

## Cross-Cultural Encounters of Expatriate Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines how immigrant women's sensitivities and identity formation in the cross-cultural confines of the exotic land are related to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013). It is a new, exciting, coming-of-age story about a young woman who lives in India but moves to America in quest of her identity, which changes her life. With a cross-cultural backdrop, this novel provides a broad overview of the protagonists' sociocultural experiences in both India and America. Divakaruni has thought about the necessity of interpreting her community's situation by portraying the experiences of Indian women in America. She depicts the conflicts faced by Indians who have left their homeland and attempt to maintain their cultural identity while assimilating into their new country.

**Keywords:** Culture, Expatriation, Women, Homeland, Diaspora

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indo-American diasporic author, is an admirable storyteller and expertly delineates the Indo-American affinities of women. She depicts an intriguing analysis of the challenges faced by displaced people in both India and America. She watches expatriates in American society and uses her creativity to weave their conditions into her novels, which address immigrant difficulties. Her female characters express the feelings of these individuals. The heterogeneous society has a big influence on Divakaruni's writing. She rises to enormous heights in the literary firmament for her wonderful navigation of her useful inventions of the social realities. She is now a resident of the adopted country and has assimilated into the customs of migration, cultural symbolism, and diasporic identity building. Her protagonists reminisce about the past while imagining their future through a charming transgression. Her immigrant characters traverse uncharted territories while enduring the struggle between the traditional past and western culture. As they have the option to return home, Divakaruni's characters overcome displacement, move, and reinterpret their goals to integrate with the host area. By allowing her characters to embrace the difficulties they have in shifting their identities and reconciling cultural forces, Divakaruni stands at the top of the crest.

In Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*, Karobi Roy, an *Oleander girl*, encounters a lot of people on her important journey. She experiences a number of problems, learns about life, and most importantly, learns about herself and her actions. Readers are captivated by her portrayal of the unassuming girl next door. Her close friends and family are quite concerned about her well-being after she makes the decision to travel to the United States to look for her father. The submissive college-bound granddaughter of Bimal Roy, however, is not as frail as people believe. The more challenges she faces, the more resilient she grows. After going through a number of difficulties, struggles, and tribulations, Karobi finds her father.

Karobi creates her own world in which she discovers two stark realities about her life. While she has no trouble embracing the first, she finds it difficult to accept the second. However, she now develops into a stronger lady than most people realise. As a diaspora living in America, she is tempted by many things, but she controls herself well and resists them. She is unable to gain a deeper understanding of her conflicting self, though. She finds herself in a very emotional dilemma as a result of her recently discovered attraction to vice and her promises of loyalty to Rajat.

Korobi is an 18-year-old girl who is being nurtured in a traditional manner by her grandparents. The mansion is named after her great-grandfather, Tarak Prasad Roy, and her family is well-known in Calcutta. Korobi inherits traditional values from her patriarchal, traditional, and primitive grandfather. She attends boarding school and is under her grandfather's protection. Because of the limitations placed on her, she is hesitant to become friends with Rajat. "Rajat asked for my phone number," she remembers. "I didn't give it. Long ago, my grandfather had told me that the Roy family's daughters had no partners" (8). Rajat, the proprietor of the Barua and Bose Art Galleries, finds her traditional attitude appealing because she differs from the young city girls. As the daughter-in-law of the Boses, she purchases an off-the-shoulder Kurti in maroon chiffon with slim-fitting trousers and imagines her grandfather's reaction. Traditions instil moral values in women.

The day before the night of her engagement, Korobi has a dream in which she encounters her mother. Instead, she has come to tell me something. In Indian culture, dreams are thought to have specific significance. Korobi wants her dream to be interpreted. My mother's body trembles with difficulty, as if she wants to talk. She starts to disintegrate. Through her battered body, "I can see the ocean, waves crashing against cliffs" (5). Her vanishing body exudes an urgent anguish. It is a very significant time in Korobi's life, she believes. Korobi concludes that "my mother would have wanted me to find my father" after learning about her ancestry from her grandma. I'm positive that's what my dream meant, Grandma" (83). Korobi's dream inspires her to look for who she is.

