



The Gneiss Impact In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Oleander Girl

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ABSTRACT: Diaspora has always been debated in the light of migration as the search for better prospects, education, marriage or to heal wounds, break downs in life, forge new boundaries and create a new identity. America is always viewed as the land of opportunities with, "Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs". This article titled "The Gneiss Impact" signifies the crossing of boundaries by the protagonist Korobi in search of her biological father. The search which begins with this minuscule idea undergoes a sea of change due to the surfacing experiences and results in self-realization, self-fulfillment, and self-constructed identity. Identity therefore as Thapan believes, "is not a finished product, it is rather a social construction ... The representation of identity, therefore, is an ongoing process, since immigrant identities are continually transformed by the journey, the subjectivities being recomposed in different spaces and sites of experience" (Thapan 29). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed writer and currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her active involvement in organizations, MAITRI, DAYA, and PRATHAM, which helps battered women testifies her drive to provide the clarion call to women to rise above situations. Through Korobi, in *Oleander Girl* she addresses the misconception of society that men are adventurers and a woman's spaces are the home and kitchen. She also underscores the need to break away from the psychological barriers of caste, creed, and religion.

Keywords: diaspora, nostalgia, victimized, trauma, resilience, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Diasporic writings are replete with exhaustive details of Diaspora and Diaspora dilemmas. The present article moves beyond the confines of these findings to present the reactions of Korobi to situations and circumstances and traces the scaffolding of reactions that gives birth to the transformational journey from the chrysalis stage of captivity to freedom. Justifying this thought is Divakaruni's interview with Anand Rajok while recalling the character of Sita. She claims that the character of Sita, "taught me that though we can't always control what happens to us, we can control our reactions. We can choose to live courageously, without compromise" (Divakaruni 6).

Korobi's visit to a friend's birthday party sets the pace for her transformational journey. Traditionally dressed she is just a spectator in the crowd until Rajat, the high-priced individual spots her. She acknowledges his request and joins him on the dance floor. This meeting blossoms into friendship and she desires to marry him. However, setting herself free from the cocoon of 26 Tarak

Prasad Roy Road is doubly challenging due to her traditional grandfather and their current financial status, as compared to Rajat.

With much persuasion, Bimal Roy complies with Korobi's request to marry Rajat. An upholder of traditional beliefs, his views reveal the clash between, 'tradition' and 'modernity' and are evident during Korobi's engagement. Perceiving the seating arrangements in the temple, he laments "For generations, we've been praying on the floor. They can't do it for one day? Sacrifice a little comfort for the goddess's blessing?" (Divakaruni 6).

Korobi's decision to marry Rajat is her foremost step towards maturity. At this point in time, she is still considered a quiet, weak, and vulnerable individual by her grandparents. The calm and serene pre-adult stage is broken up with the visitation of her dead mother, Anu. Unable to comprehend the complete essence of this visitation and entranced by the ceremonial preparations of her engagement, Korobi though delighted, brushes it aside and keeps it a secret. Hailing from a traditional background, Bimal Roy wanted Korobi to wear a saree for the evening's reception. On the contrary, Korobi desires to please her modern in-laws and chooses to wear the off-shoulder maroon chiffon Kurti with slim-fitting pants. This gives rise to heated arguments between Bimal and Korobi. It is a depiction of the controversies that arise between different generations, traditions, and modernity. Bimal's dislike for the modern lifestyle is further perceived in his cynical comment, "I told you, Bose -babu, all that singing-dancing -alcohol-drinking- you know I don't approve" (Divakaruni 48).

The engagement party hosted by the Boses ends abruptly with the news of Bimal's hospitalization. This gloom reaches its climax with the patriarch's death and weighs heavily on the women binding them together. These discussions resurrect Anu's visitation and the secret of Korobi's parentage. In her bereavement, Sarojini shares the secret story of her daughter, Anu. Anu was a brilliant student and received a scholarship which landed her in America. It was her escape mode that she used to travel far away from her domineering and traditionally bound father. Eager to assimilate, she develops a live-in relationship with an African - American. Her pregnancy creates new problems as she is unable to marry Rob due to the promise made to her father. Besotted with feelings of nostalgia and with the desire to be set free from the promise, she decides to visit her parents in India. Struggling to get a release from the promise, Anu's three-month-long stay ends in her accidental death and the newborn Korobi is sent away with Sarojini to their ancestral home in the village.

Her mother's story brings to life the first characteristic of Cohen, dispersal. Korobi is ecstatic with the discovery that she is no longer an orphan and resolves to go in search of her father. For in finding him, she believes that she would not only discover her parentage, nonetheless, her identity too. Sarojini's initial fear of Korobi's trip is, "When people went there, they forgot their loved ones they had left behind. They forgot themselves, too. No one returned from that country, although they weren't unhappy there in their bewitchment" (Divakaruni 92). Korobi convinces both Sarojini and Rajat, who then support her in this endeavour. Sarojini sells her antique jewellery, while Rajat locates a detective in America to search for Korobi's father and financially provides for the entire trip.

The search begins with the narrowing of geographical boundaries and dissolving boundaries of time zone. Malcolm Waters interprets globalization as "a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and people become aware that they are receding" (Waters 48). As characterized by Robin Cohen, every migrant experiences, Dispersal, and scattering, followed by collective trauma, cultural flowering, troubled relationship with the majority, the sense of community by transcending national frontiers, and the final return to the homeland. Setting foot into America, she experiences collective trauma in the circumstances that confront her. Nostalgia seeps into her as she is forced to sleep in a tiny room with a mattress on the floor in Mitra's cramped apartment.

In her travel to meet the detective, she is a victim to a passerby. “He suddenly turns and lumbers towards me, mumbling, hand outstretched. His nails are bluish, dirt-encrusted. His eyebrows look scorched” (Divakaruni 223). Her timely reaction frightens the man away and stops him from advancing. This is her first experience of ