

Identity and Alterity of the Protagonist in Oleander Girl by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Sujatha Girish, Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury
Department of Arts and Humanities Reva University, Bengaluru
Corrssponding author: Sujatha Girish

ABSTRACT: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the eminent diasporic writers of Indian origin. She has achieved an enviable position within a short creative span. She has been acknowledged as an impressive Asian American writer with a hybrid identity. Her works can be perceived as classic examples of 'Feminist Narratives'. This paper attempts to analyse Divakaruni's novel, *Oleander Girl* (2013) as a Feminist Narrative. It will deal in depth with the protagonist Karobi's 'quest for identity and discovery of her alterity' and traces her transcultural journey from an innocent and protected girl to a matured, confident and assertive young woman. The paper emphasizes on the transformation in Karobi's character using the theoretical framework of 'feminism' and the theory of 'diaspora'. The paper portrays the identity clashes, immigrant issues and the dilemma of the protagonist as a young immigrant who travels to America in search of her father at a time when the country is coping up with the after effects of twin towers disaster.

KEY WORDS: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Feminist Narrative, diaspora, identity, alterity and transcultural

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 22-11-2018

DATE OF ACCEPTANCE: 08-12-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the group of young Indian writers who have emerged on the literary scene with a postcolonial diasporic identity. She is well –acknowledged as a South- Asian writer in English. She has been accepted as a writer with hybrid identity. Her works reflect autobiographical touch. She has been hailed as a 'brilliant storyteller' by Junot Diaz and as a 'skilled cartographer of the heart' by People magazine. She has authored books of multiple genre. She has invested in writing about the immigrant experience which continues to have resonance in today's world. Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013) is a resonating page turner and a treasure of multiple experiences to a reader. The protagonist Karobi's transcultural journey has a profound impact on her persona. As she experiences cultural clashes as an immigrant she explores her identity and discovers her alterity with a feminist perception.

Feminism challenges the patriarchal structure and androcentric nature of the society. It strongly resists the long accepted stereotypes and gender-roles thrust upon women. It demands for equal treatment of women and equal opportunities for women. According to dictionary.com, the word feminist means 'a person whose beliefs and behaviour are based on feminism'. As per dictionary.com, narrative means 'the art, technique, or process of narrating or of telling a story'. The term 'Feminist Narrative' implies a story told with a feminist perspective. Divakaruni portrays Karobi's character as a strong woman who dares to face the challenges of her complicated life unabashedly. The novel *Oleander Girl* impresses the reader as a Feminist Narrative. 'Identity' implies the distinguishing character or personality of an Individual according to Merriam- Webster Dictionary. Alterity means the state of being different with respect to one's perception of one's identity within a culture; otherness as per the freedictionary.com. Transcultural is defined as 'relating to or involving more than one culture; cross-cultural. This paper attempts to explore the identity and alterity of Karobi in a transcultural backdrop.

According to R.S. Malik and Jagdish Batra , " 'Feminism' takes a hard look at the real position of women in society which discriminates against women mainly due to sexual difference" (76).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an eminent postcolonial feminist in her essay " Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" discusses about the hegemonic feminist approach of the west. She criticizes the portrayal of the Third World Women by Western feminists. She critiques 'Eurocentric Feminism' which homogenizes and systematizes the experiences of different groups of women of the Third World countries by erasing all marginal and resistant modes of experiences. Mohanty opposes the misrepresentation of women living in non-western countries. She insists that the most valuable kind of feminist research must avoid specious generalizations about the Third World Women and take the lived experiences of specific women into account as a basis for theorizing.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar, literary theorist and feminist critic in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” emphasizes the incapability of the colonized to speak up. This theoretical formulation can be ideally applied to the deprived condition of women in liberated Third World countries including India, where structures of power do not permit the subaltern to articulate his predicament. Women too are prohibited from voicing themselves due to societal structures like patriarchal hegemony. In fact women are doubly challenged due to their so-called ‘weaker sex’ status.

