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## Representation of Diasporic Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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**Abstract**--This paper examines the representation of diasporic identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* from the perspective of contemporary critical approaches to diaspora. It is argued that moving beyond its preoccupation with the poetics and politics of colonialism, postcolonial literature is making forays into diasporic dynamism to the extent that contemporary fiction within its ambit can be seen as literature of diaspora to a great extent. Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* focuses on the issues pertaining to identity formation and identity crisis. National, religious, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds that work as the determiners of one's identity have been problematized in the novel. In the process, the idea of plurality embedded in one's identity instead of the illusion of any singular identity has been suggested. The concern with identity politics is dominant in these literary texts against the backdrop of cross-cultural, inter-racial, multi-ethnic and transnational communication and interaction.

**Keywords**---Identity, Cultural, Diaspora, Plurality, Racial, Ethnic.

### Research Paper

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the most influential Indian Diasporic writer, is a product of forces which are eastern and western. She genuinely accepts the interplay of these two forces, one inner and the other outer, one central and the other peripheral. In the course of such interplay, both the forces acquire prominence, and both contribute to the construction of an identity which may term - postcolonial. It is a cross-cultural scenario where, through her fiction, the diversity of Indian English literature is displayed. She is almost like exploring her own world and society but creating thereby a universal appeal of affectionate closeness through her writing. She focuses on the predicament of immigrants, specifically Indian women's infirmities of dislocation, loneliness, exile,

bewilderment, and identity crisis.

Divakaruni's *The Oleander Girl* is a provocative novel about identity. Doubt and uncertainty as well as crisis in identity are some major issues examined in the novel. About the novel, where the issue of identity crisis gives way to identity-quest, Divakaruni says in her interview given to Suneetha Balakrishnan that the novel is of great significance to her:

...it symbolizes for me the hero's journey in search of self. It brings together America and India. It examines religious violence. It underlines the importance of loving coexistence in today's multicultural world. It is also important to me because it explores the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and that is a relationship that has meant a lot to me. ("Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," 2)

The novel, *Oleander Girl*, is set in a time during which both India and America were going through national and political crisis. In 2002, the Godhra riot had broken out creating a situation of religious tension not merely in Gujarat but affecting many parts of India at least indirectly. At the same period "war on terror" (Janna Evans Brazier's *Diaspora: An Introduction*, 196) had been declared by American government as a reaction to the terror created by the Twin Tower blast.

The lives of the immigrants in America were violated with the attacks of suspicion, segregation and rejection in almost every sector. Racism was revived and the civil lives of the South Asian immigrants were in trauma and trouble. *Oleander Girl* mentions these events as passing references, focusing not essentially on those events but their remote impacts on the Roy and the Bose families and people connected with them in Kolkata and elsewhere.

Divakaruni comments on the national crisis by fusing its impact with the individual and familial context of the Roys and the Boses. As the writer's purpose is to uncover a family history inscribed with national, cultural, racial and ethnic conflict, she has not invested much space on discussing the cause of the religious riot and its subsequent impacts. However, she mentions its scattered impacts in the course of the fictional characters' dialogue and communication with each other. In the Hindu families of the Roys' and the Boses', the issue of the religious riot is raised only occasionally with various other relevant discussions on the naming of the city of Kolkata from its "anglicized version" (21) or on the attack on the American centre. The discussion exposes their biased views as being Hindu by religion they target only the Muslim for all the clashes, conflicts and its resultant tragedy: "... those Muslims. A violent lot" says Bimal Roy and asks Mr. Bose, "Did you hear about the incident on the train today in Gujarat? All those Hindu pilgrims they burned to death?" (21). Bimal Roy's attitude reflects the singular affiliation of religion to be the only determiner of a Muslim's identity.

Considering the time frame and setting of the novel, it is predicted that the religious minority would free fabricated hatred and would be targeted with discrimination, generating further hatred. The problematic diagnosis of identity had become the only applicable yardstick for segregation of South Asian immigrants in America post 9/11. In *Oleander Girl*, although Divakaruni

predominantly emphasizes the central character Korobi's quest for her patrilineal identity, she also opens up scopes for reflecting on the conditions of the traumatized immigrants in America terrorized both by 9/11 and the after effect of the event.

