

## Redefinition of Self and Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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**Abstract:** *Oleander Girl* is a coming of age novel in the best tradition, with a heroine who is both infuriating and endearing, and most importantly, brave. Having discovered a letter from her mother to her father, full of love but never sent, Korobi sets out on a quest to find her father. Along the way, she confronts enemies and finds helpers, faces temptation and despair, but in the end, overcomes all to discover what matters most. What is coming of age? Coming of age understands that the world does not revolve around you; that the world cannot be forced to conform to your version of it; that the adults you revered make mistakes; and that what endures is what you have given of yourself to others. Korobi's gift is the effort she makes to resolve her past with her present, and to overcome barriers erected both now and then.

**Keywords:** Woman, identity, patriarchy, power, hegemony, individuation.

The quest for female identity seems to be a soap opera, endless and never advancing. The concept of female identity provides a key to understanding the special qualities of contemporary writings by women. Identity as Erikson conceives it is both formed and manifested through social relationships. Female identity is a process. Although Erikson believes that both sexes pass through the same stages on their way to maturity, he also believes in basic biological and psychosocial differences between the sexes. In the realist view, "identities are both constructed and real." (Reclaiming Hau 153) Identities are constructed in the sense that they are constituted through theory-mediated interpretations of our experience. Identities are not arbitrary but are regulated by an extra-discursive "reality" that makes up our life situation. In her *Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Anatomy Theory*, Patricia Waugh writes:

The concept of a "woman's identity" functions in terms both of affirmation and negation, even within feminism itself. There can be no simple legitimation for feminists in throwing off "false consciousness" and revealing a true but "deeply buried" female self. (186).

Transformations in self-identity and globalization, are the two poles of the dialectic of the local and global in conditions of high modernity. Self and society are interrelated in a global milieu. Self-identity becomes problematic in modernity in a way which contrasts with self-society relations in more traditional contexts. The person with a successfully achieved sense of individual identity feels unique, whole, and coherent, although in pathological cases, identity formation may fail and the person suffers from 'identity diffusion'. *Oleander Girl* is a beautiful novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, published in 2013. Novel is a saga of

quest for identity. It depicts the search of a 17 year old girl, Korobi, orphaned at her birth. She grows in boarding school far from home and reunites with her maternal grandparents to get betrothed to a young, dashing, understanding young man Rajat, son of Boses. But just a night before her engagement ceremony, she sees her dead mother in a dream or hallucination, who wanted to tell her something but having no voice, she was unable to communicate. But the daughter got restless. As the story unravels, many hidden facts and truths related to life of Korobi come on the surface. This secret shatters Korobi's sense of self and thrusts her—against the wishes of her fiancé and his family—out of her sheltered Kolkata life into a courageous and troubled search, in the company of an attractive stranger, across post 9/11 America, a country that she finds at once dangerous, unwelcoming and alluring. What she discovers at the end forces her to make the most difficult choice of her life. Korobi understands that her mother wishes her to travel across the ocean to find something and when she awakes, she knows she must find out what the dream means. Korobi has only known Rajat for a mere three months, after meeting him at a party. Rajat had just broken up with Sonia, a girl who is rich and well connected. Korobi is quite different from Sonia who leads the life of a wealthy party girl. She comes from a traditional family and has led a protected life, having been sent to a boarding school. After the engagement ceremony, Korobi is stunned to hear her grandfather ask the Boses to agree to have Rajat and Korobi marry in three months. The Boses agree to this, but Korobi is furious with her beloved grandfather for not asking her first. In chapter One, grand-mother, Sarojini is dressing her grand-daughter, Korobi for betrothal ceremony. She gets amazed on seeing the curls in Korobi's hair: "Where she got those curls, Sarojini can't figure out. Everyone else in the family has stick-straight hair" (*Oleander Girl* 9). During ceremony, her grandfather showed his urge for Korobi's and Rajat's marriage at the earliest possibility and strilingly, he died at the same night when Korobi went for a reception party of her engagement. Here comes out the secret of her past which was also kept hidden from her by both grandparents. After her arrival from Boarding, she finds a letter written by her mother, Anu for her father:

