



IDENTITY CRISIS AND INDIANESS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "OLEANDER GIRL :A NOVEL"

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ABSTRACT

The current paper aims to demonstrate the themes of Identity crisis, Indianess and other diaspora experiences dealt by the author in her novel *Oleander Girl*. Themes such as class conflict, religion, politics, exile, racism etc also jell up 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. Many of Indian rituals and traditions have been depicted in the novel, presenting Indianess in her writing. Therefore Indianness and Indian customs and mentality are studied and various such diasporic experiences are highlighted in the paper. Indian experiences, contemporary American life style, history, myth, and the challenges of living in a multicultural world is also scrutinized.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Indianess, Diasporic experiences

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A brilliant amalgamation of an author, an activist and a professor of creative writing, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American who appeared on the world literary scene during 1990. She has written poetry, short stories and novels. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni began writing poetry and eventually short stories and fiction as she was moved by the dual forces of pre-immigration and post-immigration conditions.

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."
(ChitraBanerjeeDivakaruni,pg.253)

In spite of being stubborn with independent thought and with consciousness about Self, Korobi hesitates to hurt or disobey him and her love for her grandfather makes her to be conscious about her traditional values and Indian tradition of accepting elders' decisions, though little unwillingly sometimes. This makes her mixture of contradictions – docile but confident. When she buys an "off the shoulder kurta in maroon chiffon with slim fitting pants" (18) she is scared of her grandfather's reaction. Being brought up by such grandfather who had been dead set against westernized culture and too much traditional. Divakaruni being a first generation diaspora writer is very well aware of old Indian rituals which have been performed in India since ages without questioning them. Many of such rituals and traditions have been depicted in the novel, presenting Indianess in her writing.

Banerjee is very much aware of class conflicts prevailed in India, which has been clearly presented in the beginning of the novel. Other than consciousness of class distinction, the author also demonstrates her responsiveness towards religionism. As first generation migrant, she very well knows how very small occurrences are enough to create friction and disturb the smooth functioning of the society. So a dispute arises at the warehouse owing to some news in the radio about Godhra, leading to bloodshed. In rage Rajat fires a Muslim

worker consequently leading to fury among the workers at the warehouse. Being in America she had minutely studied how people of different communities in India develop distrust among the other community when once they had been together. Riots develop after the Godhra incident stimulated the religious fury among the common people of both the races; workers who had been working together till now become conscious of the differences that separate them. When Mrs. Bose is chased by the Muslim workers, Asif her chauffeur comes to her rescue, but due to her own disbelief she distrusts him and hands over the responsibility of Pia to Shikha, her secretary. Simultaneously, the writer points out that honesty and devotion has nothing to do with class or religion. This is witnessed when the workers scold Asif for protecting Mrs. Bose: "Don't you realize they think of you

the same way as they do us...
cockroaches to be crushed
under their chappal when the time is right?"

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.211)

Asif undergoes the same pain on losing Pia; he gives up his job and joins the sheikh. But when Rajat and Pia are attacked he again saves their life. Therefore Oleander Girl lays a hand on the racial tensions in both American and India in the early 21st century. As mentioned, like in India, the prejudice against Muslims is also seen in America after the terrorist attacks of 2001 which spill over into the Indian community. Even Indians outside India show their prejudiced against Muslim community and has sustained the feeling of insecurity. Vice versa Indians in India too connect 9/11 attack and Godhra with Muslim community.

Other than class conflicts, Divakaruni is also found her awareness of Indian Patriarchal society, the novel is the best example of not only presenting Indianess in one sense but it comprises of each and every aspect of Indian society. Sarojani is shown to be a very obedient wife of Bimal Prasad Roy. She is the one who has long forgotten her individuality following the orders of her husband even hiding his lies to the world even the lie about the identity of her own son in law. She was very much conscious not to do so but she does that for the sake of her

husband. Patriarchy, a very notion of Indian society subdues Anu over love. The writer presents a real picture of Indian culture who does not allow its girls to choose what is right. Divakaruni consciously presents a real picture of Indian society and more than Korobi it is her mother who becomes victim of Indian concept of something doing wrong or right. She presents rudimentary, orthodox, patriarchal, conservative attitudes ruins a precious life, which separates a daughter from her parents and keeps a father away from his child for years. Anu Roy who becomes a quiet forever and her dismal experience creates a dreadful memory. He passively remains present in entire story. It is she who suffers from identity crisis and psychological alienation due to migration.

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 Banerji 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 colour believes to be from the Roys but the colour of her hair still confuses her. She is tattered between the Indian-ness and the western-ness. 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.

