



A Quest for Her Roots: A Study of Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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“*Oleander Girl* is a riveting and powerful exploration of family secrets, betrayal, love, and ultimately, the search for self. Divakaruni paints colorful characters on a rich tapestry of modern India, all still haunted by the past.”

(*New York Times*)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a modern novelist, whose stories bring forth the social issues such as racism, gender bias, generation gap in the contemporary Diasporic literature. Her stories are set in the backdrop of India and the USA, with an impact of the recent historical events. Divakaruni with her Indian background has the advantage of having the deep understanding of Indian culture and place of woman in society. Her writings bring out the travails of women in contemporary world. Her lead characters are females with strong personalities, and are usually immigrants from India to the USA. While on one hand they have the psychological shackles of the Indian conservative society, and on the other they face the challenges of racism and non-acceptance in America. They all struggle to find their identities and to achieve their rightful places both internally and externally. Her latest novel – *Oleander Girl*, is portrayal of Korobi, an orphan girl in Calcutta, coming of age, and discovering herself. This story narrates Korobi's endeavor to find out her roots. Divakaruni in this saga speaks for a young woman who leaves her native land, India for America on a search that will transform her life.

“A many - faceted story of discovery, *Oleander Girl* is a part mystery, part search, but mostly the story of a young girl finding herself and deciding where she belongs.” (Seattle Times)

Korobi, a Bengali word meaning Oleander, wonders why her mother names her after a plant which is beautiful but poisonous. Divakaruni portrays her as an ordinary girl who is Impulsive and thoughtful. She is simple and intelligent which makes her stand out. She falls in love with

neo rich Rajat, a successful and wealthy man, and is engaged to him. Usually, that is the happy ending, but not for a socially cognizant who came to know the truth about her father at a crucial juncture of her life. Her stern yet loving grandfather dies unexpectedly. He hides the truth about her parents from Korobi in all her life and forces his wife also to do so, but due to some inner impulsion her grandmother reveals the truth and everything change in Korobi life. She sets out for her journey in quest to get the truth about her parents and her birth. She leaves behind all her happiness, to find out about her father and herself to USA, a xenophobic country post 9-11 and through an India torn by Godhra riots. Like a conventional Divakaruni protagonist, Korobi also goes through a sea change in her personality and faces many challenges, both internal and external. The story of *Oleander Girl* takes us through the thought process, a negotiation between the lore of desires and consequences of surrendering yourself to them.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to describe the concern of Divakaruni for modern youth and to show how her latest novel *Oleander Girl* inspire them to take stand for right things in life. The theme of the novel also advocates the fact that we should leave our comfort zone and stand up for what we believe in. Through the portrayal of Korobi, Divakaruni wants to render her message for today's youth that we should possess courage to accept the reality of our identity.

The story in *Oleander Girl* is woven around Korobi, an orphan girl, brought up by her grandparents with over possessed love. She is a headstrong and charismatic young Indian woman coming to terms with her life and trying to find herself in post 9/11 America. Korobi is an attractive girl brought up by her grandparents in a traditional Hindu way. She belongs to a renowned family in Calcutta, even the road on which they have their house is named after her great grandfather, Tarak Prasad Roy. He is quite conservative and traditional, and he provided Korobi an extremely protected environment. Korobi loves her grandparents, respects them in every possible way. She imbibes the traditional values, and did not have much exposure to the way of life of the youngsters in the city. Her family background, her intelligence, and her way of upbringing give Korobi an aura of a perfect traditional girl. When Rajat meets her at the party thrown by Mimi, a common friend to both Rajat and Korobi, he is fascinated by a girl who is traditional, belonging to a good family and different from others. Rajat is a neo rich, outgoing and popular amongst his friends. He is given to the club culture of the city, drinking and a wasteful life. After his breakup with Sonia, an extremely rich stubborn girl, he falls for Korobi

instantly. He is fascinated by her classy background, which is in quite a contrast from his. When Rajat meets her at the party thrown by Mimi, a common friend to both Rajat and Korobi, he is fascinated by a girl – traditional, belonging to a good family, who is different from others. Very soon Rajat and Korobi are engaged with blessing from both the Bose family and the Roys. Just after Korobi's engagement her grandfather expires and her grandmother tells her the truth that her father is alive and is in the USA.

