

Fem Mettle, Grit and Determination in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

Dr. Archana Durgesh

(Supervisor) Associate Professor, B.B.D.U. Lucknow, (U.P.) India

Nigar Alam

Ph.D. Scholar, B. B.D.U. Lucknow, (U.P.) India

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific and proclaimed feminist writer of Indian origin based in America probed intricately various issues concerning women. She began her literary career during 1990s by writing poetries and then continued to write books for children and novels. *Oleander Girl* is the story of Korobi Roy, a young girl in her quest to know her true identity undertakes a journey to far off land 'America'. Korobi had been living a protected life in Kolkata and her boarding school under the care of her loving and adoring grandparents. She is engaged to be married to Rajat, son of high profile business family based in Kolkata. All goes well in her life until her grandfather dies on her engagement day. She stands face to face with plethora of facts about her existence. She is shattered by revelation of unexpected secrets of her life which changes her from a bubbly easy going girl to strong headed woman. As the story unfolds we embark with Korobi on a dangerous journey and share her experiences of surviving and fulfilling her mission in an unknown land, far away from her loving family. Basically, Divakaruni presents Indian and American experience and differences in the cultures through the protagonist Korobi Roy. The research paper gives insight to the novel *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with reference to patriarchal attitude towards vulnerable female characters.

Key Words: love, death, relationship, lineage

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni teaches creative writing at the University of Houston. She is an award winning author. Her own experiences of both east and west is finely woven into her works. She is also actively involved with organizations which work with women in distress. She assists the Advisory Board of 'Maitri', 'Daya' and 'Saheli' that help South Asian and South Asian American women held in abusive or domestic violence, sexual assault and trafficking. She also assists the board of 'Pratham' that is dedicated to bring literacy to disadvantaged Indian children. She volunteers for 'Indo-American Charity Foundation' too that helps the underprivileged and the needy

with monetary and volunteer work. She feels it is her good fortune to have seen so many brave women and says 'I'm really amazed and touched by women I have worked with. Women who have recovered and have started all over again from difficult situations. I wouldn't call them Draupadi because she was strong in a particular way but these women are strong in many ways.' She further says 'It's very important to balance things, it's imperative to do something for the society and women in particular and help women who aren't in position to help themselves. There is no conflict in looking good. You buy things you need and then you do something good for society.' (Feminists can look good too,

says Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Sonakshi Babbar, Hindustan Times, Jaipur, January 22, 2011.)

Feminism essentially includes various theories, philosophies which are concerned with gender difference that argue equality for women and work for women's rights and interests. Education helped women to develop themselves according to the situations and have become advanced in various fields. They became aware of their rights and duties which led to their progression rather than regression as believed by the patriarchal society. A prominent feminist writer M. Wollstonecraft gave befitting reply in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* to a French diplomat who wrote women should receive domestic education and should remain out of political affairs. She blamed lack of education for the subjugation of women. She rejects women should be treated as charming objects rather she believes that 'elegance is inferior to virtue'. She encouraged women to reach intellectual heights without depending on their beauty and charm. Some other well known feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, Toril Moi, Eliane Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet were quite disheartened that women were considered inferior to men. Some eminent works by these feminist stalwart tries to change radically our perception of women's place in society and her life.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* represents the perception that 'there is something wrong with society's treatment of women'. She particularly refers to her harrowing experience of being denied entry in the University Library because she was a woman and 'ladies are only admitted to library if accompanied by a Fellow of

the College or furnished with a letter of introduction'. (*A Room of One's Own*, p.5) Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is one of the earliest attempts to explore and locate the origin of imbalanced gender roles. She wonders how female come to occupy inferior position in society. She turned to biology, psychoanalysis and history to better understand her own identity. These subjects do reveal the differences between men and women but provide no justification for women's inferiority. She further gives instances from mythical representations, society, religious figures which emphasize women's dependence on men. She goes on to write that women are free and independent being like all human creatures, who are forced by men to assume the status of the 'Other'.