Feminism opposes women’s subordination to men in the family and society and seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy. Divakaruni has painted Karobi’s character as a feminist who follows her heart and takes decisions by herself without fearing the consequences or the social repercussions. Divakaruni intentionally names her protagonist as Karobi. It is a Bengali name which means ‘oleander’. Oleander flower is beautiful and tough as well. True to her name, the author portrays Karobi as a harmonious blend of beauty and toughness along with determination. Seema Panjwani in her research paper writes that “the title of *Oleander Girl* has a profound meaning and it is a prevalent image throughout the novel. Even the young girl Karobi is named after the oleander flower in the Bengali language.”

The protagonist Karobi Roy is a 17 year old girl orphaned at birth. She is brought up by her grandparents Bimal Roy and Sarojini who are culturally rich, socially well placed and highly reputed family. They give her an identity as a granddaughter of Roy family with Bengali ethnicity. She is sheltered and over protected by her adoring grandparents who refuse to speak or discuss anything about Karobi’s parents. She is haunted by the silence that surrounds her parents’ death. Her only inheritance from them is the love note found in her mother’s book of poetry. After the sudden demise of her grandfather, Karobi gets to know about her American father from her grandmother. Karobi is in a perplexed state of mind after knowing about her parentage. She thinks about her identity as Karobi Roy and her alterity as daughter of Rob, the American father. She says to Rajat, “I’m so confused. All the things I was so proud of, my family, my heritage- they’re only half-true. The other half of me- I don’t know anything about it. Except that all this time my father was alive, and in America” (66).

The author skilfully describes Karobi’s the bold decision of travelling to America all by herself as she is eager to know about her alterity. She doesn’t roll back her decision when Rajat does not favour this idea of her American visit. Karobi’s courage to inform Rajat’s mother Mrs. Bose startles the readers. After hearing the truth about Karobi’s parentage, Mrs. Bose suggests that the marriage should be conducted at the earliest. Karobi wants to follow her heart and refuses to heed to the pressure of Mrs. Bose. When Karobi declares assertively that she will travel to America to find her father, Mrs. Bose is taken aback. Mrs. Bose’s explanation about the negative consequences of Karobi’s truth revelation to her family fail to change the feminist mind of Karobi. Mrs. Bose’s apprehension that if people come to know about her mixed heritage and that she may not even be a Hindu, their family’s reputation will be at stake, bothers her momentarily. Mrs. Bose’s fear that Mr. Bhattacharya, a politician who upholds Hindu traditions and who is willing to extend his financial assistance to their family which is facing severe financial crisis due to business loss in America may withdraw his support puts Karobi in a dilemma. She is caught between her secured life as a daughter-in-law of the Bose family and as a daughter of Anu Roy and Rob. She decides to play the role of her daughter and fulfil her dead mother’s desire that she should go in search of her father. She thinks to herself, “It would be cowardly, for the sake of security to relinquish this chance to find and know the man my mother loved so deeply that she couldn’t give him up though it tore her heart in two. It would be a betrayal of myself to go through life pretending to be what I am not” (Divakaruni 78). For Karobi it is more important to discover her alterity than embracing her identity as the daughter-in-law of the Bose family. As a true feminist she places her priorities above the demands of the patriarchal expectations of the society.

Divakaruni depicts the picture of class based society, the influence of the politicians on the business people’s lives, the way the marriage alliances are looked at, in a powerful manner. She brings out the feminist aspect of Karobi poignantly. A young girl who is an orphan, who has lost her protective grandfather, who has support of none other than her own courage stands by her decision of searching for her father. She is neither afraid of breaking her engagement nor worried about the comments of people. She just wants to follow her heart. She boldly declares, “But neither do I want a trouble to you. I understand how much of a problem for you my heritage has become”... “If it is so important for your business, I’m willing to release Rajat from the engagement” (Divakaruni 79). She declares so knowing very well that it will have serious repercussions and antagonising Mrs. Bose will lead to problems between her and Rajat, the man whom she loves dearly. With mixed feelings and her grandmother’s blessings and with great confidence Karobi embarks on a journey to New York in search of her father. Karobi’s journey is no ordinary journey. During her stay in America she experiences diasporic identity. She lives the life of an immigrant woman though for a short while. She faces identity crisis at many a times. It proves to be a cross-cultural journey which gives her a transcultural exposure. She gets to experience the cultures of the East and the West. She visits America at a time when people are still

recovering from the devastating twin tower attack. Divakaruni deftly writes about the unrest and distrust in the country and the way life has become a nightmare of thousands of immigrants.