Bimal Prasad Roy has earned prestige and reputation in the society, procuring the precious cultural heritage and tradition. That was the reason Rajat's parents had agreed for his choice though Roy's family did not match with their rich, modern high status. Now that Korobi was an illegitimate daughter of an unknown father, her going to USA would bring out what more in store was making Rajat afraid. Rajat's fear again reveals the hard Indianess which considers family values and culture more than any other thing, even individual's own identity. She becomes stubborn with restless hope to find out her identity taking all risk of social as well as geographical arena. It was very difficult task for Korobi to find out her father in a foreign land without having his photograph and knowing only his first name i.e. Rob.

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. Dont abandon me and go to America!"

I want to say okay. I want it so badly, I can barely breathe but I cant. 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."

(Divakaruni, pg. 85)

Rajat's fear also reveals uncertainty of Korobi's returning to India as no one knows what would happen next. Neither Korobi nor Rajat nor her grandmother. Therefore no one wanted her to leave India. Nevertheless, consciousness and longing of her identity is so strong in her heart and mind that she manages to convince everyone though not happily.

Korobi promises to return India and marry Rajat. Though it has been noted that in America,

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 knows that her hair though is her own property; they are associated with all those who are in relations. Therefore she says,

"Belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée, to Papa and Maman Bose's daughter-in-law to be."

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.178)

But 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".

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.177)

She confronts various comments and expressions of people and their concerns over her decision. She faces mixed reactions as some of them support and the other criticize. Reaction of her friend Vic who supports her act by commenting,

"I like it. Makes you look modern and confident".(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.177)

This brings out modernity and westernized attitude in Vic being in America.

However at the same time, her friend Seema is shocked to see her short hair. Seema, being brought up in traditional Indian culture believes in the value of women's dressing intertwined in the cultural system and its traditions.

For her, appearance makes the acceptable member of Indian social system through her modest practices is the duty of a woman.

“Oh my God! What have you done! All your beautiful hair, gone! Does your grandmother know? Did your in-laws give you permission?” (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.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 Indianess and Americanized culture when she finds Mitra being impolite by not paying taxi fare, though he might have his financial constraints due to struggle for survival.

“Already I'm losing my Indian courtesies; I'm thinking in terms of survival, like an immigrant.” (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.94)

Divakaruni through her Indian characters, be they Indians or Indian Diaporas, makes efforts to reflect upon the broader facet of India and Indianness. That is the segment of Indian culture that she might know and love best. She expresses the nuances of the Bengali lifestyle and ways of thinking better than other cultures. In *Oleander Girl*, this is set in Kolkata, some in an ancient mansion, some in modern discotheques, or in historic Kolkata locations such as the Park Circus Cemetery. This depicts that she has been recollecting her memory of past which she had left behind far in India. We come across to traditions of India, customs and food habits as she gives scenes of ceremonies added with smells, spices and poojas.

“Sarojini hurries to arrange lamps, camphor holders, incense sandalwood powder, marigolds, large copper platters, fruits, milk sweets, rice grains, gold coins, and

multicoloured pictures depicting a pantheon of Gods.”

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg. 6)

While talking about Korobi's engagement ceremony at her grandmother's home, the writer confers about various rituals and rites that are performed as a part of Hindu traditions to avert the evil eye and bring luck and prosperity for the engaged couple. It can be noted that Divakaruni brings out Indians as superstitious who believe in dream interpretation, ghosts, magic, evil eye, etc. Sarojini also mentions the ritual of mustard-seed ceremony to avert the evil eye which Korobi should necessarily undergo before Korobi's in-laws arrive for engagement ceremony. One can witness a very superstitious India and Indians through such conversations and descriptions.

Therefore Indianess and Indian customs and mentality can be witnessed here even in diasporic writers who might be recalling India with such image which she might have had seen and been recalling. One of the most classic themes of Indian culture is presented at the very beginning of the novel. The novel starts with the description of typical Indian wedding and engagement ceremony. It is observed that Divakaruni talks about the fear and nervousness that go with marriage and relationships.

Love for Bollywood songs also takes place not only in setting of India but also in foreign land.

The author also makes us see that how Indians in foreign land live more like Indians, korobi finds this in Mitra's apartment which is above Karaoke bar, its windows plastered with gigantic Bollywood posters. She wonders,

“What a contradiction this apartment is! Noise from the karaoke bar below hits me in sudden blasts as guest enter and exist. Bollywood sings, nostalgic old favourites, the immigrant's longing to capture home. In India, I never cared for this kind of music, but now as I hear it, homesickness twists my insides”

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.97)

Similarly, mention of Indian food by diaspora characters also witnesses that how Indian food to creates space in foreign land along with the little

India they carry with them. They refer to Indian music, food, culture, ritual more when they feel nostalgic. Meticulous description of desi Indian food in American setting can also be seen in the novel.