The immigrants on the basis of their national, religious and ethnic identity have been treated violently in America, so much so that many immigrants considered encountering a journey back home. Seema in *Oleander Girl* too considers living "among her own kind" (102) when she is no more welcomed in the host society. Detention, physical and mental assault, interrogation, search without warrant were some of the common measures to tackle any kind of terrorist activities inside the United States. Divakaruni presents the intensity of such a situation through Mr. Mitra's story of detention. Mr. Mitra's detention like that of Tariq's father's is without any justifiable reason. He is detained when he went to complain about the ransacking in the Mumtaz to police. Neither did Mitra say, nor could Seema know, where "they'd taken him, or what they had exactly done with him during detention. When he returned, haggard-eyed, Mitra refused to talk about it. Those two days had changed him, made him bitter and silent the way he'd never been" (102). The detention and ill-treatment have most possibly been because of his identity as an Indian. His national identity before the incidence of 9/11 hardly impairs any social and cultural transactions as long as he applies the strategy of adjustment. Starting from acquiring visa to running and managing the business in the city of New York successfully, Mitra's professional skill and other related aspects of his identity which till now have been considered as significant both by the employers of his homeland and the customers and business dealers of the hostland are now put to question after 9/11.

The issues like the Godhra riot and the 9/11 that influenced few characters in the novel could have been given the prime focus but the writer's concern is more with her central figure's quest and concern with identity. In "*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Oleander Girl Captures the Complex Real India*," Shyam K Sriram observes,

In a post-Godhra India, it would have been easy enough for Divakaruni to make Hindu-Muslim tension the center-piece of this book - a strategy that many Indian authors have employed in the last decade to push for their own agenda. Refreshingly, Divakaruni does not adopt this path; rather, the riots and subsequent tension across India are visited occasionally to make the events between the Bose and Roy families appear to be more realistic. (Web)

A study of the novel appropriates Sriram's comment as Divakaruni focuses more on the affairs of Korobi's life than on the issue of Gujarat riot. Travelling to America, Korobi confronts different avenues where lies the "fleeting multiplicity of possible identities" (Hall's "*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*." 598). While in India, Korobi never had to assert her ancestral background as a determiner of her identity. However, in post 9/11 America, Korobi's national and cultural identity is the basis on which she faces discrimination. While boarding flight she notices the strictness of security check meant particularly for the Indians and other South Asians and feels that "it's not fair" (183). The truth is that "flying while brown in post 9/11 America" cost more than Korobi could assume. It saddens her on personal ground because the loss and destruction caused by the terrorist attack

saddens her more when she is physically present in that place. While watching the disaster from distance on television, she felt only a mild sorrow but being physically there in the disaster affected area and experiencing its subsequent impacts Korobi is more worried and anxious. The worry is not merely for herself and the people she has seen suffering but for the edifice of the towers themselves, because, to her, “they had been icons of another world, tiny and distant and beheaded already. In New York, their absence saturates the air “she breathes (101). This feeling, however, is not a sign of empathy for the natives of America as they could not believe relying on the immigrants’ feelings at a time when “All Eastern things are associated in people’s mind with 9/11” (185).

In *Oleander Girl*, Korobi’s little knowledge about her parents conferred on her by her grandparents hardly impacts her being till her grandfather is alive. It has been the natural pangs and discomfort of an orphan girl who despite missing her parents has accepted their absence as an unavoidable truth. This phase of faith and belief in her identity as an orphan girl brought up by her grandparents in one of the reputed and honourable families of Kolkata lasts only temporarily. She starts searching for her identity from that crucial point when Sarojini, her grandmother, reveals the truth about her patrilineage. The writer through Korobi’s character has questioned the fixed, coherent and stable sense of identity. The phases through which Korobi passes, unveil the changing and decentralized concept of identity where the identity of an individual cannot be said to be limited in the fixed notion of any category.

Korobi, the granddaughter of Bimal Roy, is going to tie her knot with Rajat, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Bose. Korobi, till the death of her grandfather, knew that she had been orphaned at birth. Her mother died during child birth and her father “died months before her mother” (52). Her identity as the descendant of an esteemed and revered Bengali family in Kolkata appears to be unified and unchangeable, although she longs for her dead parents. This particular attitude to one’s own self can be substantiated in Hall’s argument as he puts it, “If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self about ourselves’ (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 598). In Korobi’s case, the comforting narrative about herself is told by others, the others being her grandparents.

Korobi did not suffer from any identity crisis till she considered the knowledge given to her about her identity to be constant and stable. However, the crisis arises when Sarojini reveals after the death of her grandfather: “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). The truth of her father being alive makes Korobi sees her life in two different ways: feeling jubilant at the truth and getting inquisitive about unfolding the truth further. It would in turn open up new possibilities to determine the transformation in her identity. Her journey of life thus takes a new turn, venturing not only new circumstances but a new country altogether. At Rajat’s reluctance to find her father out just before their marriage, Korobi says, “You want me to go through my whole life with my in-laws pretending that my father is dead? That he was Indian? Are you ashamed of who I am?” (73) This very question leads her overcome all obstacles and she bravely sets out for finding her patrilineage.