In *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni depicts the Hindu-Muslim riots that Indians had to endure. The workers' Hindu-Muslim conflict causes them to miscommunicate in the Barua and Boses Galleries. In the absence of his father, Rajat is ignorant of the recent developments that have caused turmoil in the gallery and separated Muslims and Hindus. In her stories, Divakaruni creates characters like Munna and Asif who are more honest and caring towards their bosses. Twelve-year-old Munna is the same age as his sister Pia, who works in the gallery to support his family following the death of his father. In the middle of the confusion, he gives Rajat tea and biscuits. Because of his generosity, Rajat can purchase parathas for his family. Because of the ongoing disturbances, Mrs. Bose doubts her faithful driver, Asif, who is Muslim, and arranges for her assistant, Shikha, to drive Pia to school. Unable to handle it because he feels a sisterly bond with Pia, Asif quits his job and is hired by Sheikh Rehman. Following this tragic event, Asif rescues Pia and Rajat from a car accident. Despite being a Muslim, he is appreciative and close to the family. They discover that Sona, Rajat's ex-girlfriend, rather than the gallery employees, is to blame for this heinous act. Mrs. Bose hires Asif as a driver once more.

The true essence of Indian society is depicted in Divakaruni. She illustrates the value placed on tradition within the family structure and highlights its benefits and symbols. Because Rajat's father is impressed by Korobi's background, Mrs. Battacharya in *Oleander Girl* sponsors the Barua and Bose Art Galleries. He admires Judge Tarak Prasad Roy, her late great-grandfather, and is drawn to the historic Durga temple on her family's land. Additionally, he has expressed a wish to visit the Roy family temple. Mrs. Bose might be able to arrange that visit for evening.

In *Oleander Girl*, Sarojini is persecuted by patriarchal conventions. Despite her understanding of her daughter's genuine and innocent feelings, she is powerless to assist her. "I cried every day while your grandfather was at work, sure that I would never see Anu again," she admits to Korobi. "But I didn't speak to him. I had been raised in that manner" (59). Anu Roy's life is made into a pitiful state by Bimal Roy's obstinate, patriarchal, conventional mindset. Despite her grief over her daughter's passing, Sarojini patiently goes through the customary ceremonies. She is choked whenever Korobi asks about her parents since her husband made her swear before God that she would not tell her grandchild the truth. She embodies the subtle image of a subjugated woman and is docile and submissive. According to Simon de Beauvoir, a woman is shaped by her social environment: "One is not born but rather becomes woman" (301). The way a woman displays herself in society is not determined by her biological, psychological, or economic circumstances. This creature, which is characterised as feminine, is the product of civilisation.

By standing in for patriarchal authority, Bimal Roy represses his wife Sarojini, daughter Anu, and granddaughter Korobi. Sarojini's anguish is shown by Divakaruni: "A rejoinder shot up to her tongue" (17). Who is to blame for my daughter's passing? She drew it back into herself at the last second. She could not have kept living with Bimal if the words had become a reality. Her phone number is destroyed. He forces Sarojini to avoid getting in touch with her. He would send me to live alone in his ancestral village if she admitted to him that she only had one child and that he could not be harsh with her. Although Bimal is devoted to Anu, he values her compliance. According to Sarojini, Anu learnt to lead a double life because she valued his praise. She was competitive and assertive in school and college, but complained and silent everywhere else. Every lady has her own uniqueness, according to Divakaruni.

