



KOROBI-AN EMBODIMENT OF DIASPORIC DISPERSAL IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S OLEANDER GIRL

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee presents the voyage of women who, right from their birth to matrimony, progress ahead to cross numerous borders. Chitra Banerjee has precisely examined the shortcomings in the Indian society that are troublesome for women. She thus, moves a step ahead of other contemporaries in the literature of Indian diaspora. She distinguishes herself from others by revealing how Indian women continue to be stereotyped, marginalized and relegated to a colonial subjective position by their own oppressive tradition. Yet the women equip themselves to desist and defile the principles and beliefs of their own culture. Each person's journey is unique, and it changes that person in an exceptional manner. Divakaruni's woman protagonists aspire for power and autonomy to tussle against the domination of patriarchal ideology and humanity. Chitra Banerjee through her character Anu propounds how exile is, as prevailing as Diaspora which gives migrants an opportunity to excel in their career. This paper investigates the depiction of diasporic identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Oleander Girl through the lens of contemporary critical approaches to diaspora.

Key Words: Migrants, identity, diaspora, culture, quest, homeland

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Oleander Girl is a narrative of adore, misery, discovery, and the ultimate quest for self. A woman has to cross several boundaries right from her birth to her matrimony and this novel Oleander Girl depicts a similar expedition of the protagonists Korobi and her mother Anu. The novel Oleander Girl is set in India. This novel portrays women belonging to three generations- Korobi, her mother, Anu, and grandmother, Sarojini. Each generation has different idiosyncratic womanhood involvements and encounters.

Korobi, orphaned at a young age is brought up by her beloved grandparents Sarojini and Bimal Roy. She is an obliging and self-assured woman. She is brought up by her grandparents and is branded as a grandchild of Bimal Roy's family. Throughout her

childhood days she longs for her parent's love that she never experiences. One morning she visualizes her mother's shadow in her dream and is frightful to share it with her grandfather. She says, "From time to time, I imagined- a mix of horror and pride- what Grandfather's reaction would be when he saw me in it." (OG18). Though Korobi intends to discern much about her parents she doesn't explore, as it would be excruciating for her grandparents Korobi in spite of being obdurate with independent thoughts and consciousness about self, hesitates to upset or disobey her grandfather who rules the family, with iron fist, like Chitra Divakaruni's father. Korobi, who contemplates her grandfather, the retired barrister, as "father and mother



rolled into one" (OG 2) is brought up according to her grandfather's desire.

Her love for her grandfather makes her to be conscious about her traditional values and Indian tradition of accepting elders' decisions, though little reluctant at times. Bimal Roy adores Korobi very much as her advent in his life changes him into a liable man intriguing interest in his family business. The unexpected death of Korobi's adored grandfather on her engagement night and the restraint of her grandmother's appalling disclosure that her father is still alive open up a mysterious and uncertain past of Korobi's life. It is a big blow for Korobi to hear from her grandmother that her father is yet alive and is an Afro-American. Korobi comes to know of her mother, after her grandfather's demise.

The subplot of the novel revolves around the characters Anu and her lover Rob, an Afro-American, in USA. Anu, Korobi's mother was sent to boarding at the age of five and perhaps that created her individuality. She opposes to be bogged down by any kind of family pressures and has a voice of her own. Sarojini tells Korobi, "She learned to live a double life, assertive and competitive at school and college, compliant and voiceless everywhere else" (OG 57). Though Anu is given a free hand there were some restrictions too, to express her views. Chitra Banerjee raises her voice against the social taboos in order to provide Anu the required space. Anu takes a decision to study further for two more years after finishing her college. She indeed takes a bold step to explore her. Sarojini says, "She received the scholarship, all expenses paid to study International Relations at the University of California in Berkely" (OG 57). Women are gradually migrating abroad on their own to educate themselves, seek jobs and to boost economic opportunities.

Anu migrates to US for her higher studies. In spite of Bimal Roy's strict precincts,

she grows adventurous in America. The curiosity to know the world, the importance in discovering new people and places also serve as one of the important reasons for the geographical displacement of individuals. Anu gets consent from her father Bimal Roy after bequeathing a promise in-front of a goddess that she will for no reason get married without his consent and relocates to America. Anu who is always under the shadow of her father, Bimal Roy chooses her own way of life. She desires to marry the man whom she dearly loves. But she doesn't get her father's consent. Anu's stay in the US escalates her loneliness. Migrants who relocate to foreign lands for temporary or permanent settlement feel, at one stage or the other, a sense of up-rootedness, homelessness and estrangement similar to Anu. Uma Parameswaran in her *Trishanku and Other Writings: Current Perspectives in Indian English Literature* has discussed diasporic consciousness in immigrants. She expresses the phases they undergo and propounds:

The first is nostalgia for the homeland, left behind mingled with fear in strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy in adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-culture issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and started participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (108)

Immigration has become the key motif in post-colonial literature across the globe. Divakaruni symbolically talks about the migrants who are in exile as they are unaware of their captivity similar to birds inside large cages. She says, "...watching the birds' flit from branch to branch inside cages so large



that they probably didn't know they weren't free" (OG 98). With time migrants know that they want to break free; but they know that there is no physical escape. Hence, migrants long for a temporal escape in their minds. The immigrants' psyche is torn between the feeling of nostalgia and rootlessness, and they acquire a new personality when they overcome such feelings.

The physical return to one's homeland becomes virtually impossible for diasporics, and it remains a much desirable and unfulfilled craving. As Salman Rushdie says that the person who goes through exile and emigration faces assured wobbly in their personality that creates the impulse of clinging on to the few pieces of roots that they have in the new land. This kind of longing is the grounds for individuals to depend on their native customs and hang about in touch with the country they left behind. The longing for their homeland makes them dependent on the dream of going back, and only in a few cases migrant will go through transformation and finally materialize as an independent personality who can acclimatize to the existing alien society. The dilemma that an emigrant face in adopting the new culture makes him/her apprehensive and susceptible. Edward Said suggests,

For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally (32).

Relocating one's own identity in an exiled place is difficult and in the existing contemporary period a new kind of genre that discusses and explores the emigrant term called 'Diaspora' has been formed. Anu is incapable to forget the country of her birth as

she is sentimentally attached to it. Rushdie skilfully sums up this perturbed interaction of spatial and perceptible locations of immigrants and comments:

Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge (which gives rise to profound uncertainties) that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind. (76)

Yet Anu continues to professionally rise in the foreign land. Mishra asserts that the diasporic subject creates an imaginary homeland (here, the "old homeland"), where the imaginary homeland becomes a "fantasy structure... through which society perceives itself as a homogenous entity" (423). Therefore, the migrant in the diaspora sights the old homeland through a lens of vision, where the old homeland functions as an ideal homeland, a homeland where the migrant can feel secure. Therefore, the need to feel good in an imaginary homeland points out that the migrant does not feel pleasant in the diaspora.

After a few months Anu expresses her earnest longing to visit her home and startlingly Mr. Roy gives his consent for her stay as long as she wishes. According to Mishra, new Diasporas keep their connection with the homeland "intact" through "family networks" (422). Mr. Roy's only condition is that she should come alone and during her stay should not speak to any one, not even to



her mother about her husband. Anu agrees and arrives accordingly. Patriarchy, a very sturdy notion of Indian society subdues her love affair with Rob. Divakaruni presents a genuine depiction of Indian culture that does not permit girls to choose what is right. During this period Mr. Roy repeatedly insists Anu to give birth to the baby in India but she remains determined to move to America before her delivery. Though she tries all capable ways of persuading her strict, conservative father, it turns futile. During an argument with her father, she slips from the staircase and bleeds. She pathetically dies in the hospital after giving birth to Korobi.

It is a ruthless catastrophe for Bimal Roy and Sarojini to lose their lone amorous daughter. The only hope of optimism for them to endure is the newly born baby, Korobi. Bimal Roy takes a pledge from Sarojini at their temple not to divulge these particulars to anyone not even to Korobi. He tells to Sarojini, "We'll grow old in an empty house while she is brought up in another country without culture or values. Do you want that?" (OG 62) It is at this point that Korobi's identity crisis and struggle for endurance in a tradition and value-bound society begins. The prime agent to hurl her into such a circumstance is none other than Mr. Bimal Prasad Roy, Korobi's grandfather-the torch bearer of the so-called Bengali, "Sanaatan Hindu tradition" (OG 26). His stance and abhor for American culture is quite lucid from these words. This vanity in Mr. Roy becomes so dominant that he makes Sarojini avow on the Goddess that Korobi's father must never discover that she is alive. As a result, the legitimacy about Korobi's parents remains hidden deep in her heart.

Matters are unpleasant for Korobi to deem and accept. She is enraged to hear from her grandmother that her grandfather had sent a message to her father mentioning both

mother and child were dead. They had asked Korobi's father not to come to India as it would enhance their melancholy. It was always Bimal Roy's command and never Sarojini's resolution. It is only after Sarojini's husband's demise that she frees herself from the traditional stifle and shares her every speck of indignant memory with Korobi. She utters, "All my life I only cared about what he wanted. Obeyed him even when my conscience cried against it" (OG 52). Divakaruni portrays the psychological claustrophobia and the emerging conflicts arising in a few Bengali women who are susceptible to feel the twinge yet are intellectual enough to sense out their family situations and sever out. Divakaruni vigilantly displays her responsiveness of the Indian patriarchal society. The life of Sarojini is not less than harassment. Sarojini is shown to be a docile wife of Bimal Prasad Roy. She is the one who has long forfeited her individualism following the orders of her husband and even hides the identity of her own son-in-law.

