

Search for Identity and Struggle for Existence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract- Themes of search for Identity, Indianness and struggle for existence dealt by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Oleander Girl*. Themes such as class conflict, religion, politics, exile, racism ...etc are also connected with the above themes. In between there are views on momentous and crucial gestures such as love, devotion and faith. The long kept secret of the family and dreams inserted in between provide a delightful impression to the book. The novel presents before us the protagonist's quest for the identity of her father, which in turn becomes her own identity crisis. Indian experiences, contemporary American life style, history, and the challenges of living in a multicultural world are also scrutinized.

Key Words: search for identity, struggle for existence, protagonist's quest, contemporary, multicultural, scrutinized...etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes to examine the issue of woman's quest for identity, struggle for existence and the woman's transformation in the new world order and emergence of 'New Woman' with particular reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*. The paper will glance through the experiences of woman protagonist Korobi who suffered and come out of hurdles with her identity at the end of the novel. Chitra draws an extraordinary portrait of Indian woman, who flout conventions and live life on her own terms.

2. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE IN *OLEANDER GIRL*

Oleander Girl is one such example of traditional values as well identity crisis in a foreign land. It also demonstrates the female character, the protagonist, taking the risk of leaving everything and moving in an unknown land in search of her identity and family secret. *Oleander Girl* is a permutation of Divakaruni's visits to Kolkata and her brooding over family secrets which are thought to be shameful by Indian society consequently hide even from their own granddaughter. The novel is narrated from the perspectives of Korobi, her future mother in law, her grandmother, the Muslim driver and some others. Divakaruni captivates the readers into a story overflowing with mystery, heritage, romance, familial ties, and identity crisis, traditional bondage and various such ingredients. 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. She encounters the company of attractive strangers, across America, a country where she finds at once dangerous, unwelcoming and alluring. Korobi has been shown to be conscious about herself like any other women characters in Divakaruni's fiction. 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. 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. Korobi again expresses her confusion in front of her father why she has been named on poisonous flowers, which is hardly very popular. Korobi asked her father,

Did my mother ever tell you why she wanted to name me Korobi?" 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)

One of the major themes of the novel is Identity Crisis, which female protagonist faces in the novel as mentioned above. Unlike other characters and Diaspora writers the protagonist 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.

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 Roys and also being the fiancée of the most desired and the richest man of the town. She is taken aback when she discovers the secret of her family about her father who is not an Indian but an Afro-American. It is a great shock for Korobi to learn from her grandmother Sarojini that her father was not an Indian, a foreigner, not a lawyer and that he did not die in a car accident. Anu her mother, was in love with him during her stay in America when she had been there for higher studies on a scholarship. 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. Though she tried all possible ways of convincing her rigid, conservative father, it was all futile. In a rage of arguments she slipped from the staircase and started bleeding. That is how she died in the hospital giving birth to Korobi. 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 took a promise from Sarojini in their temple not to reveal these facts to any one 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.

The whole story revolves around Korobi's quest for identity and her struggle to fix her identity in totally unacceptable social conditions. Her skin color believes to be from the Roys but the color of her hair still confuses her. She is tattered between the Indianness and the westernness. She has to balance between the goodness of both cultures and should choose the right one for her. Therefore, Korobi who is conscious about her own identity since the beginning realizes that it is difficult for her to begin a new life with Rajat and also not judicious until she finds out the true identity of her fragmented self. She experienced all the emotions of anger, sorrow, distress

and disgust. However at the same time she has got little hope of exploring her own identity which won't be deceptive anymore. The answer to her real identity lies across the ocean, the United States, where her mother had spent a few years as a student. She 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. So Korobi talks to Rajat how eager she is to know about her own father and therefore she happily takes challenge to explore in foreign land.

In spite of knowing the hardship on the way, Korobi reluctantly shows her consciousness of self and she decides to give up all her comfort and even to sacrifice her love in order to find her identity. Like all other migrants Korobi too turns away from luxuries and easy life and chooses to walk in path of hardship and challenge, though with hope of getting something better (here: her original identity)

I love you Korobi. Don't abandon me and go to America!" I want to say okay.

