

Retrieving the Mystery of Past in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novel *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract

Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues and predicaments; they have women's perspective in the world. Women writers' centers around the problems faced by women, their position in the society and their attempts to overcome the restraints imposed upon them by the society. Diasporic Literature is a very immense concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works is connected with native culture and background. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni emerged as a representative voice of the diasporic sensibility with various themes. She revisits her favorite and major themes of immigration and self-discovery in her novel, *Oleander Girl*. In this novel, *Oleander Girl*, the protagonist, Korobi taking the risk of leaving everything and moving in an unknown land in search of her identity and family secret. Korobi is devastated by telling unexpected mystery of her life which changes her from versatile to mettle. Divakaruni gives Indian and American experience and difficulties faced by the protagonist, Korobi through her journey. The journey to America unfolds Korobi's search for her father and her identity. This paper "Retrieving the Mystery of Past in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl*" shows the journey of Korobi discover the mystery of past and her identity which make her a powerful woman.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Self-Identity, Mystery of past, Empowerment.

Indian English Literature is an honest endeavor to express the ever rare gems of Indian writing in English. Fiction by women writers contributes a major part of the contemporary Indian writing in English. It also endeavors to launch their identity and emphasize their individuality. This a common theme popularized by all Indian women writes and those who belong to the Indian Diaspora. Identity becomes the core problem in any investigation of diaspora. It is also based on the history or conditions leading to migration. Like, Divakaruni describes the journey of diaspora, especially women diaspora in most of her works and she discuss about immigrants encounter in new country and how one loses one's identity and becomes a nameless person but this also gives one an unknown sense of freedom.

Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni possesses a high rank in the contemporary circle of Indian diaspora for being a very keen observer of life of the Indians, especially Bengali women, in the United States of America. As a poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist, she won the 'American Book Award' in the year 1995 for her collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*. Divakaruni has been praised for her literary creativity and personal sensitivity in dealing with cross-cultural complexities of self-identity, family

relationships and community values. Her major contribution lies in capturing the continuity of the lives of women, the South Asian immigrants to the U.S.

Divakaruni is a prolific writer who has fourteen novels to her credit. She also has poetry collections like *Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle* (1991), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) to her credit. Some of her novels are *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2012), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Two of her novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* as well as a short story *The World Love* were adapted to film. Currently, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni teaches creative writing at the University of Houston, Texas.

Oleander Girl is an archetype of traditional values as well as identity crisis in a foreign land. It also demonstrates the protagonist taking the risk of leaving everything and moving in an unknown land in search of her identity and family secret. The story in *Oleander Girl* revolves around the theme of quest for the lost self by the protagonist, Korobi, eighteen years old orphan girl, brought up by her adoring grandparents in Calcutta. The novel is elevating story of a young girl discovers a mystery about herself and her family. While describing the chain of event, Chitra Banerjee eventually describes the self of most of the characters of novel. Inevitably, Korobi remains the centre; her mother too occupies the position in the novel throughout. Her continual presence in the novel guides Korobi even in America for her quest.

Korobi, lose her parents after her birth and brought up by her grandparents, firm and strict Bimay Roy, tender and sensible Sarojini. Throughout her childhood Korobi has longed for her parents. She was informed by her grandparents 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. She always wanted to know much about her parents but her grandparents never utter a word. She actually missed a one generation. Her only primogeniture from them is the love note found in her mother's book of poetry.

The novel starts with Korobi dreaming about her fiancé Rajat Bose who belonged to one affluent Bengali family. On the engagement night, Korobi and her grandfather got into argument that leads Bimal Roy landed in the hospital and he had his last breath. After the sudden death of Korobi's grandfather, her grandmother Sarojini revealing an unknown mystery of past in Korobi's life. It is a great shock for her to learn that her father might still be alive and he was not an Indian, a foreigner. Anu, Korobi's mother wanted to marry that man who also loved her dearly but Bimal Roy was not ready to accept it. Anu tried all possible ways of convincing her father, it was all futile. In a rage of argument, she slipped from the staircase and started bleeding. She died after giving birth to Korobi. Korobi is in a confounded state of mind after knowing about her parentage. She thinks about her identity as Korobi Roy and her alterity as daughter of Rob, the American father.

