

Debut of Self Quest in Divakaruni's Oleander Girl

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Abstract

Women empowerment can be precisely stated as the altering consciousness approach by which women believe in their uniqueness. From ancient days the quest for women's identity is a never-ending process as they prefer to be unconventional. In the epoch of post modernism and globalisation, the voice of South Asian Diasporic women being empowered by their throng of writing has taken the literary globe of Diasporas to the zenith. As a South Asian Diasporic writer with a feminist perspective, Chitra Banerjee she has unfolded the various facets related to these aspects by portraying her own experiences and those of other immigrant Indian women in her novels. Her writings largely deal with immigrant women and their trail for autonomy, identity, and independence. Significantly to a certain extent, instead of restraining women's life to a particular belief, she drives her perception across-the-board of each veiled woman. She endeavours to sensitise readers on how women contemplate and feel through her works. She adeptly portrays energizing female characters and discloses the pinnacle of their strength across the generational difference. This paper attempts to explore the protagonist's trepidation in seek out for her individuality which she assumes has gone astray in the novel *Oleander Girl*.

Keywords: Identity, diaspora, tradition, patriarchy, autonomy, feminism

Literature, culture and linguistic have a perceptible impact in communicating one's identity. It is our identity that encompasses our sense of self. The post-colonial era is predominantly a pursuit for identity. In the words of Wassef, "Identity is an urgent quest for Third World countries attempting to assert their individuality as nations and shed the yoke of having been culturally oppressed for a significant period of their history". (75) Assertion of identity turns out to be a progressive obligatory for immigrants as they acknowledge their social, moral, and cultural heritage as their inheritance. A woman in general is bound to dawdle in the fetters of oppression and suppression in a society. Feminism questions the androcentric nature and patriarchal structure of humanity. It robustly opposes the extended gender-roles and habitual stereotypes shoved on women. In general, it also claims for identical demeanour and constructive circumstances for their livelihood. R.S. Malik and Jagdish Batra opine that, "Feminism, takes a hard look at the real position of women in society which discriminates against women mainly due to sexual difference" (76). A woman faces jeopardy while establishing her identity and is forever in a dilemma. She is in a quandary whether to go after her traditional ways of living or unconventional ways while combating in upholding her identity. She is for eternity skilled to be a wonderful daughter, wife and mother from her childhood. Her societal and intellectual development too is confined to the family and its acquaintances. She is utterly reliant on the monetary status of her father and then on her husband. Feminism incessantly involves rephrasing of femininity, which declares women as women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a fictitious critic in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" stresses the need for subdued colonized to talk out. This imaginary categorization may be relatively enforced to the destitute state of a woman where a constitution of

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supremacy doesn't authorize the subaltern to express their quandary in liberated Third World countries, including India. Due to the so-called weaker sex status and frameworks like patriarchal supremacy are twice challenged and forbidden from expressing themselves. Feminism seeks to end masculinist hierarchy by opposing women's subservience. A postcolonial feminist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" opposes falsification of women who reside in countries other than western Europe and asserts that, the lived experiences of explicit women have to be taken into account as a basis for theorizing.

Diasporic Indian individuals are usually regretful of their ethnicity, community and mode of livelihood. They construct a make-believe home in the unknown land to accomplish the shortcomings of their native soil torment. In the fiction, 'Asian Diaspora Poetry in North America' Benzi Zhang elucidates that the notion of diaspora entails an alteration from national to cross-cultural and subsequently to global perspectives. As the immigrants' distinctiveness is endangered by the mores of the host country in any civilization, they endure location, disruption and reposition. This situation according to Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, "Our identity is at once partial and plural. Sometimes we find that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15). Colonialism and patriarchy mutually comprise dealings of demand and subjugation, where the subjugated is enforced to acquire the, oppressed scapegoat locale. In *Sexual Politics* (1969) it is as Kate Millet observes that, the history of patriarchy perpetrated cruelties and barbarities on women (46). She argues that patriarchal authority is pervasive. Chitra Banerjee endeavours to renovate the past by integrating her experiences as a fragment of the shattered image. She divulges her own experiences through the characters Korobi, Anu and Sarojini, who too faces many predicaments while exploration of her identity, being a female in a cosmos subjugated patriarchal setup.