I want it so badly, I can barely breathe but I can't. If I do I know I would never feel complete, in his arms or anywhere else. I have too many unanswered questions to just let this go. (*Oleander Girl*, 85)

Though it has been noted that 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. When she needed money she decides to sell her hair. She decides to sell it because she feels that she has the ultimate right on her body and herself. The decision of selling of hair makes her more liberated and confident. She confesses, "I feel light-headed, untethered. But once the money is in my hand I'm somewhat consoled. I now have enough for California; I have done it without having to beg anyone". (*Oleander Girl*, 177)

Nevertheless she confronts hard times in America being alone without her real identity; the very first adversity she faces is at Kennedy airport where she was longing to get Mitra who was supposed to pick her up from the airport. She is alone with none but Mitra to receive her, her spirited self turns into a

perceptive one. When she doesn't find Mitra on the airport for nearly half an hour, she becomes anxious on that foreign land detached from her familiar people and terrain. In spite of facing hardship, she is determined and then after she has very first encounter of difference between Indianness and Americanized culture when she finds Mitra being impolite by not paying taxi fare, though he might have his financial constrains due to struggle for survival. "Already I'm losing my Indian courtesies; I'm thinking in terms of survival, like an immigrant." (*Oleander Girl*, 94)

Hence it is witnessed that Divakaruni successfully puts India in plain words to Non Indians through *Oleander girl*. Moreover, Korobi's experience of migration in search of her own identity presents her in-between potential of Diaspora. No one forces Korobi to leave India, neither her external environment nor her marital reason. It was due to her own quest and to quench the thrust of her identity, she dislocates herself from India and Rajat, at least till she finds her own self. And therefore she, like all women characters of the author, becomes synonyms of endurance, strength and determination. She was taken aback, her earth slid from her feet when she met her father and when she came to know that her mother and father had never got married. It was a question being her illegitimate, which made her feel suffocating.

It is noted that Korobi's fear and shock of being illegitimate is purely based on stereotyped Indian culture in which such illegitimacy is completely looked down. Korobi, like any other migrant, faces her own struggles. Firstly from Mitra who seems to be spying on her. He does not even cooperate 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. These experiences shatter her and she is about to give up when she receives a call from a lady named Meera Anand who admits of knowing her mother Anu Roy and having stayed with her. It is from the photo that she recognizes Anu which Desai had given in print. Korobi's struggle for identity reminds us with struggle of Sudha in *Vines of Desires*. Like Sudha Korobi is too like a turtle which comes out of his hiding environs but at time struggles with her own self and goes into a mode of self-reproach. Sudha's listening of a folk song reflects the psyche of the woman whose life has gone through various hurdles. Korobi's search too faces various obstacles one overlapping the other.

During her journey of search, she was attracted by Vic who is the only one who understands her and supports her, it has been seen that Korobi had choice to stay back in America and she also loves the place by its all fascinations. "I'll have to make my new decision: Vic or Rajat, America or India" (*Oleander Girl*, 218). 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.

At the end, Korobi experiences conversion by the circumstances and she does succeed in getting back her love freeing herself from the web of identity crisis being truly the beautiful oleander that her mother wanted her to be. She realizes that one's own sense of identity is far greater than all social and cultural dogmas, she achieves sense of fulfillment. This can be the reason why Korobi didn't break down when she was deserted by Rajat and she returned his engagement rings with dignity. Though she accepts him at the end as she her heart senses freedom, without burden of identity dilemma, social pressures she reads out poem written by her mother at the end, "He who binds to himself a Joy Doth the winged life destroy; But he who kisses the Joy as it flies Lives in Eternity's sunrise." (*Oleander Girl*, 288)

3. CONCLUSION

Every migrant is conscious about the other side of the experience yet he or she chooses to travel. Chitra Divakaruni portrays her own experience of migration in most of her works. Her Novels project Indian experiences, contemporary American life style, history, myth, and the challenges of living in a multicultural world. In *Oleander girl* she very cleverly depicts that how Indian society plays a role in creating an identity of a person and further putting her in situation where she faces her own identity crisis. She successfully displays Indian society which witnesses Indianness in her writing. In addition to this, Identity Crisis is experienced by Korobi, due to patriarchal society and migration to other land. Korobi has passed through different stages to achieve in her own way a sense of fulfillment. Here it is tried to analyze the elements of struggle for existence and identity crisis in the selected novel. Therefore, it can be recapitulated that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has very well knitted the theme of search for identity and struggle for

existence of Korobi in *Oleander girl*, which comes out of her own Diaspora experience.

(A.1)

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