Korobi is stunned that the painful secret about her true identity changes her life. She wanted everyone connected with her to acknowledge her father. She made a decision to find her father. No amount of interpretation by Rajat, his mother and grandmother could persuade her to change her resolve. She says to Rajat,

“ I am so confused. All the things I was so proud of, my family, my heritage-

They're only half-true. The other half of me- I don't know anything about it

Expect that all this time my father was alive, and in America” (66).

Korobi has been shown to be conscious about herself like any other women characters in Divakaruni's fiction. She declared to Rajat, “I need to understand my parents' marriage before I can enter my own” (72). The author expertly describes Korobi's bold decision of travelling to America all by herself as she is eager to know about her family mystery. Though Rajat explained to Korobi that he least concerned about the past and interested more in present and future and that his love for her will never end, Korobi is firm in her decision,

“.....Rajat you don't understand! I don't want it to fade away.

I'm shocked and hurt, yes, but I'm excited, too. Do you see? I have

a father now! I can meet the man my mother loved so much! All my life

I longed to understand my parents. Now fate has given me a chance” (67).

Korobi's journey is not usual journey. During her stay in America she encounters diasporic identity. Chitra Banerjee unravels a sequence of troubles Korobi has to go through and empowers her with the courage and determination to fight against all the odds so that she can find her father and by that discover her identity. The novel expatiates the difficult task of Korobi's search for her father. After a fruitless trip to Boston, Korobi has to travel to California in search of her father. When she realizes she doesn't have enough money for her travel, she even sells her thick and black hair to raise money for her California trip and this illustrates her craving for retrieving the past to find her father. She faces many obstacles in America to search her father. But that doesn't put off her from continuing her search.

Korobi comes to know about her father that he is an African-American through her mother's friend. The author illuminates the impact of this revelation on Korobi. Her new identity is that she is half-black and she is the daughter of Rob Lacey, an African-American father. During her meeting with her actual father, she learns about his life with Anu, her mother. She comes to know another unpleasant truth about her life that her mother and father were never married. Korobi is disappointed. She thinks to herself, “Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame” (246)

Even though Korobi grasps her confidence to the newly found facts opened up a different dimension to the existence of life. Divakaruni does offer empowerment to women of diaspora on various levels, including solidarity with other women acknowledgment of the supportive, healing role women often play. In spite of being adorable darling of grandparents, she muses over her mother and meaning of her own self and her name given to her by her mother. Moreover, Korobi asked her father why her

mother named her Korobi, Bengali name of the Oleander- beautiful but poisonous plant. She is in confusion why she named her a poisonous plant. Her father tells her the reason:

“She did actually, 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 of it herself” (253).

Korobi discovered that her mother gave her the name because she wanted her daughter to be able to protect herself from predators. Therefore it brings out Divakaruni’s strengthening her female protagonists with courage. Her characters are as strong and firm as she has been. In most of her novels her own experience has been revealed. It can be seen that how hard it is Korobi to accept the newly found facts about her identity and it paves a way to a different aspect to the existence of life.

Now, Korobi is a different Korobi who understands the shade of every relationship and can handle them better than before. The author describes the way Korobi deals with her life with her new identity after her return to India as a better person who knows what’s right for her. She tells the truth about her birth to grandmother and Rajat and his family. However Rajat is too happy to have her back and accepts her identity as Korobi the granddaughter of Bimal Roy and as the daughter of an African-American father. Korobi, true to her name, is an Oleander Girl who is not only beautiful but also tough. Thus, journey of Korobi retrieving the mystery of past and discovery of self made her an empowered woman.

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