

Diasporic Experience Of Korobi In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract

Women's independence and freedom is a tired topic that nevertheless sparks lively debate in our culture. Women's autonomy and appropriate limits are still denied to a large proportion of women. Indian women are frequently used as instruments to promote one's culture and as tradition bearers. The concerns of diaspora, transnationality, hybridity, and identity crises continue to enrich the literatures of the twenty-first century in the age of globalisation. In the realm of global migration, shifting, cultural transaction, multiculturalism, and fluid identity constitute a complicated framework. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a South Asian immigrant herself, frequently uses her narrative to reflect the challenges of these women in her novels. Her best-known work, *Oleander Girl* depicts the cultural displacement of Indian immigrant Korobi and her customers as they face identity crises. Divakaruni gives voice to her female characters in the novel, who represent a portion of oppressed Indian women, through her great use of magical realism. This paper investigates the sense of identification and belonging of characters of Indian descent and immigrants in the United States in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel. In her writings, she has written on the Indian Diaspora and told anecdotes about the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural differences in the Diaspora realm.

Key words: Origin, Diaspora, multiculturalism, immigration.

Diaspora is a group of people with common origin, beliefs and background migrated from their homeland to some foreign land, voluntarily or forcefully and settled down there with a sense of displacement however without losing hope to return to their home land eventually or at least having a yearning of the same. Diaspora is a scattered group of people who have settled abroad having deep attachment with their native land. This sense of displacement, their hope to return to their native land, their feeling of nostalgia, their spiritual attachment with their own people, their sense of loss and their non-declared, unspoken or say mute desire to return their pleasures in the foreign land and pains caused by intimate memories of their homeland have found unsurpassed place in their literature.

Indian Diasporic writing is a powerful network connecting the entire globe. Diasporic literature helps in the circulation of information and in solving many problems. This literature works as a channel to strength the bonds between the different states of India and of India in relation with the other countries at large. Diasporic opinion helps to break through the past alienation and isolation which cause much injustice and abuse of human rights. It also serves as an outlet to their passions, emotions and feelings, providing a ventilator to grievances and grudges. In other words diasporic literature helps as a cathartic indignation. The welfare and wellbeing of the overseas Indians, a sense of security for them and India's greater concern for them is brought out through these writings. It also helps in creating good will, a cordial relationship and in spreading values, virtues and universal peace. The immigrant experience leaves the author at a transit station caught between the realities of the new world and the memories of their original home. Indian diasporic writing is now mostly dominated by women writers.

Diasporic authors exposed to the two different cultures and their imagination is given a complex structuring of different cultural symbolism and consolidation of two different social strata in the context of cultural studies. The process of assimilation and acculturation is so complex on the social and the psychological levels that the individual has to go through a constant struggle. The characters of these authors are generally immigrants. Major concern of the diasporic authors is immigrants and their struggles for survival in a new socio-political situation.

Sometimes, these authors are politically influenced and their texts emerge as a political expression of the marginalized minorities. These texts reveal exploitation of immigrants by the host nation. Another important political modification of these authors is to protect their indigenous culture in the form of literature. They celebrate their homeland and portray their home in the literature to oppose the domination of host society. Therefore, their writing can be interpreted as a search for identity and at the same time, contradictorily it maintains a distinct aboriginal identity. They become aware of their 'otherness' in the host country and they are discriminated by indigenous people. Immigrants indulge themselves in the memories of the past and create a replicated homeland.

They try to get assimilated with the new socio-cultural environment along with the feelings of confusion, humiliation and fear. Migrants cannot separate themselves from their origin and hope to survive in the settled country by accepting the norms of new culture. Diasporic aspects like displacement, sense of otherness, humiliation due to discrimination, nostalgia, trans-nationalism and trans-culturalism are integral parts of their lives. The immigrant authors, fully aware of the problem of immigrants, produce the diasporic literature. Thus these authors being charged with a diasporic consciousness, attempt to render their problems and prospects. They are hopeful for the future whereas some of them are frustrated due to the discrimination and marginalization. The diasporic consciousness influences the depiction of thematic concerns and shapes the attitude of the author to approach the socio-cultural facts.