Sexual Politics by Kate Millet draws our attention towards politics where one group governs the other group. The privilege to rule has been given to males while the females are supposed to be ruled. She examines how the culture and society are dominated by men. The oppression of women exist in mind and the women are made to believe from childhood that they have to look pretty to get married and then proceed to have children. This is the ideal life of a female. This notion was not acceptable for one half of the human race. We are in sufficient numbers to alter this biased treatment of women by building ourselves. In Eliane Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* brings forth how women's literature has evolved from Victorian period to Modern writing. The women writers such as Brontes, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and many more entered the predominantly male bastion of writing.

Oleander Girl is a combination of tradition and modernity. Korobi's grandfather, Bimal Prasad Roy a famous barrister belonging to a reputed family and household 26 Tarak Prasad Roy strongly believed in Indian traditions and principles. He was very harsh to whosoever deviated from his principles. He somehow convinced or rather forced them emotionally to accept and act according to his own whims. Divakaruni to a certain extent was inspired by her own grandfather while portraying Korobi's grandfather who was externally tough but soft in his heart. Like Divakaruni, Korobi absolutely adored her grandfather. However young Korobi and Bose family are fairly modern in their approach towards life. Divakaruni a gifted story teller takes us on a journey of love, betrayal, family secrets and finally search for true identity of the central figure of the novel. Human psyche is delved upon extensively in *Oleander Girl*.

As the story unfolds, we are introduced to Korobi Roy, a young girl dreaming about her fiancé. She is excited and happy to be chosen by one of the most perfect man of Kolkata. It is always imbibed in the minds of young girls that to be married is the greatest achievement she can ever have in her life and Korobi is fortunate to be chosen by one of the most eligible bachelor. She later realized that she was envied by her acquaintances for her good fortune. Although, she was pampered greatly by her grandparents and she had never been in distress, yet she missed her parents. She had lost her father in an accident before her birth and her mother left her during the complications of child birth. The fable she heard about "deceased parents appearing to save their offspring

from calamity" (*Oleander Girl* p. 2) often put her in daredevilry situation and she hoped for miraculous appearance of her parents to save her. That never happened and she ended with bruises and scolding from principal and grandfather. Her prized possession a letter from her mother to her father which she accidentally came upon while sifting pages of a book in her grandfather's library make her secretly yearn for same kind of emotion with her husband. Her fiancé family approved of Korobi because of her beauty and lineage. She was the granddaughter of Roy household, a reputed and respected family of Kolkata which boasts of having oldest Durga temple.

Rajat Bose and Korobi Roy are engaged in the age old temple of Roy's household and a party arranged in a swanky hotel for the couple. Korobi raised under the strict guidance of her grandfather is an obedient girl. However her grandfather's disapproval of her off shoulder dress for the party infuriates her and she openly argues with him. A woman is expected to dress traditionally, an unsaid dictum of our society. During the engagement party, the news of Korobi's grandfather is admitted in the hospital, made her rush from the party with Rajat to hospital. Korobi felt her grandfather wanted to tell her something before his death in the hospital. Sarojini her docile grandmother, later, informed Korobi about her father and mother. After the death of her husband she is released from the promise she had made to him. She bares her heart and tells her how her mother Anu an intelligent girl defied her father's intention to get her married after she completed her college. She asked him to let her study in America before her marriage. A smart Anu secured

scholarship too for her studies and then Bimal Roy had to reluctantly agree. He asked her to swear in front of Goddess “never to marry without his approval” (*Oleander Girl* p.57). He wanted to control the life of his daughter and to a certain extent he could make her do what he wanted. As fate had something else in store for Anu, she fell in love with an American man. All hell broke loose for Bimal Roy. He couldn’t control his anger and angrily stopped all contact with her. But when Anu became pregnant and she wished to meet her parents, soft nature of a father emerged and he allowed her to visit them. But when the delivery date neared she wanted to go back to America to the father of her baby. Bimal Roy disagreed and during one of their arguments as Anu tried to walk away, she slipped and fell down. Korobi was born but Anu died. Bimal Roy and Sarojini were devastated by the loss of their only daughter but took solace in the birth of their granddaughter. He was not ready to part with Korobi. So when her father came to India in search of his child. Bimal Roy told him both the mother and child had died. He even made Sarojini swear in front of Goddess that she will never ever reveal the truth to Korobi.