Dr. Priyanka Vaidya in her book 'Feminist Explorations: A Study of Contemporary Indian Women Writers' while discussing about the theme of 'Displaced Existence' well used by Feminist Indian Diasporic writers, elaborates on the influence of transcultural journey on various protagonists of different authors. She speaks about Ashima in *Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, Jasmine in the novel *Jasmine* and Tara in *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee and Laila in Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* to name a few and asserts the fact that the intercultural interactions by these characters result in the synthesis between two cultures. The author delineates the extent to which cross-cultural boundary is vulnerable to alien influence (164- 166). Divakaruni's portrayal of Karobi's character is a beautiful reflection of the aforesaid aspects.

While elaborating about the discourse of Diaspora, Benzi Zhang in the book, *Asian Diaspora Poetry in North America* explains that, the idea of diaspora implies a shift from national to inter-national and cross-cultural contextualizations.

Homi K. Bhabha in his book, *Location of Culture* expounds about the concept of hybridity applicable to the diaspora. The identity of immigrants in any society is threatened by the culture of the host country. The immigrants experience location, dislocation and relocation. The process of acculturation is not only slow but also one sided along with a feeling of a sense of loss. It is also not a clear transformation; it gives rise to hybridity marking different stages of acculturation.

Divakaruni delineates the challenges faced by Karobi as an immigrant poignantly. On the way to Mr. Desai, the detective's office, a native man tries to attack her by pushing a rusted metal cart piled with plastic bags. It reflects the resistance of native people to accept immigrants after the twin tower blast. The courageous Karobi yells with a loud clap asking him to go away and to stop harassing her. She is slowly acquiring the survival skills of an immigrant to sustain her search in New York. The author unfolds a series of troubles Karobi has to go through and empowers her with the courage and determination to fight against all the odds so that she can find her father and there by discover her alterity. Karobi's life as an immigrant woman takes a different turn as she tries to adjust to American ways of living.

After an unsuccessful trip to Boston, Karobi has to Travel to California in search of her father. When she realises she doesn't have enough funds for her travel, Mr. Desai suggests that she can approach Rajat for money. But She is determined not to ask any money from Rajat. Divakaruni gives a strong voice to Karobi when she writes, " I'll get the money," I say with jaunty rashness, though I have no idea how. I know this much, though: I'm not going to ask Rajat (172). She sells her thick and black hair to raise money for her California trip. Seema with whom she stays in New York is quite surprised by her action and enquires Karobi if her grandmother knows about her hair cut and if she had the permission of her in-laws. Karobi who has taken complete control of her life says, "It's my hair"(178). Divakaruni presents the character Karobi as an independent and assertive woman who takes decisions based on the needs and requirements her life in America. Karobi has transformed into a confident woman who thinks and feels she needs no one's approval to cut her hair. Here again we see Karobi's feminine sensibility. She exhibits her autonomy on her life.

Divakaruni harmoniously weaves the story of Seema who gets inspired by the feminist mindset of Karobi. Her courage and determination influences Seema also to cut her hair and sell her jewellery so as to go back to India, to her mother's place for her delivery. She doesn't want to stay with Mitra who isn't much concerned about his wife. Karobi gets to understand the life and uncertainties of an immigrant woman through Seema's story. The small overcrowded apartment of Mitras where Karobi has to stay is a sad reminder of how an aspiring immigrant's dreams are crushed. Divakaruni narrates how Seema walks out of her wedded life refusing to suffer in silence facing the tyranny of her husband. As a young immigrant woman she is disillusioned by her life in America. The twin tower disaster has disturbed her life beyond repair leading to marital discord prompting her to go back to her roots. This aspect of novel again impresses the reader as a feminist narrative. The changing identity of Karobi motivates Seema to shift her identity from a devoted wife to a dedicated mother who doesn't trust her husband's care in the crucial stage of her life. She prefers to be with her mother so that she can deliver the child safely and take care of the baby. These sub plots are so enthralling that they add to the magic of the story.

