobi thus symbolizes strength but she also suffers from moments of self-doubt.

Keywords: Tradition, discovery, survival, strength, self.

Introduction: ‘Tradition’ derived from the latin word ‘tradition’ meaning ‘to transmit’ along with inherited beliefs, cultural heritage and other factors be it social, political, economical, religious gives shape to philosophy of life. There are two main concepts-“Tradition” and “Modernity” which are contradictory to each other but represent a culture of synthesis. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a South Asian Diasporic writer, has explored this synthesis of culture through her protagonist Korobi in *Oleander Girl*. The title itself is suggestive as it fuses toughness and softness. Korobi is named after Oleander “as it is beautiful -but also tough .It knew how to protect itself from predators [2].”(253) In his essay *Cultural Studies and Theoretical Legacies* Stuart Hall has mentioned that “for cultural studies...the intervention of feminism was specific and decisive. It was ruptural. It reorganized the field in quite concrete ways. First, the opening of the question of the personal as political, and its consequences for changing the object of study in cultural studies, was completely revolutionary in a theoretical and practical way[5].” Culture shapes perception on gender, self and society and it is projected in the literary text. Representation of women in text merges with reality and social structures though put a constraint on women but

they also become agents who resist oppression enabling empowerment and changing alternatives.

Indian women novelists from Toru Dutt, Kamala Markandaye, Ruth Jhabvala have all tried to present the ‘confrontation between occidental and oriental attitudes’ but by the second half of the 20th century women writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor, Jhumpa Lahiri , Arundhati Roy started dealing with the contemporary Indian political theme, heralded a new realm with the psychological portrayal of the character, projected the ‘heart rending condition of the women and made an aesthetic plea to free the female psyche from the conventional mode. ,presented the women characters representative of the new woman who refuse to be rubber dolls and assert their independence and self-reliance through education, dealt with universal human experience, experimented with the language of ungrammatical constructions, and striking similes to reflect the life of Indian society, caste and class distinction. In a way their works represent the contemporary Indian tradition. In the present times, diaspora studies has helped in understanding the empty spaces of a person’s life in a broader context of cultural identity and collective memories. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

has attempted to relive the culture and tradition of her country but has also reflected the changing attitudes and shift in sensibilities leading to new paradigms. Abdulrazak Gurnah (2004) has stated, *“Travelling away from home provides distance and perspective, and a degree of amplitude and liberation. It intensifies recollection, which is the writer’s hinterland.*

Distance allows the writer uncluttered communion with this inner self, and the result is a freer play of the imagination [3].”

Aim: The aim of this research paper is to show that Indian diaspora literature reflects the changing tradition and the way women are fighting the age-old views and trying to fight their own path. Though women are straddled between expectations and aspirations in this modern world but the contemporary literature is replete with characters voicing their thoughts and the need to assert their fundamental human right of freedom of speech and expression. Women are seen as ‘Cultural Emblems’ and their progress is suggestive of the national culture. The binary opposition between equality/difference, man/woman are explored and the female voice is seen as an investigation wherein by deconstruction the word ‘woman’ gets associated with a network of meanings that are attached to the word ‘woman’ in text.

Plot: *Oleander Girl* explores a journey of an eighteen year old girl to discover her own father against the wishes of her family. The novel is about a girl Korobi Roy who has been brought up by her grandparents and it is after the death of her grandfather that she embarks on a journey to US to discover her father whom she was told to be dead. She puts her engagement into a state of question and withholds her plan to marry to discover her roots. The discovery that her father was an Afro-American and that she is an illegitimate child though shatters her, she still accepts and confesses the truth before her fiancé and his family. In-between a person called Vic offers to give her a life of security away from the narrow dogmas of caste or class discrimination. However she chooses to return back, discovers her father but leaves him behind for his fiancé and family. Divakurni has also shown the traditional Bengali family (Roy) and the modern Bengali family (Bose) and their union. Her writing interrogates, invites and

suggests a journey into this multicultural world where ‘dissolving of boundaries’ is must for reshaping the notions and ideals.

Journey as a metaphor for self-discovery: The novel opens with a dream of swimming and it personifies an image of movement & motion. *“I’m swimming through a long, underwater cavern flecked with blue light, the cavern of love, We’re in a race, and so far I’m winning because this is my dream. Sometimes when I’m dreaming, I don’t know it, but tonight I do [2]”* (1) The opening serves to illustrate the path for Korobi which she swims through to understand herself and also others. Korobi through the course of the novel experiences faith and loss, happiness and sorrows, trust and mistrust together. She however is able to walk through moments of doubt, mistrust and suspicion with a sense of untold conviction which she has inherited from her mother and grandmother. Her faith that, *“Rajat loves me just the way I am, that he never wants me to change [2]”* (4) gets shaken up later and she feels, *“My entire notion of who I am was shaken up. I felt betrayed [2].”* (273) However that does not stop her from doing what she wants to do. Journey in her case is a metaphor of narrative reflecting growth and change.