Divakaruni depicts women who are particularly caught in multicultural challenges. She has tried to give women an imperative position through her protagonist, Korobi who confronts various challenges in the foreign land. Divakaruni intentionally names her protagonist after the oleander flower as Korobi- which implies beautiful as well as a tough. Korobi's character is framed by Divakaruni as a personality, one who trails her compassion and takes resolutions devoid of dreading the social consequences.

The novel *Oleander Girl* is about Korobi an eighteen-year-old orphan, raised by Sarojini and Bimal Roy-her grandparents. Korobi's grandparents are ethnically prosperous being positioned in an alleged family. Bimal Roy is a conservative retired trial lawyer. Korobi is given the uniqueness as the Roy family's granddaughter with Bengali mores. Divakaruni to an assured extent inspired by her own grandfather portrays Korobi's grandfather who is outwardly tough but supple in his heart. Korobi is raised by her well-off and loving grandparents who sent her to a classy boarding school in the hills. The only information that she is responsive regarding her parents is that her mother Anu passed away in the course of her parturition and her father expired in a car crash accident.

Korobi is betrothed to Rajat Bose who hails from, a well-off Bengali kinfolk. The unexpected demise of Korobi's beloved grandfather on her betrothed night, the subdue of her grandmother eventually pursued by the scandalous disclosure that her dad might be yet living, opens up a mysterious and indecisive past in her life. She realizes the complexity in commencing a new life with Rajat and determines to unearth her true identity. Korobi thinks of her mother at every phase of her life right from her engagement till her quest of self. The solution for her individualism lies in the United States, beyond the ocean, where her mother Anu once had lived a few years as a scholar. Her search for her father overwhelms many of her aspirations about herself. Her identity gets withered due to her mother's

migration, culturally as well as geographically. Korobi after undergoing distress and anguish in her life, realizes that she has to do away with her subservient and passive attitude to emerge as a secure, self-reliant and audacious woman. She takes a voyage to America in seek out of herself. In the article, "Model Minority and Martial Violence", Margaret Abraham expounds, "ethnicity, gender, class, race, and citizenship are important aspects in the construction of self and community for South Asian immigrants in the United States" (198). Lisa Lau makes an interesting observation about self-identity in South Asian Literature:

Identity is one of the most common themes in South Asian Literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding . . . Women writing in South Asia write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations, diasporic women's writing has different characteristics . . . Women of diaspora, instead almost always, without exception; testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities.(252).

Though Korobi's would be mother-in-law and fiancé Rajat pressurize her to get married and not to embark on any journey to America, she prefers to pay heed only to her inner consciousness and goes to America. She ponders to herself, "It would be cowardly, for the sake of security to relinquish this chance to find and know the man my mother loved so deeply that she couldn't give him up though it tore her heart in two. It would be a betrayal of me to go through life pretending to be what I am not" (OG 78). For Korobi it is furthermore momentous to determine her alterity than embrace her identity as the Bose family's daughter-in-law. Though aforementioned dilemmas are traumatic, they in turn furnish circumstances for inciting a novel identity.

Divakaruni gives an exceptional penchant to the individuality of Korobi who begins an expedition on her own to discover her father. Being a genuine feminist she placates her preference beyond the claims of the patriarchal humanity. Korobi experiences alike torment as perceived by the immigrants when they are uncovered to the unknown land initially frayed in-between both the worlds. She undergoes identity crisis during her dwelling in America. For a petite period she endures the life of an immigrant woman but experiences identity crisis scores of times. This voyage accords her a trans-cultural revelation turning out to be a cross-cultural expedition. It also helps her discard the entire unwanted burden that she carried earlier as a part of her persona. There is a very significant instance in which Korobi displays her strength of character by revealing that she alone has inclusive rights over her body. In the words of Jasbir Jain, "Indian women writers adopt the strategy of foregrounding the female body as they try to handle the problems of communicating a cultural inheritance and creating space for construction or recovery of self" (139). The protagonists' performance in this context can be taken as avowal of selfhood and uniqueness. To promote funds for her journey to California she sells her thick black hair. She indulges in absolute concern over her life and opines, "It's my hair" (OG 178). She has done something that is against the old tradition of the whole family. She metamorphoses into an audacious, tough and independent woman, from being a docile Korobi geared up to face all challenges in life. She exhibits her autonomy and tries to establish her identity both in her family and at home. In the book, "Location of Culture" Homi K. Bhabha expresses the notion of hybridity pertinent in diaspora. The immigrants' identity in any ethnicity is endangered by the mores of the unknown nation. The progression in acculturation is one sided as they experience dislodgment and repositioning along with an emotion of trounce. It's also not a lucid alteration but in turn augments into hybridity tarnishing diverse phases of acculturation. The author presents the protagonist as a self-determining and self-assured woman who earns resolutions entrenched on the requirements for her living in America.