Divakaruni convincingly projects Karobi's process of acculturation and her sense of hybrid identity. She is quite comfortable in the company of Vic, Mr. Desai's nephew though he is a stranger to her. She changes her dressing sense according to the expected norms of America and wears Seema's Prada suit when she goes to meet people who according to Mr. Desai could be her father. Karobi was brought up in a conservative manner by her grandparents. In India, as a young woman she would not have travelled with a stranger. But in America, she does not hesitate to do so because of her changing outlook and acculturation.

The author elaborates the difficult task of Karobi's search for her father. Since Karobi does not know her father's second name, the matter becomes quite complex and she has narrowed down her search to three gentlemen with Rob as their first name. She feels she is deceiving people in the pretext of search for her father.

It hurts her that she has to tell lies after lies so as to meet men with Rob as their name. But that doesn't deter her from continuing her search. She also faces an attempt of physical assault from one of the persons she meets. Karobi is totally distraught due to this unpleasant incident. She wants to put an end to her search and go back home. She draws strength from Vic who consoles her and speaks words which soothe her. Trying to find her alterity, she goes through a terrible phase in her life. Vic's appreciative words that she has acted bravely and she deserves to be proud of herself hold a mirror to her feminine sensibility and true identity.

Vic is fascinated by the ways Karobi handles her life. Her feminist ways charm him. Divakaruni brings in a twist in the story through Vic's confession of his love and admiration for Karobi. He offers a job for her and says she can stay with him in California. She can earn her own money. This sudden proposal tempts Karobi. Her assimilation of American culture and the thought of financially empowered woman who can earn her own money prompt her to think about the opportunity. As an immigrant woman she feels she can get a new identity in America. Life with Vic will definitely be interesting. Caught in the whirlpool of cultural clashes of freedom in America and conservative lifestyle in India, she is in a total dilemma. There is a clash of identities with in herself. To make a choice between the life in India/ America; life with Rajat/Vic seem to a tough one for her. Vic tells her to take time, think and tell the answer.

Karobi comes to know about her mother's student life in USA and that her father is an African-American through her mother's friend Meera Anand. Divakaruni elucidates the impact of this revelation on Karobi. When she shares this with her grandma, she says when she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees her skin, hair..everything differently. Her new identity is that she is half-black. Her alterity is she is the daughter of Rob Lacey, an African-American father. During her meeting with her actual father, Karobi learns about his life with Anu, her mother. She comes to know another bitter unacceptable truth about her life that her mother and father were never married; that she was born out of wed-lock. Karobi is unable to digest this fact. She feels extremely shameful about herself. Her father tells Karobi that Anu had promised Bimal Roy that she will never marry against her father's wish. To keep up her promise made to her father, she didn't agree for marriage despite his repeated requests. Karobi is disillusioned about her otherness; her alterity. She thinks to herself, "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" (246).

Divakaruni describes the way Karobi deals with her life with her new identity after her return to India. The Bose family's unacceptance of new identity as an illegitimate child does not disturb her. She decides to pursue her studies. Her grandmother is amazed by transformation of Karobi. Her trans-cultural experience has made her an empowered woman. Karobi gets frequent calls from her father and Vic inviting her to America but she has made up her mind to stay in her own country. She says, "I can't deny that America's siren song had pulled at me. But I came back, of my own choice. Surely that counts for some-thing. I love my mother. But I am not her. My journey has taught me that" (280). Subhra Roy, in her research article, "The Unfolding of Korobi: A Critical Analysis of the Gradual Growth of the Central Character in *Oleander Girl*" describes Karobi's character in a sensible way. She states, "While in America, with many temptations around her, Korobi manages not to succumb to them, but she does understand her contradictory self better." Karobi is too strong a woman to heed to the temptations. She is crystal clear about her mission America which is to discover her alterity and not to settle there. Here she proves to be different from her mother Anu and resists her temptations.