Korobi understands generation gap and learns by unlearning at times. The strictness and the rigidity of her grandmother makes her strong-headed. She gets moulded and shaped by her grandmother whose belief is that *“girls have to be toughened so they can survive a world that presses harder on women [2].”* (7) The woman who resisted sending Korobi to a boarding school, who believes in superstitions and carries out mustard-seed ceremony to ‘avert the evil eye’, who narrates bed-time stories becomes responsible for igniting the desire in Korobi to search for truth. She defies the promise but takes a firm decision to tell Korobi the dark secret of her life. *“All my life I’ve cared only about what he wanted. Obeyed him even when my conscience cried out against it [2].”* (52) She is the one who arranges money for her by bringing in the casket of her dowry jewelry. On the other hand her mother-in-law who herself suffers class discrimination but is able to inspire Korobi. Korobi opines, *“This is a side of Maman I haven’t seen, eclectic and adventurous. I’m filled with new admiration [2].”* (74) Korobi learns a lot from her mother-in-law and becomes more determined to

travel the path she wishes to.

Self, Identity and Transformation: Korobi's journey from 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road in Kolkata to Mitra's apartment in US can be seen as a journey from a protected world to an open world where each step she takes is a step towards rediscovery. She feels, "the gulf between 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road and this building is so wide, perhaps joy meant something else here [2]." (243) When she comes to know of her father being alive, she moves from disbelief to experiencing a shock of betrayal. She does not want to get married soon but enjoy the period of courtship. Her rage comes out in her words, "Do they think they can pick up my life like a ball of dough and roll it into whatever shape they fancy[2]?" (22) She loves her grandfather but refuses to be pushed into something without her permission. Her progress from being a girl who thought of managing her own home as a 'heady unreality' is the one who takes a journey on her own across the oceans. From moments where she felt like a 'prize dog' she arrives at a point where everything seems a nightmare.

Korobi's firmness and at times sounding like her stubbornness makes her take a decision which is not welcomed but she is sure of what she wants. Her anger comes out in her words spoken to her grandmother. "I'm tired of people treating me like a charity case, acting like they're doing me a great favor by having this wedding take place. I'm not ready for it, anyway [2]!" (83) She feels her relationship with Rajat also shifting 'plate by tectonic plate' and has her own misgivings but refuses to make a compromise. Unsure about what would happen next, she is sure of her present decision to discover her father.

All the while conscious of her values and cultural heritage, Korobi unhesitatingly tells Vic, "Money's not the issue. You don't know how people think back in India! I can't spend the night alone with you [2]." (154) She does get attracted towards Vic but self-reproaches herself and tries to reaffirm her self-belief. "I must be faithful. I will be faithful [2]." (162) She realizes her obligations and promises for her family and though she goes through a series of inner conflicts but her strength never diminishes. The open world of US makes her conscious of the differences and she learns to eventually accept it.

The sacrificing of her 'hair' is a symbol of her strange, positive stubbornness to overcome challenges. She

refuses to beg but asserts her own identity by arranging money on her own. She takes a big step and gets transformed into a 'stranger, glamorous and a little dangerous' girl. She defies all notions by allowing this. Her simple act evokes different responses from people but for her it is a way towards realizing her goal. "If I hadn't sold my hair, I wouldn't have the money to go to California. I would have to go back to India without ---without doing what I had come all the way to do [2]." (178)

Her journey to US reveals that her parents never married each other and that she is an illegitimate child born out of wedlock. Her illegitimate status breaks her for a while. She fears losing Rajat but refuses to lie, "You want me to hide such a big thing from the man I'm about to marry [2]?" (64) She feels, "It would be a betrayal of myself to go through life pretending to be what I'm not." (78) The un-surety which had loomed over her when she traveled to US surfaces again when she travels back. "Layer upon unseen layer, how this complicated city holds me. For better or worse, I've chosen it over the cities of America. I've decided to fulfill the promises I made here.[2]" (270) Stuart Hall (1999) while talking about identity has said,

"Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation [4]."

She learns to make her choices and decisions with a fore-sightedness and at the same time learns to accept her differences. "I love my mother. But I am not her. My journey has taught me that [2]." (280) This statement speaks volumes of the way Korobi has been penned by the writer which is so close to being a woman with a difference. The words of Divakaruni establishes the identity of New Woman in Korobi. She has mentioned, "I wanted to show, through Korobi, a very different kind of person -- who does exist in India, even though she might be uncommon, because India is a country that straddles several centuries at the same time [7]."

Conclusion: The novel thus is not just a journey of a girl trying to discover her father but it also stands as a metaphor of an evolving culture wherein a woman

breaks the boundaries imposed by society. It also is a pointer of a globalized world where acceptance can be the only key for growth and happiness. To put it succinctly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has made her protagonist a symbol of power thus representing the contemporary thought and view. It is through mingling, knowing, socializing and experiencing that she learns to appreciate the pros and cons of each nation. Bhabha's words sums up the argument, "What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond the narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to

focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood, singular or communal, that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself [1]."

Oleander Girl is thus a novel of exploration and discovery set against the complex Indian traditional values portraying modern woman and her challenges.

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