

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Remapping the fragmented self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

Aditi Abhishikta

Research Scholar, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

Sidhartha Anahat

Student, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract:

The self in other words known as the individual characteristic of a person is the manifestation of one's identity. This identity constitutes the features of human thoughts, feelings, motives, senses and sensibilities directing the cycle of life and action. Due to variation in the conceptual perception, attitude and principles observed by the society in individual lives many a time the self experiences difficulty to grow and come in terms with the social environment particularly when the societal demands are incompatible which leads to the crisis of identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Oleander Girl (2013) weaves the scenario of the fragmented self uncovering the realities experienced by the three generations of women and their sensibilities at the backdrop of patriarchy. Korobi, the protagonist in her journey to know her true identity unfolds the saga of her mother's past that was kept hidden from her; her mother Anu Roy becomes a victim of the powerful force of the conservative notion that had taken a drastic turning point in her life; her grandmother Sarojini who was left with no other option than to be a submissive, subservient and ideal wife to her conformist husband. This piece of literary work has attempted to delineate the malicious grip of patriarchal attitude on individual lives and has also tried to substantiate the role of women emancipation in a progressive world of living.

Keywords: patriarchy, identity crisis, feminine sensibility, individual outlook, women emancipation

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the acclaimed contemporary Indian women novelists in English deals with the feminine sensibility of the Indian women as well as the immigrant women in her works of literary creative. Coming from Kolkata she has obtained her Masters in English from Wright State University in Dayton and Ph.D from the University of California, Berkeley. Her literary works have been included in over fifty anthologies e.g. Best American short stories, The Pushcart Prize Anthology, The O'Henry Prize for stories and also in the San Francisco Chronicle's 100 Best Book of the 20th century. Her literary output witnesses a spectrum of themes and techniques ranging from the victimization to protest self assertion. She has to her credit two collections of short stories namely, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). These were the precursor of many novels together with *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010) and *Oleander Girl* (2013). A common thread found in all these stories is the cultural fetters struggled by the immigrant women, their sensibilities, relationships, subjugation under patriarchy, conflict between tradition and modernity and self identities. Divakaruni pictures her characters in a realistic, credible and authentic way that gives the glimpse of women predicament in contemporary India and America.

Oleander Girl (2013) revolves around the theme of quest for the lost self by the protagonist, Korobi, an eighteen years old orphan who is taken good care by her grandparents, stern and strict Bimal Roy, tender and sensible Sarojini and her entire studies has taken place in a boarding school. Throughout her childhood Korobi has longed for her parent's love whom she has never seen even. The only knowledge she had gathered about her parents (informed by her grandparents) was that her mother Anu Roy died while giving birth to her and her father who was a lawyer died in a car accident before three months to her mother's death. There was not a single photo frame of her parents in the big mansion of Bimal Roy, 25 Tarak Prasad Roy Road in Kolkata thinking that the past memory will bring utter grief to the old couple. Neither anybody raised a question about it nor was there any discussion on this topic. Though Korobi wanted to know much about her parents she could not explore as it would be painful to her grandparents.

Korobi is engaged to Rajat Bose who belonged to one affluent Bengali family. Though he was a play boy kind of a man, he really loved Korobi and her arrival in his life not only changed him into a responsible man taking interest in family business but also brought him close to the true definition of life and love. So Rajat's parents were happy to accept her though she did not match with their modern way of living.

Korobi sees her mother's shadow in a dream in the morning of her engagement day and feels as if her mother wants her to find out something by pointing her fingers outside the window towards the ocean. She wonders whether it is a blessing for the day or a

warning for the unexpected coming ahead. When she consults with her grandmother regarding it Sarojini tries to avoid it pretending to be busy and tired. Korobi senses a kind of secrecy in her behavior. She gets an old love note written by her mother to her father inside a book of poetry immersed with deep love between the both that arouses her interest even more to find out what was unknown to her till then. The sudden death of Korobi's dear grandfather on her engagement night, the silence of her grandmother followed by the shocking revelation that her father might still be alive, open up an unknown and uncertain past in Korobi's life.

It is a great shock for Korobi to learn from her grandmother Sarojini that her father was not an Indian, a foreigner, not a lawyer and that he did not die in a car accident. Anu was in love with him during her stay in America when she had been there for higher studies on a scholarship. Anu wanted to marry that man who also loved her dearly but did not get the permission from her father Bimal Roy. Anu had to come back in hope of getting her father's consent but she was already carrying Korobi then. Though she tried all possible ways of convincing her rigid, conservative father, it was all futile. In a temper of arguments she slipped from the staircase and started bleeding. That is how she died in the hospital giving birth to Korobi. It was a severe heartbreak for Bimal Roy and Sarojini losing their only loving child in front of their eyes and the only light of hope for them to survive was the newly born baby, Korobi whom they would not lose at any cost and who was the only one to tie Anu with them. Bimal Roy took a promise from Sarojini in their temple not to reveal these facts to any one not even to Korobi as she grows or to leave him for good.