Discovering her identity has been a devastating experience for Korobi as she says, "My entire notion of who I am was shaken up. I felt betrayed. Unworthy" (273). Korobi unfolds layer after layers of her identity. First, she comes to know that her father is alive and an American. Secondly, she discovers her father as an African-American. Thirdly, she unveils that she is illegitimately born of her parents. Whereas the first and the second layers, despite giving her shock, fail to break down her indelible spirit for the search of her identity, the third layer crushes her into pieces. She suddenly starts feeling "ashamed" of herself and contradicts her previous self. She came to America to find answers of "too many unanswered questions" (85) despite everyone's reluctance. Korobi feels, "Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame. I'm furious with everyone - my mother, my father, my grandfather" (246). Divakaruni posits Korobi in such a juncture that she discovers a whole new identity of herself: "My whole world has been turned upside down all over again. Today I was looking at myself in the mirror, my skin, my hair - I'm seeing everything differently now. Every detail has taken on a new meaning" (226). Korobi was unaware of the changes that would redefine her identity as a whole.

Korobi's search of her father's identity and thereby her own identity assumes to be, in Hall's words, a "moveable feast" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 598). Her identity is formed and transformed at different levels when she envisages some or the other fact that would determine who she is or what her identity is. Divakaruni makes Korobi realize that a "fully, unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 598). Moreover, the changing phases in Korobi's life and her surroundings unfold the fact that identity is a complex issue. Korobi, at the end of the novel, shows the spirit of courage to accept the "other stories" and learns to live her namesake - "beautiful but also tough" (253).

Korobi's struggle to find and create her own identity at the face of all odds underscores the idea of emancipating tone which the women of the traditional and conservative Roy family could not afford to achieve. She emerges out to be the connective cord to implant an assertive voice in the other two women preceding her in the family. Sarojini, Anuradha, Korobi - the three women in a line show gradual transition in the matter of identity formation. The transitional phase has its bearing upon time, space and above all an urge to break-free the constraints that pull back and fasten the individual to an all engulfing homogeneous notion of identity.

In *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen argues that one's identity is not a one-dimensional property owned by religious or cultural aspect. Rather one should recognize and give value to the different other aspects which can equally be the determiners of one's identity. He makes the argument that "The sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of our relations with others, such as neighbors, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens or followers of the same religion" (2). This sense generates a community feeling. However, along with an understanding of

inclusionism, the attitude of exclusionism involved in the recognition of identity is important. Because, the sense of identity giving rise to and substantiating a community feeling can “exclude many people even as it warmly embraces others” (2). Not merely the plurality of identity with its diverse implications should be a matter of concern but the choices one makes regarding the relative importance of the divergent loyalties and affiliations according to the given context are equally important. In *Oleander Girl*, the attitudes attached with community feeling as well as inclusionism and exclusionism in connection with identity formation find an argumentative ground.

Divakaruni, in different ways, has empowered her character Korobi. She goes through the changing phases of her identity accepting the upheavals with strength and courage. Through the character of Korobi, Divakaruni makes the point that the changing phases contribute to a flexible notion of identity. While multiple aspects of identity formation find their voice in *Oleander Girl*, the aspect of diasporic identity does not make a prominent presence. Although voyage to America and staying there for a period are encountered by two women of two generations and through these characters’ interaction, some other characters are introduced who are essentially diasporic in nature, the focus is not solely on the particularities of diasporic identity.

Korobi’s travel is time-bound although at the onset of the journey, she feels the uncertainty of returning: “Grandmother had once told me about the enchanted land. When people went there, they forgot the loved ones they had left behind. They forgot themselves too. No one returned from the country, although they were not unhappy there in their bewitchment. What if America turned out to be like that?” (92). The enchantment of the new land fails to hold back Korobi. On different occasions in the host-land, Divakaruni Shows Korobi giving in to memory, homesickness and nostalgia which are typical of Divakaruni’s immigrant characters.

To sum-up, it can be said in these contexts that the notion of identity is represented in this novel with the help of various parameters which suggest flexibility and multiplicity. National, religious, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds that work as the determiners of one’s identity have been problematized in the novel. The idea of plurality embedded in one’s identity has been emphasized in the process instead of the illusion of any singular identity.

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