Anu is attending the University of California, Berkeley, on a scholarship granted by the university. After he vows in front of the Goddess "never to marry without his approval," (57) he permits her to go to America. In Indian traditional society, love weddings are frowned upon and disapproved of. Bimal Roy is unable to accept anyone who does not adhere to cultural norms since he is addicted to traditional beliefs. When he deserts his daughter after learning of her affair with an American, he is provoked. "He took all her photographs out of their frames and burned them," (59) the author writes. To fulfil her vow to her father and wed her boyfriend, Anu travels to India while she is pregnant. "His only stipulation was that she came alone and spoke to no one, not even me, about her husband while she was here," (59) according to her father, who permits her to

remain in the house. She intends to go back to America, but her father talks her out of it, and Anu's kind and submissive personality cannot stand up to him. After a tirade between Bimal and Anu, Anu falls down the stairs and gives birth to Korobi in the hospital. They lose their exclusive, devoted daughter in front of Bimal Roy because of his stubbornness in sticking to tradition.

Divakaruni depicts men assisting women in achieving their objectives. When Korobi in America is suffering from the clash of two cultures, Vic helps her. When Korobi is feeling down, Vic's laid-back demeanour helps her get over it. "The brave, loyal head strong woman, you are struggling against odds that would have defeated most people a long time ago," Vic says when he pops the question. "You're engaged to be married, so I've held back" (217). Vic says something that surprises Korobi. "In spite of the troubles I've faced here, I love what I've seen of America," (218) she says, expressing her genuine affection for the country. The American way of life serves as an inspiration for Korobi. Despite feeling America's pull like a mother would for her daughter, she goes back to India. "I love my mother," she says. However, I am not her. I've learnt that from my journey" (280). Vic is an example of a man who supports women.

Divakaruni explains how immigrants were affected by the destruction of 9/11. Immigrants' lives are severely impacted by the World Trade Centre bombing in American culture. Vic's statement, "Imagine finding bodies everywhere, pieces of people half-cooked by the heat," (151) captures the countless deaths brought on by the damage. Occasionally identifying a friend. There is a lingering animosity towards the Muslims in America because of the widespread destruction that occurred on September 11, 2001. Vic, Seema, and Mitra must endure severe discrimination in their new country. Following the chaos, Vic's restaurant, Lazeez, is impacted. Glass panes are broken, the artworks in Mr. Bose's Mumtaz gallery in New York are ruined, and threats are painted in red characters on the walls. For two days, Mitra is held at the police station. "Seema had nearly miscarried as a result of the shock" (101). The predicament of immigrants like Seema and Mitra, who must endure the perils and hazards of living in a foreign country, is depicted in Divakaruni.

Following the events of 9/11, the immigrants have a sense of insecurity. After the 9/11 attacks, "many South Asian businesses were boycotted, especially those with Muslim names," Seema tells Korobi. They attacked others" (117). Because of the 9/11 attack, Seema feels scared and alone. In a foreign nation, Korobi discovers his father without even his picture and just knows his first name, Rob. To pay for her bills while searching for her father in America, Korobi sells her hair. "That hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancé, to Papa and Maman Bose's daughter-in-law to be," she recalls, recalling the happenings in her family. "Visions of my shorn self, incongruous in red silk under the wedding canopy, invade me" (178), she even imagines her marriage. "One of my happiest memories is the feel of her fingers on my scalp," (177) she recalls, recalling her grandmother washing her hair and massaging it with coconut oil. Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, writes,

These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

It discusses how immigrants living in the space between two cultures, two languages, and two value systems create new identities in the new world. Korobi attempts the same thing, looking for fresh approaches to being herself.

In her quest to find her father, Korobi encounters Rob Evanston, Rob Mariner, and Rob Davis - three likely fathers. She is obstinate with her guests despite the challenges and setbacks she experiences in the new country. When Korobi first meets architect Rob Evanston, she is drawn back by the picture of the dwellings and says, "I realise I'm describing my grandfather's house. I'm choking on a wave of longing. I don't want to be here now" (153). When she realises that Rob Evanston is not her father, she becomes warped. Korobi searches for her father whenever she can. Despite the possibility of some difficulties, she is adamant about meeting Rob Mariner at his house by herself. Mariner uses this opportunity to harass her, but she fights back with bravery. She is afraid of Rob Mariner's actions. According to her, "I see that no, of the hills where Grandfather had sent me - to keep me safe from men like Mariner" (215). She thinks about her grandfather, who has protected her throughout her life, when she and Mariner encounter difficulties. When faced with difficult circumstances in a foreign country, immigrants have a sense of estrangement from their home countries.