You are in my thoughts every minute. I can't believe that only three months have passed since the last time I held you in my arms to say good-bye. I thought I could handle this separation, but I can't. Each day I ache for your touch. Each night I think of the way I felt complete in your arms. I talk to the baby inside me-I'm sure it will be a girl-about you all the time. I want to make sure our child knows how your love surrounds her even though you are so impossibly far away, in a whole different world... (*Oleander Girl* 3)

These loving lines written by her mother to her father are so endearing and close and intimate that she does not want to share them with anyone in the family. But she comes to know that her mother loved her father deeply. She also comes to know that Rajat's parents are so enchanted by the heritage of their family home and the temple built there which was also visited by Subhash Chanda Bose, which has its historical relevance.

Due to facing financial crunches in their New York Gallery, they want some funds by Mr. Bhattacharya, a candidate of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Party for the upcoming elections. No doubt, Rajat loves her but still she is used as a tool for financial success of the Boses. Her own grand-father whom she loves a lot, deprives her of her own identity. Identity which she is living is enforced on her because of the honour of the family. This is a challenge for this modern woman who wants to unravel the layers of mysteries lying in her being. Her mother, Anu, also becomes victim of the patriarchy prevalent in family. When she makes her own choice after living with a foreigner, she has to pay for this. Her father breaks all relations with her daughter because of her love for a foreigner. One day, he feels very excited after talking to her on phone. Reason being she wants to come back home for rest as she is pregnant and she is going not well. Father gets agreed but on one condition that she would not say anything about her husband. When she is about to leave back to New York, one day before, she has a heat up discussion with her father and she gets fainted. After this incident, she dies giving birth to Korobi but the grand-father declares the child dead and sends Sarojini with infant Korobi away to a village so that no one comes to know about what happened in the family. Divakaruni, who has examined the lives of Indian women living in the United States in works like *Arranged Marriage* and *Mistress of Spices*, introduces a cast of characters who defy their stereotypes. Korobi's ideal sacrificing grandmother has secrets of her own. The story gets twisted when Korobi learns that her father was a foreigner and not dead, still living in America.

With this realization of self, she wants to go to America to search for her identity. But she was opposed by everyone in the family, even by her fiancé to be. But she is so determined in her mission that despite so many financial crunches at both the families, she wants to search for her identity. For the Bose family, they are counting on the financial backing of an important Indian politician, Mr. Bhattacharya, for their failing art gallery in New York. When Korobi visits Rajat's mother to explain to her why she must go to America, her future mother-in-law explains just how important Mr. Bhattacharya is to her family's failing gallery business. His constituents are very traditional, frowning on those who marry outside the Hindu faith as Korobi's mother did and now as Rajat will be doing, since Korobi is half American. Rajat's mother, Maman advises Korobi against going to America to find her father, to marry her son quickly and then everything will blow over. They will still have the financial backing they so desperately need. But Korobi cannot do this. This would dishonor her mother, who was so terribly wronged by her own family. She offers to break off her engagement to Rajat, which infuriates both Mrs. Bose and Rajat. However, Rajat who is struggling to establish himself in his family's business and to cope with his ex-girlfriend's obsessive behaviour recommends that this is important to Korobi. So as a compromise, he offers her one month overseas to search for her missing father, which Korobi accepts. Korobi, with little knowledge of America and limited funds, flies to New York to begin a month long search for her long lost father. It is a search that will forever

change her life. With the help of an American man of Indian descent, Vic, who is working with the private detective Korobi hired, she is encouraged to continue when the situation is bleak. During this time both Rajat and Korobi will see their blossoming love tested to the limit, ties between family and friends strengthened and more family secrets uncovered. Later on when Korobi was in New York, working with Mr. Desai to find her father and tried to talk to many people who could have the slightest of the possibility of being her father, Grandmother, Sarojini came to know about the further link of the story from one old servant of the house that after their departure to village, father of Korobi came to Calcutta asking after mother and the kid but he was informed that both died. In order to confirm the fact, he also handed over a death certificate of both to foreigner.