'We'll grow old in an empty house while she is brought up in another country without culture or values,' he said. 'Do you want that?'

'I shook my head.'

'Then swear on the goddess that you'll never contact him-or tell her about him.'

'I felt only a moment's compunction. I had no love for the stranger who had snatched our daughter from us. And I agreed with your grandfather: it would be the best thing for you.'

'Later, as you grew and began asking about your mother and father, I would have my doubts, but I could not say anything, not until I became the only keeper of your secret.'(p.62)

Things were hard for Korobi to believe and accept. She thought of her unseen father. At least he should have come to India to fetch her as he truly loved her mother. She was furious to hear from Sarojini that her grandfather had sent a telegram to her father mentioning both mother and child were dead and not to come to India as it would increase their distress more. Korobi and her grandmother had been sent to their ancestral home in the village for first one year. Meanwhile Bimal Roy had managed to arrange a death certificate to avoid further problems and had also managed many other things for which he had paid huge money. Once in a month he visited the village and most of the time spent holding Korobi, loving her the most as he could see Anu's reflection within her. But this love can not cover the crude reality that caused Anu's death.

'Korobi looks away. Sarojini knows that this is what hurts her granddaughter the most. Not just the deception, but that it came from the man she had trusted more than anyone else in her life.'(p.63)

Korobi realizes that it is difficult for her to begin a new life with Rajat and not wise also until she finds out the true identity of her fragmented self. She could feel her heart heavy with anger, sorrow, disappointment and distaste. Even if she wanted also she could not burst on her grandmother for her folly, as she was the one who dared to cut the silence of so many years and speak the unspoken words that were forbidden to come to light. The answer to Korobi's identity lies across the ocean, the United States, where Anu had spent a few years as a student. Her intellect doesn't take the advice of Sarojini not to reveal anything to Rajat, to forget everything and begin a new life. If she does, it would be the continuation of the same deception against the loyal love of her parents and one of whom is still alive now with the knowledge that his daughter is no more.

She discloses her every fact to Rajat who has all the sympathy for her but persuades her not to venture any further. Bimal Roy's family and mansion had earned a good name and reputation of procuring the precious cultural heritage and tradition. That was the reason Rajat's parents had agreed for his choice though Roy's family did not match with their rich, modern high status. Now that Korobi was an illegitimate daughter of an unknown father, her going to USA would bring out what more in store was making Rajat afraid. Though he explained to Korobi that he least bothered about the past and interested more in present and future and that his love for her will never cease, Korobi is steady in her decision.

".....Rajat you don't understand! I don't want it to fade away. I'm shocked and hurt, yes, but I'm excited, too. Do you see? I have a father now! I can meet the man my mother loved so much! All my life I longed to understand my parents. Now fate has given me a chance."(p.67)

Korobi's journey for identity takes her across the oceans, as was indicated in her dream, in the United States overcoming her grandmother's anxiety on unearthing a truth that has long been masked, her fiancé's cynicism and feeling of insecurity in her travelling alone to America on an uncertain goal and her in-laws' awkwardness on her cultural background. She dexterously peels off layer by layer, the thick swaddle of the years of lies and secrecy. One can not stop but admire Korobi's spirit with the progress of events, as she metamorphoses from the simple, inexperienced, protected and sensitive girl into a bold, determined, passionate and independent woman to be reckoned with. A woman who embraces her inheritance, strengthened rather than diminished by who she really is. She can be compared with Ida in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) where Ida ventures into her journey of quest for identity in exploring her mother's past.