Korobi has lived a cocooned life, protected by her grandfather at every step. She is sent to boarding school for education, where she is shielded from the outer world. She misses her parents and longs for them as a child. She wants to live like other normal girls in town but her grandparents are too conservative to allow that. She thinks about her mother predicament, which, she knows, is also true for her; coming from her predestined, predictable life, my mother would have been amazed by a man like him. (OG 215) She knows that her grandparent love her and want to do what is best for her. When her grandfather expires, her distress is aptly captured by Divakaruni. Grandfather exited my life like a bullet, leaving a bleeding hole behind. (OG 48)

Korobi has imbibed traditional values but at the same time she has an independent personality. This exhibits for the first time when her grandfather decides the date for her marriage without consulting her. She cringes, she decides to take it on with him, and she does. Again on her engagement party, when she decides to wear a trendy dress, Bimal is furious. He goes on to compare the dress to that of a prostitute. But she stands up for herself, and decides to wear the dress. She makes her own decisions. She respects elders, but at the same time she is not able to give in to their unreasonable demands. She never gives herself to the wasteful ways of the vain youngsters. She is committed to her studies. She is directed. When she goes to America, she does not fall to the pleasures that America offers. When Vic proposes to Korobi, her obligations and traditional values are accentuated.

“How could I explain to him all the obligations that fettered me because I was the granddaughter of Bimal Roy, barrister, of 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road? Because-like my mother-I had made certain promises? (OG 170)

Korobi has discovered a letter from her mother to her father, full of love, but never sent. Therefore, Korobi herself sets out for a quest to find her father. Despite everyone else's advice, Korobi decides to search for her father and with her determination she finds her father, and along with him the truth about her parents. Her father is an Afro-America, and her parents never married. She is shocked but quickly composes herself. She decides to tell the truth to her in-laws

about her birth. But her in-laws find out the truth before she is able to tell them. They question her integrity. She goes back to her house and immerses herself in academic and household work. Soon her fiancé and in-laws realize the truth, and accept Korobi.

During her quest, she encounters many problems. She has faced the real, cruel world. She is controlled, and focuses solely on searching for her father. She has an inner strength and confidence that comes out when she faces difficult situations. She has been protected and guarded by her grandparents all her life, hence, initially she finds it thorny but she composes herself and moves forward.

Korobi had hired Desai, a private detective, to help her search her father. She knows that her mother went to University of Berkeley, and her father, whose first name is Rob, met her mother there. She also has an old photograph of her mother with her friend. Desai advertises it in an Indian newspaper in the USA that anyone who comes up with any information about Anu Roy, Korobi's mother, will be adequately rewarded.

Korobi has little to pursue, but she is determined. Desai gives her three leads –one in Boston and two in California of the people named Rob who had been in the University of Berkeley at the same time as her mother. She does not give up when he is short of money in New York. Paucity of funds does not deter Korobi. She goes with limited money, and stays with unfriendly Mitra. She is not afraid; she has taken on the situation as it comes. She is committed to finding truth about her father; she has come this far away from her own people. When she runs out of money, she decides to sell her hair to pursue her search. She has changed her perspective. She thinks like an immigrant and her every action is directed towards her quest. She even cuts her hair;

This seems like a small sacrifice, but for a traditional girl whose marriage is fixed, this is a big step. But for Korobi, it comes naturally; she boldly goes ahead and gives up her hair for her dream. (OG 94-95).

Korobi is taking every chance to get any clue for her father. She decides to meet Mariner alone at his home though she knows that it would be risky. True to her apprehensions Mariner tries to take advantage, seeing her alone, but she does not panic. She faces him bravely, and ultimately her valor saves her. Even then she does not give up and continues to pursue her search for her father.

Korobi's biggest strengths are her value and ethics. Her ability to stand by her convictions in the face of adversity is admirable. When Sarojini tells her the truth about her parents, she is devastated and decides to find out the truth. Her life seems settled, she loves Rajat, she likes Boses, everything is planned, and even the marriage date is fixed. Her pursuit of truth might jeopardize everything, yet she decides to go against tides.

Her thoughts are - "It would be cowardly, for the sake of security, to relinquish this chance to find and to know the man my mother loved so much" (OG 78).

But she does not want to go to a family who respects her for her lineage, and take that respect all her life when it is based on falsehood. She thinks that she cannot - "...pull the blanket of status quo over myself, and dwindle into a wife." (OG 217)

She decides to tell Rajat and later Jayashree. She is ready to face the repercussions but does not want to give in to the safety of the fallacy. Even later when she finds that her father is Afro-American and that her parents never got married, she decides to tell all the truth to the Bose family. She does not want to live a life based on lies.

Korobi is a perfect example for modern girls. She is educated and confident, and she has conviction of her ideas. She stands for courage, for truthfulness and for determination.

She convinces Rajat for her pursuit to discover her roots Rajat. He was not ready for this earlier but he also bows down to see her determination. Divakaruni has presented him as a typical new rich guy, living a wasteful life. He is happy in his friend circle enjoying his life in the city. He had a serious relationship with Sonia, at least he was serious. He lived a wasteful life with Sonia, drinking and going to clubs. When he discovers Sonia's flippant nature, he is devastated and then Korobi enters his life. He falls for simple and intriguing Korobi. He loves Korobi for her traditional upbringing, her different way of life and her guarding grandparents.