Over a period of time the families reconcile and patch up. Rajat and Karobi's wedding ceremony gets organised well. The truth that Karobi wasn't trying to deceive the Bose family, in fact her visit has helped the Bose family to know about the actual status of their art gallery in New York makes the family realise the courage and conviction of Karobi. Karobi is able to accept her alterity; her otherness as the daughter of mixed blood, mixed race as a child born out of wed-lock. Her good nature and her passionate love for Rajat makes Bose's family too accept her identity as Karobi the granddaughter of Bimal Roy and her alterity as the daughter of an African-American father. Divakaruni ends the novel with a happy note.

II. CONCLUSION

The readers realize that Karobi, true to her name, is an Oleander Girl who is not only beautiful but also tough. Karobi's journey in search of her father, her determination to go against all the odds to reach out to what she wants, the way she handles the crisis of her life, her resistance to temptations of America and Vic, above all her strong urge to follow her heart irrespective of the reaction of people around her makes the readers appreciate the novel as a feminist perspective. Her transcultural journey gives her an exposure to the ways of life in the Eastern and the Western world; makes her more confident. The cultural clashes she experiences at America make her stronger as a woman. The traditional Bengali culture which forms the foundation of her brought up and the liberal American culture make her understand the intentions of her grandfather that he wanted to protect the women of his family by binding them with his expectations and promises. She is in a better position to appreciate the goodness offered by life in a better way. While tracing the journey of Karobi and its implications on her, Nina Sankovitch, in her article, *Oleander Girl: Coming of Age*, has stated that, "Korobi

starts out young and sure of herself, but it is the confidence of youth and not of experience. Once she commits herself to finding out who her father was, experience come fast and furious and Korobi is forced to grow up". The novel has been highly appreciated as a feminist narrative. Divakaruni's mesmerising story telling skills are well- acknowledged. Her portrayal of women characters like Anu, Sarojini, Mrs. Bose and Seema other than Karobi leave an everlasting impression as strong women in different capacities; each of them striving to establish their identities in different ways. Divakaruni's projection of the immigrant experiences of Anu, Seema and Karobi closely related to theory of diaspora makes it a masterful diasporic narrative as well.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- [2]. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Oleander Girl*. Penguin Random House, 2013
- [3]. Malik, R.S. and Jagdish Batra . *A New Approach to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Atlantic, 2014.
- [4]. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*, No.30 (1988): 61-88. JSTOR 10 July 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395054>
- [5]. Panjwani Seema. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 's Art and Technique in *Oleander Girl*." *International Journal of humanities, Arts, Medicine and Sciences*, Vol 2, Issue 9, Sep 2014
- [6]. Roy Subhra. "The Unfolding of Korobi: A Critical Analysis of the Gradual Growth of the Central Character in *Oleander Girl*." *Language in India*, Vol. 15:5, May 2015
- [7]. Sankovitch, Nina. "Oleander Girl: Coming of Age." April 8, 2013. Web. Feb 10, 2015
- [8]. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds*. Routledge, 1998.
- [9]. Vaidya, Dr. Priyanka. 'Feminist Explorations: A Study of Contemporary Indian Women Writers'. Yking Books, 2014.
- [10]. Zhang, Benzi. *Asian Diaspora Poetry in North America*. Routledge, 2008.

WEB REFERENCES

- [11]. "feminist." *Dictionary.com*. www.dictionary.com/feminist. Accessed 02. Jan.2018
- [12]. "feminist." *The freedictionary.com*. www.thefreedictionary.com/feminist. Accessed 02. Jan.2018
- [13]. "narrative." *Dictionary.com*. www.dictionary.com/narrative. Accessed 02. Jan.2018
- [14]. "identity." *Merriam- Webster's Learners Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster. www.merriam-webster.com. Accessed 02. Jan.2018

Sujatha Girish "Identity and Alterity of The Protagonist in *Oleander Girl* By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 07, no. 12, 2018, pp.32-36