Sarojini was startled to know this truth. How she was kept in dark by her husband. Simultaneously, story of Asif, driver of Boses, also runs. He feels so close to Piya Missy, sister of Rajat that he is not leaving this job though he has got many offers from Sheikh who is very generous towards Muslims and also sends them on Hajj if they want, at his own expenses. The novel also traces the effects of history on individual's life. Due to WTC attack by terrorists in USA, Boses's New York Gallery turns into losses aggravating the problems of people associated with it. For example, in India, Mrs. Boss suffers a lot and in America, Mitra and his wife Seema face disturbance in their marital life. They are not contented even when Seema is in family way. That's why, Mitra starts selling many paintings on his own because he has no faith left with his employers. Later, he also blackmails them by sending a photo of Oleander Girl with Vic, nephew of Desai, to Rajat. Seema and Mitra had to move to a different place because their flat was destroyed by police doubting them having a link in attack. Hindu-Muslim riots at Godhra also aggravated the problems in Bose's business. Factory workers turn fanatics, fighting each other. Rajat was unable to handle this crisis. Finally, Mrs. Boss was threatened by few factory workers to take back the Muslim worker in company. Things got worsened in individual's life being affected by history. America's past can even destroy an Indian's present and future. 9/11 mishap also destroyed the restaurant business of Vic as he mentions the same to Korobi:

It was a bad time all around... I remember how terrified and furious I felt right after. That's when my own restaurant business- which had been doing quite well-started going under. People just stopped coming. Nine-eleven injured the people of this city in so many ways- we still haven't been able to tally up the casualties..." (Oleander Girl 50)

In America, Korobi feels attracted towards Vic because of his Americanness, free-naturedness. She likes in him what is lacking in Rajat. There is a moment when she is driven towards him:

I feel his lips on my forehead, a moment's touch, like a falling petal. ...I keep my eyes closed. It takes all my willpower not to collapse into Vic's chest. I must be faithful. I will be faithful. Is it wrong for me to want this moment not to end. (*Oleander Girl* 162)

Korobi's search for a lost parent makes her meet many foreigners. One of them also tries to molest her. After that incident, she wanted to go back to India but Vic boosted her back for her mission. A cultural clash is highly pervasive in this novel. Big skyscrapers, industrialization of America stands at a stark contrast to highly populated Calcutta. In America, where air is also full of frankness and liberty, Korobi is inclining towards Vic. She confesses: "Somewhere deep inside, I must have felt this coming. My heart unfurls, a sudden red flower... Maybe I am already half in love." (Oleander Girl 217-18) Korobi feels quite oscillating between 'VIC OR Rajat, America or India.' (Oleander Girl 218) But finally, she makes her final choice with Rajat, India because of love. The day she talks to one of her mother's known at America, she gets surprised to come to know of Anu's life with her father. Anu went to International House to learn folk dancing on Fridays. There she met Korobi's father. That day she came back all flushed and happy.

Your mother had strong values. If she thought something was wrong, she wouldn't take part in it..... worst thing was, she knew what she was doing would bring pain to a lot of people she loved. I could see it tearing her apart. That's when she told your grandpa, hoping he'd understand... (Oleander Girl 221)

Finally with the help of Desai, Korobi comes to know about her father. His name was Robin Lacey. He was a history major at another university in the area. Korobi gets shocked to know that: "My father is not white. He's black.... He's an African-American." (Oleander Girl 224) When she shares this news with Sarojini. She gets all shocked because of the racial prejudices in India as well: "Sarojini wants to explain the complicated gradations of race prejudice in India, how deep its roots reach black." (Oleander Girl 225) Korobi says to Sarojini: "It matters so much to me that you're not upset because my father is black. That I am half-black myself." (Oleander Girl 226) His father is married, has three children. His wife is also Afro American, a nurse-practitioner at a local hospital. To her dismay, she finds that her parents never got married. She is an illegitimate child. She feels so embarrassed on finding this reality about herself. "Your mother and I were never married." (Oleander Girl 244) A beautiful scene is captured by Chitra of a father and his daughter. Korobi feels a single moment spent with her father:

My father takes my arm as he has touched me. I clasp his hand as a child might. How many times have I longed for this! He limps a little. Will we ever know the injuries that lie in our pasts? (Oleander Girl 244)