Indian diasporic people are nostalgic about their village, culture, language, food, cinema etc., these people construct imaginary homeland in the foreign land to fulfill the gaps of the homeland anxiety at a distance. Divakaruni is one of the most important diasporic writers. Most of her novels deal with the diasporic elements. In the novel, *Oleander Girl* the protagonist Korobi travels between India and America and she faces many diasporic problems in the unknown country. After the death of her grandfather Korobi comes to know that her father is alive in America. So she decides to move to America in search of her father. Sarojini is the one who revealed Korobi about her father and she also said that he was alive. "No, Korobi..." your dear grandfather lied to you and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive. His name is Rob. Yes, Rob. He lives in America" (52).

While analysing the character of Korobi, she is born and brought up in a typical Indian traditional family. When she decides to move to America everyone tries to stop her because her loved ones know it is not very easy to survey in the unknown place. There come the diasporic struggles in the life of Korobi.

Anu is Korobi's daughter and with her the first diasporic element started in the novel. Anu is no more and she comes in the dream of Sarojini and informs her that once Korobi reaches her age of eighteen, she needs to reveal the real truth about Korobi's parents to her. So after the death of Korobi's grandfather, Sarojini informs Korobi about her mother Anu.

When Anu moves to America she is very happy and she engages her with many activities when she is in love with Roy. She informs her father and mother. Anu's father is very angry on her and he is not ready to accept her. She informed her parents that "He's a wonderful man... sweet and intelligent. You couldn't have found a better person for me in all of India. His name is Roy" (58). Bimal Roy asks her to return India immediately. But she refuses to do so. Finally he has stopped the communication with her. After six months she writes a letter and in that letter she informs that she is pregnant and she is in a critical position. Anu asks permission to return back to India to his father and he accepts her. Bimal Roy asks her to return to India.

After the return of Anu to India her parents are very happy and Anu is also happy. She rests her head on the arms of her mother and she feels very safe and secured. This shows that in America though she has enjoyed all the pleasures and elegance she has always missed her native land and her own

people. Once she returns to India and stays with her parents she feels that she is the happiest person in the entire world. One day all of a sudden, Anu again decides to move to America. Her decision does not make her parents happy though Sarojini does not like her daughter's decision of going back to America.

She has never forced her. But her father Bhimal Roy forces her to stay in India. One night there is a heavy fight when Sarojini is cooking she hears her daughter's crying sound "By the time cook and I came running from the kitchen, your mother was crumpled at the base of the stairs, unconscious, with you folded helplessly somewhere inside her" (61). When they rushed to hospital the doctor operated her and she said that the baby was safe but the mother was dead.

Anu's parents are shocked and they are not ready to accept the truth. Here comes the new born baby Korobi who is the new representation of both the countries and cultures. Once Bimal Roy comes to the reality he does not want to sacrifice his granddaughter's life as like his own daughters life so he informs everyone that Anu's husband Rob is a law student and he passed away due to an accident. Finally Sarojini confesses to Korobi that "I don't expect you to forgive us for deceiving you. All I can say is that we did it out of love and fear" (63). Jaisy rightly comments,

The loss and the search for identity is the result of the domination of her grandfather Bimal Roy, who makes all decisions – right and wrong – for the household. Representing the patriarchal set up, he suppresses his wife Sarojini, his daughter Anu and his granddaughter Korobi, who represent nature. The Third generation Korobi starts roaring and attains a new shape by melting herself. (625)