He is caring and loving. He loves his parents, adores his sister. His love for Korobi is selfless. He is popular in his friends, and is quite jovial. The servants also like him for his generosity. Rajat, deep in his heart, respects Indian traditions. He likes and respects her grandparents Sarojini and Bimal. He likes to talk about the history of the family, the story of the old house. Sarojini and Bimal recognize this, and adore the boy.

Rajat is sensible. He is worldly and does not pretend to be too liberal. He does not get worldly wisdom in the way of doing the right thing. When Korobi comes to him with the truth of her lineage, he accepts her, but does not want her to pursue the matter further. He is not

idealistic, and does not go all the way to proactively seek the truth. But when Korobi is adamant about finding the truth, he helps her.

Rajat is, like any ordinary man is jealous but rational. He is worried about sending Korobi to the USA all alone. He is jealous when Korobi tells him about Vic and about being alone with him. He does not like it. But when his mind pacifies, he listens to the reasoning. And when he finds out that Korobi's father is Afro-American and her parents were not married, he only allows himself to be carried away by the situation because of his jealousy. His anger and distrust of Korobi is ephemeral. When he discovers the truth from Desai that Korbi always wanted to tell him the truth face to face, his natural love for Korobi revives. Rajat is responsible and dependable. On his engagement day, when they hear about Korobi's grandfather's illness, he takes control of situation and takes Korobi to hospital, provides her emotional support. He takes charge of the work when Korobi's grandfather expires. He works hard to help family with their financial situation.

He gives up life of vanity and dedicates himself to the work. He does not run away from the situations. When he deals with the situation in the workshop he is decisive, thought inexperienced. Even with the ugly fall out, he does not run away and bravely faces the situation. He thinks - "me— but I have to show the workers that I'm man enough to face them." (OG 156) Rajat comes out a very likeable character. He is a next door rich boy, who is not idealistic but rational. He is caring and reasonable. He loves his family, and stands up to take charge when the situation demands.

Rajat comes out a very likeable character. He is a next door rich boy, who is not idealistic but rational. He is caring and reasonable. He loves his family, and stands up to take charge when the situation demands. Divakaruni portrays Rajat as a normal person, who is good at heart but, maybe he does not have Korobi's strength to proactively seek truth. But he does support Korobi when pushed for it. In Sonia, another character, Divakaruni portrays a rich brat, spoiled by her luxurious life and her can-get-anything attitude. She is drunk with power of her money, always used to getting her way. She is a cadre of the rich youth whose only purpose in life is to waste money and time - "The default Sonia is drama and tantrums, rushing from party to party, adventure to adventure, a constant bungee jumping." (OG 200)

She takes everything for granted. When Rajat spurs her, she cannot accept it. She stalks Rajat and her family. She tries hard to get him back in her life. And when everything fails, she

does not hesitate to harm Rajat. Divakaruni lays down an example of what not to do in life through Sonia.

Oleander Girl is a story of a simple girl who discovers herself as she pursues the truth of her life. It's about the basic convictions and values that drive the behavior of a person when faced with difficult situations. They drive, motivate, and keep a person on the right path. As it happened with Korobi, the education and her core values, dictate her actions when she is at cross-roads of life. She knows that her future is at stake, but she is not prepared to trade her conscience for her happiness. Despite Sarojini's advice and Rajat's coercion, she does not hesitate for a moment to take her own stance.

Divakaruni has presented Korobi as a picture of today's youth. Today's youth has a practical approach towards life. They want change in life but cannot muster courage to take action. They always talk about the attitude of society, religious and political issues and usually get quite agitated discussing their predicaments. Well, it seems, the discussion is not the means but the end. Apparently, no actions accrue from this verbal outbursts, they just threw up hands in air in despair about the things that cannot condone, they comprehend everything, they acknowledge that things are reprehensible, but they leave unfazed, without any feeling of guilt or irresponsibility for their inaction. Being vocal for wrong things is not enough, need of the hour is to act for the change we require. Divakaruni's characters have that courage to leave their perfect life for a greater good, in search of truth.

While history is about learning from past and science to make sense of the world, literature is about looking inside us, comprehending our relationships and interactions with the society in which we live. Divakaruni's strong characters make us think. Divakaruni renders a strong will power to Karobi, and that's why she has enough valor to fulfill her venture successfully. Through Korobi Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* leaves a message that to live with truth is the most significant thing in life, and to get this truth one has courage to face troubles in life. One should not throw up hands in air in despair about the things they cannot bear but muster courage to turn things to their accord.

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