

India in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American poet, short-story writer, novelist, and social activist. Born in Kolkata, India, she moved to U. S. A. at the age of 19. Though she settled in U. S. A., she maintained her link with India by writing about her homeland. The paper aims to explore India as reflected in her novel Oleander Girl.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Indian female psychology, patriarchy, rituals, caste discrimination

Literature of Diaspora has its roots in the immigration of authors from their native land to foreign countries. It includes the literary works of the authors associated with their native background but written in foreign countries. The diaspora authors cannot completely break their connectivity with their ancestral land as a result the reflection of their ancestral land can be observed now and then in their literary works. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the prolific Indian diaspora authors. She is an Indian-American poet, short-story writer, novelist, and social activist working for the welfare of women.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born on 29th July 1956 in Kolkata, India. She completed her early education in India and went to the United States at the age of 19 where she secured her Ph. D. degree in English on Christopher Marlowe from the University of California, Berkeley in 1985. While perusing her studies she has done various odd jobs such as a clerk, a laboratory assistant, a dining hall attendant, etc. She is not only a renowned author but a philanthropist also. She has been a co-founder of an organization Maitri, that works for the welfare of South Asian women. She helps the Indian unprivileged children to be literate through a non-profit organization, Pratham Houston.

Most of her works have settings of India and the United States. Her novels enlighten the life of Indian born-women facing the problems of the old and new world. She has also penned semi-autobiographical novels in which she nostalgically returns to her native land. In this regard, Hiral Jani remarks: Divakaruni through her Indian characters, be they Indians or Indian Diasporas, attempts

to reflect upon the broader facet of India and Indianness. Her writings reflect Indian events such as the India-China war, the issue of Kashmir, the Godhra riots, and the terrorist attacks. While writing her novels Divakaruni revisits her homeland and exhibits Indian society, traditions, rituals, and customs.

James Thomas Bredemus in his article *Vices from the Gaps*: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stated that 'Divakaruni once explained her reason for writing: "There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious the essence of spirituality-that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community." This divulges Divakaruni's intimate connection with India. *Oleander Girl* is one of her novels that replicates the panorama of Indian society.

In *Oleander Girl* Divakaruni has ingeniously pointed out Indian female psychology through her female characters. Karobi, a young girl and the central character of the novel, is brought up by her grandparents in Kolkata who finds herself in the East and West conflict. Being groomed in Indian traditional values, even having independent thought she follows Indian conventional ethics. She fears her grandfather's reaction when she buys an "off the shoulder kurti in marron chiffon with slim fitting pants." (18). A child before marriage is considered taboo in Indian society. After getting success in finding her father Korobi realizes that she is an illegitimate child. she says, "I'm illegitimate? I whisper.... I'm a ----- bastard? I can't come to terms with this new, shameful me." (245) She feels so only because she is brought up in typical Indian culture in which having a physical relationship before marriage is considered as a shameful act.

During her stay in America, she is attracted by Vic who supports her to find out her father. She discovers herself in the conflict of two choices: to stay in America or to return to India and marry Rajat. She says: "I'll have to make my new decision: Vic or Rajat, America or India." (218) But because of her Indian upbringing she returns to India seeking peace in one's root.

Divakaruni has artistically portrayed the Indian typical

woman through the character of Sarojini, an obedient wife of Bimal Prasad Roy, following the orders of her husband. He hides the lies of her husband and son-in-law just for the sake of her husband's honour.

While searching for her father Korobi needs some money so she sells her hair to fulfill her need considering her hair as her own property. Her friend Seema, brought up in Indian traditional culture gets shocked to see her short hair. She asks Korobi, "Oh my God! What have you done! All your beautiful hair, gone! Does your grandmother know? Did your in-laws give you permission?" (177) This indicates the accountability of Indian women for the prestige of their family.

Apart from women's psychology, Divakaruni has poignantly exhibited Indian rituals on different occasions. She depicts the Indian tradition of naming the children having some significance associated with their name. In the novel Korobi's mother gives her the name 'Korobi' meaning a beautiful but poisonous plant, believing that Korobi would be able to protect herself in the patriarchal society. The Indians tend to expect their failures fulfilled by their children. Korobi's mother Anu lacked the toughness which she wanted to be in her daughter. As a result, she names her daughter 'Korobi'. Korobi does not like her name, she asks her father, "Did my mother tell you why she wanted to name me Korobi?" He tells her, "Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough of it herself." (253)

Being a diaspora author, Divakaruni has spent her early part of her life in India. Hence, she is well aware of many Indian rituals and conventions which reflect in her novels. She recollected her memories of various rituals performed in India and represented them in this novel. While describing an Indian pooja Vidhi she writes: "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." (6) She mentions another ritual that brings good luck and prosperity to the engaged couple 'the mustard-seed ceremony' in the novel.

Divakaruni is also aware of caste discrimination in India and depicts it in her novels. In this novel, she has skillfully used the Godhra incident. One of the characters in the novel Rajat fires a Muslim worker that creates furry among the workers. The workers who were working together become suspicious of each other. Asif, Mrs. Bose's chauffeur comes to her rescue when she is chased by the Muslim workers but she prefers to hand over the responsibility of Pia to Shikha, her secretary because of religious

differences. Asif is scolded by the workers for protecting Mrs. Bose. Divakaruni describes the furry of workers in the words: "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?" (211)

Divakaruni has explored Indian patriarchy through a very painful incident. Anu, Korobi's mother, falls in love with an Afro-American during her stay in America for higher studies. She wants to marry him after getting permission from her father Bimal Roy. Coming back from America she tries to convince her father for permission of marriage but all her attempts turn futile. While having arguments with her father, she slips of the staircase and dies in the hospital. Before dying, Anu gives birth to Korobi. Bimal Roy and Sarojini consider her as the only tie with their daughter Anu and groom her. They don't want to lose her at any cost. Bimal Roy takes the promise from Sarojini in the temple for not revealing the fact to anyone including Korobi.

Rajat and his family believe in Indian culture and family values. Rajat's parents give consent to Rajat and Korobi's marriage because Bimal Prasad Roy has prestige and reputation in the society for his cultural heritage. But Rajat gets afraid of what will happen if his parents come to know that Karobi is an illegitimate daughter of Anu. His fear indicates the rigid patriarchy prevailing in Indian society.

Divakaruni has not presented India in one sense but she has depicted the multiple aspects of Indian society. In this novel it is not just one observes India in an Indian setting but a foreign setting also. She describes how immigrated Indians live Indian life in a foreign land. Korobi observes India in foreign in Mitra's apartment which is above the Karaoke bar. She hears Bollywood songs from a Karaoke bar and finds Bollywood posters in the apartment. she says: "What a contradiction this apartment is! Noise from the karaoke bar below hits me in sudden blasts as guests enter and exit. 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" (97).

Divakaruni also describes Indian food and writes: "He brings me trays of food: rice and daal and Gujarati Karhi spiced with ginger, cooked by Desai's cousin." (214) Desi Indian food is witnessed in the American setting in the novel. She uses Indian words such as dal, chapatti, bhaji, chutney, chai, khadi, chappal, etc. To sum up, Divakaruni's novels project Indian society with its different perspectives. In *Oleander Girl* she has

proficiently depicted how Indian Society plays a pivotal role in the shaping of one's personality through the character of Korobi. She portrays real India by describing Indian rituals at various occasions, food, songs, woman psychology, patriarchy, etc. in her novels. Hence, it is evident that Divakaruni has represented the image of India in all its hue and colours in the novel *Oleander girl*.

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