
From Innocence to Experience in a Diasporic Web: Study of *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakauri

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakauri's name among the Diasporic writers is very prominent. Even in a short creative time frame, her place is enviable for others. An impressive writer writing both about hybrid identities as well female narratives, she has set a kind of pattern in her creative works. The present novel Oleander Girl was written in 2013 and explains the story of a girl Korobi, who, when novel starts lives in her cocooned world of males in form of fiancé and grandfather. Orphaned after her birth, Korobi lives a life of obligations to her grandparents and leaving all her rights and decision on them. This present paper aims to show the internal and external shifting and turmoil happening in life and thinking of a simple girl. Fall of twin towers in America is in the background of the story, and how it has impacted the life those Asians in different part of US.

KEYWORDS: Chitra Banerjee Divakauri, Love, Identity, Global world, Diaspora.

Chitra Banerjee Divakauri born in 1956 is a well known Indian – American Diasporic writer. Among the young generation of writers having origins in South- Asia, Chitra Banerjee is a scholar of great eminence. She has won American Book Award in 1995 for her story collection *Arranged Marriage*. Well known for her novels like *Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, she has acquired an image of a writer who writes about experience both as a female and a person who lives far away from her homeland. Her characters portray the intricacies of being American and Indian and confronting the difference of cultures at both the places.

The present novel, *Oleander Girl* is a kind of quest of a girl to find and understand her identity which is caught between the two nations, America and India. The main character Korobi Roy, a seventeen years old girl, at the beginning of the novel was living a life of an ignorant under the protection of main males of her life. She thinks herself indebted to her grandparents as she has lost her mother at the time of her birth and father died even before her birth. The letter she got from her grandfather Bimal Roy's library in a book of poems, made her feel of conscious of her parents love for each other. Brought up in a well to do family of Roy's, longing for her parents, she sees her mother in her dream the day she gets engaged to the man she loves, Rajat. Living in her ignorance, she thinks that her father was some Bengali man who died even before her birth. After her engagement, sudden death of her grandfather brings reality into the light. She comes to know through the mouth of her grandmother that her father was not an Indian but an American. She tells her that how her whole life she kept her mouth closed because her husband has forced to keep the truth under the carpet. This revelation made Korobi full of hatred for her grandfather

because it's because of him, her mother dies and she was kept away from her father throughout her life. After knowing all this, she feels that how she has lived her life without even knowing about her real identity. When she gets a picture of her mother from the library, she decides to go to America to find her lost father. Before that, due to her love for truth, she decides to tell all to the man she loves so dearly. In spite of knowing the fact that this truth can break her relationship with Rajat, who belongs to a well-reputed family of Kolkata. But because of her true character, she takes the consent of her in-laws to go to America and find her father. Though she was born and brought up in an atmosphere where a girl should remain dependent on her husband to take decision of her life, she proves herself to be very independent. She doesn't seem to be that mature to take decision to go to beyond her country to some other nation, but her stable mind to meet the other part of her lost-self, she takes the decision adamantly and sticks to what she decides. She wants to know what kind of man her father might have been. She wants to love that man whom her mother loved so dearly. Through him, she wants to know her mother as well. She thinks "in the things we love lie clues to who we are. What we want for those we love."

Chitra Banerjee, through this novel, has shown that how education can provide salvation to a female in this rigid Indian system. Korobi after reaching in America, even without having any concrete information of her father who lives in US, she doesn't succumb to the temptation of stopping her search. In spite of her loved ones disagreeing to the idea of her search of her father, she moves with courage. While searching for the name, Rob she gets into the trap of an advocate who tries to seduce her. But because of her yearning to meet one part of her existence, she calls Rob Lacey one evening after getting number from her mother's friend at US. Mrs Anand who had been a room-mate of Korobi's mother at student co-op, tells her that her mother was a very serious girl as student and she met her father at a dance class. Mrs. Anand tells that she was aware of Anu's conservative Hindu background in which she was not allowed to marry a man she likes. She further tells that though tried a lot but she couldn't forget Rob. One day she left the hostel to live with her love. That way Korobi comes to know that her father was an African-American man who was working in the field of History.

Korobi's desire to meet her father becomes faint when Rob Lacey accuses her that she is doing a fraud to grab money from him. But when reality comes to surface, Rob comes to meet her and tells her every detail of how she spent time with him in those years. He reveals her that Rob and her mother never got married due to the promise Anu had made to her father. This thing changes everything for Korobi. She starts questioning her existence. She realizes that how this society of her's has made restrictions of females even after proving themselves to be worthy of treating equals to men. She realizes that how her mother and she herself were the victims of mental constraints. They both were living their lives as if somebody has done favour to them to get education. Her mother in order to keep her words made to her father, she didn't get married to man she loved even after getting pregnant. She longs to meet her own love but to keep her father happy she remains away from Rob. Anu (Korobi's mother) sacrifices her own life to make everything perfect. But Korobi has decided to do whatever was right for her. She while being in America gets fond of Vic who was nephew of detective helping Korobi in search of her father. With Vic, she realizes that to have a perfect married life both the partner should be independent. Male should not a woman as a trophy or a precious jewel. This attitude of Indian males creates problem in the growth of females. She decides to take all her decisions on her own to win her freedom. Her father suggests her "Never choose something because it's easier." She simply

rejects the idea of Rajat, her fiancé to leave the search for her father. When Rajat suspects Korobi's stay with Vic, he accuses her of treachery. She takes this blame very firmly and makes Rajat feel sorry for his blames. She understands that her identity is not a shadow of the man she will marry.

This novel challenges the patriarchal structures of society that concentrates on androcentric nature only. Gender specific roles imposed upon females by this Indian conservative society are also a centre of this novel. In this novel, Korobi was supposed to do what her grandfather and her fiancé decides for her. The decision of when to get married was done in front of her without even asking her consent. Every time she tries to step to be independent, she was hindered by the thought of her love and duty towards her family. Her grandmother, who has kept herself silent in spite of knowing the reality, doesn't want her to leave for America as Korobi's in-laws might not like the idea of her going abroad even before marriage. Her in-laws were also in a fear they might get cut from the society after the fact knowing that Korobi is a mixed blood girl not a pure Hindu. These instances safely show that how a girl gets nothing to do on her own. She was just a property or a medal one gets in his marriage. While going through the condition of Indian society, one can easily connect it with Gayatri Spivak's 'Can Subaltern Speak?'. The way she has taken the third world as subaltern, we can safely take deprived woman as subaltern who got no power to speak in front of superstructures. Like the powerless East, women are also prohibited from voicing themselves due to patriarchal hegemony.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through the title of the novel *Oleander Girl* has given the idea that a girl can be both beautiful and tough. Korobi, the name given to her by her mother was a symbol of toughness her mother wanted in her daughter. In the novel when Korobi asks her father that does he know why was she given that name. In reply, he says that once her mother told her, "Girls have to be toughened so they can survive a world that presses harder on women." She wanted her daughter to be capable to live her life alone with courage when the time demands. She knew that *Oleander* is beautiful as well as poisonous. In the beginning, Korobi starts her journey to find her father in rashness of her young age but she gains maturity in this shifting and shuffling of places and their experiences in different times. She realizes that one cannot cut oneself from the places one belongs to by birth and upbringing. Though she also adds to her experience that connection with other places changes the perspective and we view life. She finds herself a hybrid identity which doesn't confirm to any place as its native land and lives happily in a global world.

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