Though Sarojini understood the emotions of her daughter, she could neither support nor aid her. She is incessantly under the pressure of patriarchy. Indian women are shown to be tied and over-burdened by family ties, in-laws' expectations and societal prejudices. Sarojini is compelled to pursue and admit the decision of her husband. She too executed the duties of a traditionalist, customary wife applauding the principles of her husband without raising any questions. But in her heart, she knew how much she sought after her daughter's bliss and at her demise how much she might have broken out. With all the resilience and susceptibility, she might have chocked whenever Korobi had asked about her parents. She would have shed tears in the dark chamber of her life recollecting every minuscule memory of Anu



without letting it be perceived either by Korobi or Bimal Roy.

Divakaruni every now and then exhibits her awareness regarding the societal reputation and patriarchy through the character Bimal Prasad Roy who has earned esteem and reputation in the society, procuring the precious cultural heritage and tradition. This novel is the paramount exemplar of not only presenting Indianness in one sense but also comprises each and every aspect of Indian society. Divakaruni consciously presents a factual picture of the Indian society where Anu becomes a victim of the Indian concept in doing something right or wrong. Because of her bleak experience she becomes quiet forever creating a dreadful memory throughout the narrative. She passively prevails in the whole story. Sarojini represents a rudimentary, conformist, patriarchal, conservative attitude which relics a precious life, separates a daughter from her parents and keeps a father away from his child for years. It is she who endures from Identity Crisis and psychological alienation due to Anu's migration.

Korobi gets highly distressed and absolutely lost when she comes to know that she is the daughter of an Afro- American. Her identity which, is entangled with the reputation of the Roy family, is shattered. Like any other women character in Divakaruni's novels, Korobi is cognisant about herself. Despite being the adorable darling of her grandparents, she questions her grandmother as to why she was named Korobi by her mother: "Why did she name me Korobi?" (OG 08).

The motive behind Korobi to exile from India is after she comes to know that her mother and father had never got married. It is a question of her being illegitimate, which makes her feel disgusting. "I'm illegitimate? I whisper.... I'm a bastard? I can't come to

terms with this new, shameful me" (OG 245). It is noted that Korobi's panic and ordeal of being illegitimate is solely positioned on stereotyped Indian culture in which such illegitimacy is enormously surmounted. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is very much apprehensive of the Indian society where children of unwed couple are cast away. Korobi mourns that she is not receptive of even a single person among all her friends, relatives and acquaintances, who is out cast this way. Korobi's mother Anu's, means of displacement, both culturally and geographically is the cause behind this.

Korobi decides to leave for America to discover her father and her identity. She escapes from India to get rid of her subjugated position. Perceiving the fact that her factual identity lies across the ocean, she determines to take a challenge to explore the whereabouts of her father in a foreign land. She finds it hard to commence a new life with Rajat. Rajat expresses his insightful love and strong belief on her. He exclaims that he is more concerned with the present than the past and the future. Korobi still remains obdurate and declares:

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. (OG 67)

Divakaruni portrays Korobi as a headstrong, alluring young woman unafraid of people and their remarks. Korobi determined to find her father says, "Until I find him Rajat, I am not sure I can get married" (OG 67). She just desires to follow her heart. Korobi realizes that it will take some time for Rajat and his parents to acknowledge these events. This is very much against the typical Indian



society which makes one remain fused to the family values and traditions and consider these values above anything else.

Korobi in order to recreate her autonomous existence migrates to America. She moves from compliance to self-assertion in order to acquire an identity in the society. After undergoing trauma and suffering in her life, she realizes that she has to do away with her submissive and passive attitude towards life in order to emerge as a sanguine, self-reliant and courageous woman. The reality of women's lives be it pining for love, struggling for acceptance, battling the expectations of family and society, craving for financial independence, yearning for respect and submitting, submerging themselves totally have all lent an emotional texture to their survival. Jasbir Jain makes an observation:

Diasporic presence is dispersal, a scattering, a flight and has to take root elsewhere, especially if it seeks sustenance and growth. But it continues to depend on the bits and pieces of its origin to hold itself together in the face of the onslaught, rejection or domination by the 'other', by the world which both frightens and fascinates too. Whatever mode it adopts and temporalities it relates to, is still primarily concerned with the contingent of being. (79)

When migrants set for a journey to their destined lands, the uncertainties do not

matter, but a change for the better prospects becomes a deciding factor for their survival. Displacement offers them possibilities of providing space for assimilation. Divakaruni through her characters has made an attempt to bring out receptiveness for the suppressed women who are subjugated in the patriarchal society. Chitra Divakaruni embodies her own experience of migration in utmost of her works. She has illustrated the expedition of Indian women from hurdles and restrictions to emancipation and independence.

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