After listening to the truth about her life, Korobi decides to move to America in search of her father. But her decision has never made anyone happy. Because of the huge love Rajat has for Korobi he takes an initiation and decides to investigate about Korobi's father with the help of the investigator Mr. Sen. One thing they have as evidence is Rob's old photograph and his short name Rob. Mr. Sen investigates a lot but he has failed in finding the person Rob. Mr. Sen advises Rajat that it is not safe and it is an impossible thing to find a person in America without having full details. So he asks Korobi not to go to America. Korobi refuses to listen to anyone. Like her mother she is also very stubborn in her decision to go to America. "Stubbornness rises inside me like a wall. I don't care how hard it is! I must do everything I can to find him. He's my father, for heaven's sake!" (72). Listening to the words of Korobi everyone understands that she is very stubborn in her decision. Mr. Sen advises her that if she is moving to America then she can work with Mr. Desai in America.

Sarojini knows that the travel between India and America is not very easy. Then the diasporic experience survey in the unknown city of America is very hard, yet she supports her granddaughter's decision. She blesses her and then she also says that her mother's soul will be always around her and her soul will protect her. Korobi promises to Rajat she will return back to India within a month and she will be always thinking of him.

The life in America is really a hard thing for Korobi because she is completely born and brought up in a typical traditional Indian family. In America she stays in Mr. Mitra's apartment, it is a small place and Korobi is uncomfortable there. Mr. Mitra is a hard person. Seema, wife of Mr. Mitra is a sweet hearted person and explains how they are reduced into the crumbled apartment after the attack of terrorists. Korobi is worried because she is losing her Indian countries by living as an immigrant.

Korobi is homesick and she is worried about her family and longs for the Indian culture and tradition. Korobi listens to the old favourite songs for the immigrant longing to capture home. When she is in India she has never listened to these kinds of songs. She is filled with solitude in America. Korobi is not allowed to do the things which she loves to do because she is an immigrant. After the destruction of Twin Towers, the condition of immigrants has changed upside down and many new restrictions have started to highlight the immigrant people.

In America, Korobi works in Mr. Desai's office. When Korobi does not have any trust on Mr. Mitra she asks him to go out from the room. Mr. Desai and Korobi are talking about her parents. But the real trust is that they do not get any information about Korobi's parents. Mr. Desai tells Korobi that his nephew Vice will drop her to the house. This is the first thing that Korobi gets as a first favour in America. The search of her parents does not go well in the beginning. They have not received any information about them. And practically it is not easy to find a person only with a name in America.

When they get to know about a person named Rob Evanston. Korobi and Vice decides to meet him. On that meeting Korobi understands that he is not her father. Korobi literally feels very bad because her attempt to find her father in the unknown place is a greatest failure. On the way back to New York, they decide to cut off their journey due to the heavy snowfall. When she informs Rajat that she stays with Vice, Rajat is irritated. According to the Indian culture after the engagement staying a night with another guy is a wrong thing. Many engagements are stopped because of suspicion in India. On talking to Korobi over phone Rajat understands that Korobi's pain of not finding her parents. Rajat requests her to return back to India. She says; "You know I can't go back yet. I've invested too much in this. I've got to stay until I've checked out a couple of possibilities" (158).

Sarojini informs that she knows the secret about Korobi's father. She says after the death of Anu, Rob comes to India and asks about his wife and daughter's information to Korobi's grandfather. But he is the one who does not want his granddaughter to be sent to America. So he says to Rob that both his daughter and granddaughter are dead. He spends more money on creating fake documents of death. And he shuts everyone's mouth with the fake documents and fake certificates. The grandfather does all these because he does not want her granddaughter to be an immigrant in an unknown country.

After returning back from that place everything is gloomy and no one informs or responses to the advertisement in the newspaper. On next day Mr. Desai has found two persons in the name of Rob. Who lives in California Korobi does not have enough money to move to California so she decides to sell her hair to earn money. According to Indian culture and tradition cutting hair is like almost doing a sin. But now she is in America. So she is transferring herself to the American tradition and culture. Everyone is shocked on looking at the short hair of Korobi. When they are in the airport for security reasons they are asked to move to the other side and they are shocked to listen to this announcement. "The security line is extremely long and slow Both Vic and I are pulled out of line and made to wait. Over one side Almost everyone waiting with us is brown skinned. We run through the airport, breathless, and get to the plane as the gate is closing" (183).