It was not an easy or simple task either for Korobi to find out her father in a foreign land without having his photograph and knowing only his first name i.e. Rob. Though she takes help from a private detective and his young assistant Vic who are good at this work and take keen interest, there were many Robs being speculated during Anu Roy's stay in California University, Berkeley. After the investigation is done more specific Korobi gets a couple of people with the name Rob and becomes hopeful for one of them to be her father. Unfortunately she is received with rebuke, humiliation and assaults who wanted to take advantage of her loneliness. Desperate but determined Korobi does not want to give up her mission. She makes herself strong enough to face all odds of life. Even she gets cut her long beautiful hair liked a lot by Rajat in order to get some money to stay a little longer in USA and pursue her search further. Finally she meets the real Rob her father, Rob Lacey, from whom she learns the strong bond of love between her parents and also the fact that he was an African-American. He showed her that every place with which the memory of Anu was associated. Korobi could feel the unmeasured depth of love in his heart for her mother. He explained to Korobi that when Anu started to USA for further studies her father had made her promise in their temple that without his permission she should not marry to anybody. That was the reason a pregnant Anu had come to India to take her father's permission to marry and give birth to their symbol of love. A rigid conservative traditional father's attitude could not allow for that and Anu died while delivering the baby. The worst part was that Korobi's father personally had come to India after getting the news but was held responsible for the tragic death of both and was asked to leave at once. It becomes hard for Korobi to accept everything.

Korobi expresses her confusion why she has been named on poisonous flowers, which is hardly known to anyone. Korobi asked her father "Did my mother ever tell you why she wanted to name me Korobi?" Her father tells her the reason: "She did actually, 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."(p.253)

The sequences of events quite naturally invokes one's intellect reflecting back the position of Korobi's mother, how she might have felt, the pain she incurred, the agony, tribulations and trauma she might have undergone. She might have pleaded before the rigid and stubborn attitude of Bimal Roy in the process of convincing her love, relationship, and her loyalty towards the promise she had given him for which she was not married. How helpless and lonely she might have found herself. There was nobody to understand her innocent, true feelings. Was she really at fault? Was she really guilty of committing any sin? For which she had to pay the penalty at the cost of her life. Love is the most precious gift of God to mankind. How could it be a sin? If Bimal Roy could accept, love and bring up with care the sapling (Korobi) of that relationship what was wrong in accepting her father. These crude, orthodox, patriarchal, conservative attitudes lost a precious life, separated a daughter from her parents and kept a father away from his child for seventeen years. Anu Roy became a silence for ever and her pathetic experience a formidable memory.

The life of Sarojini was not less than a persecution either. Though she understood the feelings of her daughter, had faith on her right choice but could not support and help her. She was continuously under the pressure of patriarchy. She was forced to follow and accept the decision of her husband. Even she was not given a chance to offer suggestions for the well being of her daughter. She performed the duties of a conformist, conventional wife honoring the ideals of her husband without raising any question. But in her heart, she knew how much she wanted her daughter's happiness and at her loss how much she might have broken. With all the patience and sensibility she might have felt herself choked whenever Korobi had enquired about her parents. She might have shed tears in the dark chamber of her life recollecting every small memory of Anu without letting it noticed either by Korobi or Bimal Roy. It is only after her husband's death that she releases herself from the traditional suffocation and shares her every bit of pained memory with Korobi.

For Korobi the newly found facts opened up a different dimension to the existence of life. She was broken with the heartbreaking nightmare but also dared to stand in fetching the true identity to her fragmented self. In the venture of her quest in the foreign land the truth she ascertains is hard for her to believe. By thinking that it will take some time for Rajat and his parents to accept these events she does not disclose and decides to convey in person. Knowing well that it would create misunderstanding between the both she believes in the strength of her love. After coming back to India she finds herself rejected in the eyes of Rajat and his mother, but she is bold enough to face the test of time. Though there is a progressive milestone in the field of art, literature, science, technology and media while comparing the society of centuries ago and society of today with the transitions in generations but the world of patriarchy is often seen giving limited scope for women emancipation in certain aspects. In the words of Nehru, "We talk of revolution - Political and Economic and yet the greatest revolution in a country is one that effects improvement in the status and living conditions of its women." For a progressive world of living women emancipation is one of the most significant tool or requirement with which lies the success and prosperity of the present and future generation in true sense. In the words of Mary Daly, the feminist theologian: "the process of liberation involves the creation of new space in which women are free to become who we are, in which they are real and significant alternatives to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions."

Korobi experiences transformation in the manner of dealing with the circumstances and she does succeed in getting back her love freeing herself from the web of patriarchy being truly the beautiful oleander that her mother wanted her to be.

References

- i. Banerjee, Chitra Divakaruni. *Oleander Girl*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2013.
- ii. Iyengar, K R Srinivas. "Indian Writing in English" New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Limited, 1985.
- iii. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* ISSN 0976-8165 Vol III Issue III, 7 Sep 2012.
- iv. *LANGUAGE IN INDIA* Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow ISSN 1930-2940 Volume 11 6 June 2011.
- v. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities* Volume 1 Issue V Feb 2014 ISSN 2321 - 7065