Anu stuck to the promise made with her father: "She took the promise she'd made in the temple-that she would not marry against her father's wishes-very seriously." (Oleander Girl 245) After knowing her identity, Korobi got restless and felt: "Some kinds of successes are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame..." (Oleander Girl 246). But she makes her choices. She wants to see the facial expressions of Rajat at the time of this truth revealing to him. The title of the novel is very significant. Korobi means oleander, a flower that is beautiful but poisonous. Anu named her daughter after that "because the oleander was beautiful-but also

tough.... Anu wanted that toughness for you because because she did not have enough of it herself.” (Oleander Girl 253) *Oleander Girl* is a coming of age novel in the best tradition, with a heroine who is both infuriating and endearing, and most importantly, brave. Having discovered a letter from her mother to her father, full of love but never sent, Korobi sets out on a quest to find her father. Along the way, she confronts enemies and finds helpers, faces temptation and despair, but in the end, overcomes all to discover what matters most. What is coming of age? Coming of age understands that the world does not revolve around you; that the world cannot be forced to conform to your version of it; that the adults you revered make mistakes; and that what endures is what you have given of yourself to others. Korobi's gift is the effort she makes to resolve her past with her present, and to overcome barriers erected both now and then. Korobi is a modern heroine a blend of Indian values and American frankness. She does not believe in mixed relationships. She wants to confess about her origin to her fiancé even at the cost of her desertion but she cannot compromise with a life where there is no love. That's why, when Rajat with her mother, suspect her that she was deliberately concealing her reality by not informing them on phone, she leaves off and moves on. She is a new woman who despite varied oppositions, wants to look for her identity and feels so connected to her mother by a dream and a love-letter written by her mother to her father. She is not at all a stereotyped female, born and brought-up in Calcutta with narrow mindedness. Rather, she is a woman, who knows the demands of her identity. She was ready to face any consequence in her mission to search for a parent. She even sells her long hair to continue her search. For her, quest for her identity is the biggest thing in life. But she never takes the advantage of this liberty. She controls her emotions for Vic. She being an Indian woman knows her cultural values. She is a broad-minded woman. Even after knowing the relationships of Rajat and Sonia, she never tries to confuse her relationship with suspicion. “She has travelled the world and chosen to come back home” (*Oleander Girl* 284). Chitra Banerjee is the master of story-telling. She does it effortlessly. In this novel, she adds a suspense which is maintained till the last chapter. Being a Bengali writer, her love for Kolkata is visibly exhibited in this novel. Places in America and India become alive on the pages of the novel. But her love for Kolkata, brings Korobi back to home, to Rajat. Even after Vic's proposal, she knows that there is no retreat in few cases. Apparently, her decision to find her origin seems to be very awkward choice, even to readers who also start feeling that why at the cost of Rajat and his family. But we all know that this search is very important to her not because she dreamed of her mother because to know herself. Finally, a daughter finds solace in the poems of her mother. She is reading one of those poems to Rajat on her flower-filled bedroom: *He who binds to himself a joy | Doth the winged life destroys; | But he who kisses the joy as it flies | Lives in Eternity's sunrise.* (*Oleander Girl* 288) Thus Korobi, a new woman, flies to New York to begin a month long search for her long lost father to find her true identity. It is a search that she knows, will change her life forever. She is an endearing, strong character who despite many obstacles perseveres to the end. She copes with a new

culture and the newly resurrected prejudices in post 9/11 America. As she learns more about her heritage, she comes to terms with how this will affect her life back in India, her relationship with Rajat and his family. Both Korobi and Rajat struggle with their identities within a changing environment. Even while Korobi finds satisfaction in her role as the dutiful grand-daughter, daughter and fiancé, she grapples with being put into a well-defined box that limits her ability to act and think for herself. Similarly, Rajat has also to make decisions about his ideal life and his role within the family business. Korobi and Rajat, both cross the cultural barriers with their individual identity searches, with which every person eventually struggles at some point in their lifetime. After the sudden death of her grand-father and the broken secret of her grand-mother, she realizes that she cannot start a new life as Rajat's wife until she finds out who really she is. The answer lies across the oceans, in the United States, where her mother spent a few years as a student. To exist there in a different culture, Korobi has to even sell her hair. The search takes her far from her life as she knows it, across continents and beliefs, throwing her into intimate proximity with strangers, somehow getting her closer to her own self.

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