After a great struggle Korobi and Vice has gone to meet Rob Mariner in this office. He asks her to come and meet him at house. When Korobi goes there he shows many photographs to her and she understands that he is not his father. Once she realizes that she is sad and she finds that he starts to misbehave with her. Though she adopts the American tradition and culture she is born and brought up in the Indian traditional house.

According to the Indian tradition, women give more importance to their own chastity and they dislike the touch of other person that is Rob Davis. They both go to meet him but she finds that he is not his father. Now Korobi is hardly broken in her heart and she feels that she needs someone with her from India. Finally after all these problems, korobi decides to go back to India. At that time she gets a call from

Mrs. Meera Anand who informs about her mother and also lets her know that her father's name is Rob Lacey. Meera says Korobi that Anu is a strong woman. Anu meets Rob in the dance class. They both love each other and they are in relationship. One day she moves away with him and when Meera meets her she is pregnant at that time and looks happy.

During that time Anu says Meera that she is going to India and she is going to talk to her father. Korobi comes to know from Meera Anand that her father is an Afro-American. Korobi is very much excited to talk to her father through phone. She feels that it is an important call in her life. Korobi introduces herself to her father. He says; "my daughter is dead" (232). Korobi is literally sad because her father says that his daughter is dead. On the other side she feels that she is very happy because she finds her father.

After a long diasporic struggle, Rob Lacey has come to meet his daughter Korobi. They both have a good conversation. Korobi is really very happy because after a great travel of diasporic experience she has success of finding the mission of his father. He takes Korobi to his garden and says that the garden is made by her own mother. It is filled with roses, "The rose garden was special to Anu. Thus is where we made over our vow to each other" (244). Then Korobi starts to enquire the life about her parents. Finally Rob says her that, "your mother and I were never married" (244).

When Korobi comes to know that it is her mother's decision not to get married she is shocked because being an Indian girl, Korobi does not understand how her mother is in a living relationship with a

person without marrying. And she also feels shameful because she is an illegitimate daughter. Though she is shameful she decides to inform the truth about her birth to Rajat. Korobi is happy because she comes to know the meaning of her name and at last on the wedding day of Korobi her father sends a gift and blessing to her daughter. The diasporic search of Korobi is successful because she finds her father and she is reunited with him.

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 an Indian. Consequently, her own identity poses a question. Her identity gets diluted due to her mother's migration, cultural and geographical diversity. It can be seen that how hard it is for Korobi to accept the newly found facts about her identity and it paves way to a different aspect to the existence of life. On one hand she has been collapsed with the heartbreaking reality but at the same time she is also dared in fetching the true identity to her fragmented self. In the course of action of her quest for identity in the foreign land, the truth she faces is hard for her to believe. She realizes the values of India and returns to India as a better person who knows what is right for her and who knows how to resist temptation.

Oleander Girl can be considered as a noted example of diasporic consciousness especially in its sphere of identity and empowerment. As a diasporic writer, Divakaruni, gives an opportunity to understand the immigrant's quest for identity and their struggle with identity crisis in a foreign land. She brings to limelight, the life of migrants standing in-between the two worlds, ambivalence towards dual belongingness between the homeland and the host. They risk their life to succeed in a new environment and struggle to enhance their families and also their own life. Mostly women migrants are tested between domestic life and professional life. The politics of multiculturalism and double consciousness ends in disadvantage and jeopardize the future of migrants.

Divakaruni delicately portrays how expatriate women are naturally endowed with the feminine ability to relate simultaneously in two homes. The immigrants employ wisdom and compassion to empathize with two different cultures, Indian and American. They synthesize the moderate and the best in two cultures and thus heal the fractured selves of their own and those of fellow beings.

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