Much attention has been paid to Divakaruni's portrayals of her protagonists, such as Korobi in *Oleander Girl*, who is searching for herself and has skilfully connected the struggle for her existence. At night, Korobi experiences nostalgia in Mitra's flat. "I am as far away from loved ones as it is possible to be while still on this earth," she admits. "Like snow on a deserted meadow, loneliness descends upon me" (97). Rob Mariner's actions have angered Korobi. She thus begs Vic to purchase tickets for her next trip back to India. "I want to go home, to bury my face in Grandmother's chest, in the smell of her starched cotton Sari," (214) she says, expressing her need to return. Vic supports her in proving her seek and acknowledges her bravery. Korobi is prepared to deal with the consequences as she looks for her father. Her fiancé and in-laws embrace her with love and affection after she is surprised to learn of her father's surprising genealogy. She succeeds in her quest for identity in the distant country of "America" and stands apart from the devoted family.

In *Oleander Girl*, Korobi is tempted by American life, but she resists and does not give in. When Vic pops the question, her devotion to Raja comes back to haunt her. She wants to choose between America and India, or between Vic and Rajat, but

she is unsure. In America, Korobi fabricates a number of breathtaking secrets about her family. They tamper with her identification. Without her, Rajat is at risk. He is a wealthy and careless young man. He assumes leadership for the family business after falling in love with Korobi. He addresses issues like employee dissatisfaction and corporate failure. He triumphs over his ex-girlfriend's advances and is involved in an accident. After learning of Rajat's accident, she leaves for India.

Korobi's quest for identity is portrayed by Divakaruni, who makes her bold and unyielding in her attempt to mend the peaceful relationship between two worlds. Every couple of days, her father calls her on the phone. In her writings, Divakaruni depicts the state of women in the home and emphasises their growth, change, and self-determination. Unlike her mother, Korobi achieves success on her own and asserts her authority as an Indian woman. She transforms into a brave, resolute, and self-assured lady. To overcome the difficult obstacles in her life, she reimagines herself. In *Oleander Girl*, Anu embraces the American way of life and is self-sufficient. Regarding her daughter, Sarojini states, "She developed an adventurous spirit in America" (58). In her letters, she would share with us the performances and folk-dance classes she had attended in San Francisco. She spotted migratory whales as she went to the enormous redwood.

Korobi is horrified when her grandmother tells her the truth about her father. "Your dear grandfather lied to you - and forced me to do the same," (52) she says, explaining the circumstances. Your dad is still living. Rob is his name. In her grandfather's library, Korobi finds a letter her mother wrote to her father. Her mother's affection for her father is revealed in the letter, which makes Korobi curious about her parents. To discover who she is, she makes the decision to cross the seas.

The protagonists of Divakaruni alternate between two worlds, hold onto ancient traditions and practices, and yearn to become part of American society. Through the translation of personal experiences into a deeply scholarly work, the author substantiates the abstract ideas of the past to the present reality. Her writings examine the sensibility of women in the context of their cross-cultural experiences in America and India. Divakaruni explores the life of immigrants in detail. Her novels address issues of family, atonement, and cultural identity. She tackles some of the core ideals of Indian society by addressing issues like motherhood, childlessness, marriage, economic independence, and the reinvention of the Indian woman. She is one of the many Asian Americans who are still Janus-faced, caught between two different worlds, each of which is very alive in its own way and makes its claims on the sensibilities of the individual, rather than between a dead world and one that is incapable of being born. The writer, the adopted country, and the country of origin continue to have a three-way relationship. The problems that Indians or Indian immigrants face, such as marital strife, miscarriages, and the gap between the first and second generations of American immigrants, are also addressed in *Oleander Girl*.

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