Korobi is stunned when she realized that her grandfather whom she trusted and loved unconditionally had made some painful decisions. She discovered the secret which her grandparents had been hiding all these years. The painful secret about her true identity changes her life. She wanted everyone connected with her to acknowledge her father. Despite her grandmother’s insistence to keep this as secret and let things happen as it is, she refused. She told the truth about her American father to Rajat and his mother

too. She was not ashamed to accept the truth and one fierce decision was made that she will find her father. No amount of reasoning by Rajat, his mother and grandmother could persuade her to change her resolve. She declared to Rajat “I need to understand my parents’ marriage before I can enter my own.” (*Oleander Girl* p.72)

Sarojini, her grandmother who had always lived under the shadow of her husband suddenly felt a void after his death and suddenly realized she had to deal with responsibilities towards her household, finances, granddaughter and her fiancé. She had never known to have disagreed or present her view on any matter. This is what is expected from a wife in a patriarchal society; to agree on all matters and obey her husband. She felt more helpless when Korobi went to America leaving her alone to deal with everything in the household. Divakaruni has presented Mrs. Bose relatively stronger character. Though despised by her rich and authoritative father-in-law when she had married Rajat Bose’s father due to her lesser status managed to make a position for herself in her household as well as in society. She was actively involved in her family business and made decisions for her family. Mr. Bose became more passive character under her watchful eyes. Korobi too, like her name which means *Oleander* (a beautiful and poisonous flower) is beautiful and strong. She can’t be easily swayed by any person’s opinion. She makes decision for herself. When she met her father she asked him the reason why her mother named her Korobi. He gave her the reason, “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.” (*Oleander Girl* p. 253) Anu otherwise an intelligent and smart girl didn't had the luxury to make choice for herself. She didn't get permission from her father to marry the man of her choice. She had to concede to the will of her father, Bimal Roy and she became silent forever during one of the arguments with her father. The treatment of the four different women in the novel gives us insight how society works with women. They can be either subjected for being meek or she will be heard if she has strength to stand by her decision.

Divakaruni not only talks about the important characters. She gives voice to lesser characters too like Pia, Rajat's little sister and the family's chauffeur Asif. A Muslim driver for a Hindu Bose family also writes about Godhra riots of 2002. Although tension between Hindu and Muslim is not new in India Divakaruni had tried to portray the aftermath of such kind of incident. There was tension amongst the workers of both the communities in the factory. There was distrust based on religion and faithful Asif too felt lack of confidence for him by his masters. Till the riot happened Asif always took Pia to school and both of them had special bondage for each other. Asif saw his younger sister who had died due to her negligent in laws, in Pia. But now Pia was escorted by another person in car. Asif left the job as it hurt him to be doubted by his employees. However when Pia and Rajat were in danger, Asif saved them, though he was no longer working for them. He damaged his employer's car and injured himself while saving Rajat and Pia. Pia too fondly calls him A.A and often confides in him and seeks his opinion. She even refused to obey her brother Rajat when he

forbade her to talk to Asif, a servant. She says “He may be a servant, but he's a person first. A good person. Better than a lot of society people I know.” (*Oleander Girl* p. 236) She even defended Asif when he was scolded by his employer. She held his hand and told Sheikh not to put stress on him as he came from near death situation while saving her and Rajat's life. To pacify him she even added “.....I would ask my parents to pay for the car.” (*Oleander Girl* p. 263) Sheikh rightly said to Pia “You are quite an outspoken young woman and persuasive as well as stubborn.” (*Oleander Girl* p. 263) Pia like Korobi has strength to speak her mind and convince people by her words. The writer perhaps wants us to know that the difference based on religion is in our mind and not in our hearts.