“He brings me trays of food: rice and daal and Gujarati Karhi spiced with ginger, cooked by Desai’s cousin”

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg.214)

A large variety of some examples of food are deployed Korobi’s at the engagement ceremony and many other events in the novel. Therefore it is seen that the novel is full of Indian touches not only in food, but also with Indian culture, tradition and rituals and the Indian psyche, which is mentioned above and will be discussed further. Indian words are used repeatedly for instance karhai, dal, chapatti, khichuri, pau bhaji, chutney, chai, khadi, khandaani, goonda types, ma, chappals and a number of others.

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.

“I’m illegitimate? I whisper.....

I’m a ----- bastard?

I can’t come to terms with this new, shameful me.”

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg 245)

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 co-operate 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 Karobi 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.

Banerjee also presents open-mindedness of western culture on the contrary to Korobi’s fear. The conflict between old India with its strict caste system and customs surrounding marriage and honor and the new India struggling to modernize. This collide is seen between the Bose and Roy families and is mirrored also between Vic and Korobi in America. Vic who is very much western took the matter in a lighter manner as it was not very shocking in America. Again one sees Indian western attitude when Vic says,

“I know you’ve had a shock, but quit acting like you committed a crime! It’s not as terrible as you’re making it out to be, not these days”

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, pg 246)

To this, Korobi who has been brought up in a very cultured Indian family, replies,

“It is, where I come from”

Banerjee in her novel also considers identity of a person as subjected to social expectations. The demand of society and the need to follow the ways

of society towards the creation of individuals' identity and if it is to be found against social dogmas the individual herself finds it difficult to accept. The cultural displacement, which was experienced by both Korobi and Korobi's mother becomes more troublesome because of her dissatisfaction with their cultural values. The author has divulged the significance and role of female children in Indian society and their value as part of the social system. She brings out the fact that in India, family reputation is closely associated with the behaviour of the girl children and any violation of the expected norms by the girls would damage the reputation of the family, this is witnessed in case of Anu not being married without her father's permission and keeping identity of her own child at stake. Korobi's identity is entwined with the reputation of the family and the good old family name. As Korobi is the granddaughter of Judge Tarak Prasad Roy who had a street named after him, this identity shock reaches at the peak when Korobi finds her father to be a black man and not a white foreigner. In spite of being well-educated, literate, socially eminent members of society, Indians are shown to be racists. Both Bimal Roy and Boses find it difficult to accept a black man being related to family in any manner. This becomes clear when Anu visits her parents back in India during her pregnancy. She never discloses it to her father that the father of the child inside her belongs to an African-American Rob Lacey. In fact, later when Korobi herself discovers that her father is a black man she is advised by Sarojini for not letting this news out to anyone.

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."

(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pg. 218)

However, it is realized further that her deeply rooted memory of India and her imbibed traditionalism and Indianess brings her back to India and makes her choose the latter. Divakaruni is aware of every little incident that how one realizes and holds the sense of responsibility in India and

maneuvers his/her way accordingly. The writer expertly infiltrates the complex psychology of Indian women who in spite of dissolving them into another way of living seek peace in their own root which is based on personal experiences and memories. It has been seen that Divakaruni also demonstrates racism, which is affected to confront individual's own identity as well, to project India. Such deeply rooted racism influences one's way of thinking and individuality. Korobi who should have sensed peace after exploring her own self, on contrary she is wrecked at the revelation of who she really is. She is completely aware of Indian mentality which would look down upon to her original mixed-raced identity. She realizes at the end that real identity is beyond what the society, culture and religion have set for her. She worries of how to face people and how to make introduction of her real identity yet she has to make people around her accept such transition of her originality.

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 fulfilment. 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.
(Chitra Divakaruni, Pg. 288)

Conclusion

Every migrant is conscious about the other side of the experience yet he/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. A very meticulous description of various Indian rituals during engagement, wedding or any other routine day has been brought out in the novel. At the same time she also makes her reader well acquainted with Indian food, cities and songs as well giving a clear picture of real India. It is observed in the novel that Divakaruni has presented the glimpses of India of her memories through her characters, description of events and even through the presentation of patriarchy mentality

In addition to this, Identity Crisis is experienced by Korobi due to patriarchal society and migration of her mother to other land. Korobi have passed through different stages to achieve in their own way a sense of fulfillment. I have tried to analyze the elements of Indianess and identity crisis in the novel. I have come across the character of Indianess on almost every page of the book. It has been scrutinized that the novel revolves around the theme of Identity crisis of the main character which she suffers due to cultural mind set of Indian society of not accepting inter-religion marriage. Therefore, it can be recapitulated that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has very well knitted the theme of Indianness and identity crisis in *Oleander girl*, which comes out of her own diaspora experience. She

blends traditionalism as well as modern values in her novel which makes the journey easier.

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