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Ultimately, she meets Rob Lacey, her father, from whom she gets to know the fact that he is an African-American and a personality who loved his wife dearly. He narrates to Korobi about his trip to India in seek of his wife and daughter and how he was notified regarding their demise by her grandparents. Getting to know that her father is an African-American she feels vulnerable and is traumatized by the fact that she is an unlawful child. She narrates this news to her grandma, and surmises that, "when she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees her skin, hair...everything differently". Worried of her original identity being a half-black, the protagonist contemplates to herself, "Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to rather live with this profound shame" (246).

Korobi becomes engrossed by Vic who apprehends and aids in each and every one of her accomplishments throughout her stay in America. She is allured to carry on her life along with him as he acknowledges her. Being an immigrant she believes that she can acquire a novel identity in America as life with him will undeniably be appealing. She has an option either to reside in America as she is fond of the place or return back to India. She opines, "I'll have to make my new resolution: Vic or Rajat, America or India"(OG 218). But she returns back to her homeland as an enhanced individual defying her temptations realizing what is right for her. Korobis' faithfulness for her fiancé, the morals that she acquired from her grandparents and numerous beliefs about being an Indian endorses her to return back to her homeland. She achieves sagacity of fulfilment.

At the same time, it is also perceived that though Korobi experiences acclimatisation due to the situations, she does not thrive in reclaiming her love by liberating her from the maze of identity crisis being the striking *Oleander* that her mother sought her to be. She perceives that one's own sense of identity is far superior to all social and cultural dogmas. She achieves a sense of accomplishment. This is the driving force which prevents her from breaking down after desolated by Rajat. Both the beliefs of double consciousness and multiculturalism conclude in shortcomings and jeopardize the potential of migrants. Divakaruni in an interview says, "Actually though I think of my female protagonists having both strengths and weaknesses, they are yet complex characters. They often make wrong decisions. This is as true of Korobi in *Oleander Girl*. Perhaps what distinguish my character are their valour and spirit and a certain stubbornness which enables them to keep going even when facing a setback. I think it developed organically as I wrote but it also came out of a wish to portray women as powerful and intelligent forces in the world". (The Times of India May 6, 2013).

The humanity of patriarchy is time and again observed bestowing restricted scope for women liberation in assured outlooks despite the fact that there is a progressive milestone in the field of art, science, literature and technology. Korobi takes a decision to pursue her higher studies and her grandmother feels astounded by her alteration. The protagonists' trans-cultural knowledge transforms her to an empowered woman. The families resolve and patch up over a period. Rajat and Korobi's nuptials ceremony takes place. The fact that Korobi's intention not to betray the Bose's family comes into light. Her zealous affection and excellent temperament for Rajat makes the Bose's family to recognize her identity as Bimal Roy's granddaughter and her alterity as the offspring of an African-American father.

Korobi's departure to America makes her strong and progresses her uniqueness as a self-confident girl. The transcultural voyage gives her revelation to the customs of the Western and the Eastern cosmos life which makes her further plausible. The edifying conflict she encounters in America makes her authoritative as a woman. The myth of the protagonist's expedition is considered to have incredible significance from the Jungian perspective which relates the journey's physical aspect to the

psychological processes that individuals need to endure in their lifetime to reach the 'destination' – namely, psychological wholeness, a complete "individuation". (Jung 275). Divakaruni's challenge to the traditional gender-bias expectation of Indian men is also overpowered in this novel. Through this novel she provides a multifaceted site upon which the dynamism of women and their self-governing success are emphasized. Korobi, not only accomplishes self-determination but also becomes an aid to Rajat and his family.

Empowerment denotes the escalating mystical, political, communal, or fiscal asset of humankind. Time and again it comprehends the empowered individuals' self-assurance in their personal dimension. Korobi is not feeble like her mother Anu. She proves to be unlike her combating against her enchantment. As an Indo-American woman, she triumphs as an individual, as a member of a new community and as an Indian woman. The pursuit for identity forges Korobi towards her self-discovery.

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