Despite opposition from her grandmother, Rajat and his mother, strong headed Korobi is adamant to know her father. Rajat first tried to convince her lovingly with logical reasons to quit this thought about her father. He even says “Who knows what you'll uncover if you keep digging? There must have been a reason why your grandfather was so insistent about keeping you away from your father. Cara, my parents can't afford a scandal just before the wedding----.” (*Oleander Girl* page 72) He hadn't yet informed about Korobi's father to his mother. He was skeptic about all this scandal and the truth hidden was in the best interest for all. He told her “You make such a big deal about being honest and open. Do you think there's anyone in the world that doesn't have a secret?” (*Oleander Girl* p. 73) However no amount of cajoling could change Korobi's decision. She herself informed Rajat's mom about her father and

her desire to go to America in her pursuit to search him. Mrs. Bose was aghast at the news of her father. She too like Rajat insisted that her identity as the granddaughter of reputed Roy family was good enough and she need not go for the truth about her lineage.

Korobi, partly because of her longing to know her true identity and meet the man whom her mother loved dearly set on her journey to America. She sets on the journey with just the name of her father 'Rob' who lived in Berkley and an old photograph of her mother. She was arranged to live with Mitras, employee of Bose family in America. Her stay at his place was not exactly very comfortable. More so he was not polite to Korobi. His wife Seema was quite supportive and informs Korobi the impact of post 9/11 America on the business with Muslim names. Mitra is quite evasive in his ways. Later korobi discovered he was not faithful to his employer and cheated them. He spied on Korobi and blamed her for making his wife Seema like herself. Seema earlier accepted whims of her husband but with Korobi she gathered strength to refuse and resist his bad behavior. At the end she left him and went back to India alone to live in peace with her unborn child. Through the characterization of Seema we can see how a modest woman can transform to a strong woman by her willpower.

Korobi's search for her father remains futile initially. She faces many difficulties and hardships and adversities in her search for her father. She was disheartened many times but she reminded herself to concentrate on her endeavor. She took help of Desai (a private detective) and his secretary Vic. She exhausts all her energy

and money in the process. She even sells her hair to get money to sustain herself. She thought it was her hair and she had right to do whatever she wants with it in spite of knowing her hair's importance to her fiancée and his family and her grandmother. It was better to get money this way than to beg someone. Vic's approving words "I like it. Makes you look modern and confident." (*Oleander Girl* page 177) Nina Sankovitch writes '..... Korobi sets out on a quest to find her father. Along the way, she confronts enemies and find helpers, faces temptation and despair, but in the end, overcomes all to discover what matters most.' (Coming of Age) Korobi become symbol of grit, determination, strength and endurance. She knew her father was a foreigner from her grandmother and had not died in a car accident but when she located her father she was shocked to know that her father was an Afro-American. It was more embarrassing for her to know that she was an illegitimate child of her parents. Her father told her "I begged her, again and again. Especially when she became pregnant, which we hadn't planned on. But my asking made her more upset. She took the promise she'd made in the temple---that wouldn't marry against her father's wishes---very seriously. I couldn't understand it, but there it was. That was one of the reasons she went to India---to ask her father to release her from her promise so we could marry before you were born." (*Oleander Girl* p. 245) Now this was something which Korobi had never expected and she knew that society would always look down upon this kind of child. Especially in India it is something which is not acceptable. She wondered if Rajat would accept her as his wife after knowing the truth. Vic of course having

lived in America tried to reason with her that it was not her fault and proposed to marry her if she was not sure of Rajat. For a moment she contemplated to stay in America and marry Vic. She told her father “What if I stay on here? With Vic? What would you think of that?” (*Oleander Girl* p. 252) but her father insisted to face the truth and “never choose something because it’s easier” (*Oleander Girl* p. 252).

She goes back to India after meeting her father. She tells the truth about her birth to grandmother and Rajat and his family.

However Rajat is too happy to have her back and accepts her with love. Indeed Divakaruni’s story binds its reader till the end. She has explicitly mentioned culture, traditions and food habits of Indians. She has blended both traditional and modern values well. To sum up ‘*Oleander Girl* is a coming of age novel in the best tradition.....Divakaruni’s gift is storytelling and she is generous with her gift. Through her wonderful novel we become active participants.... And grateful witnesses to the maturing of a child into a woman.’ (The Huffington Post)

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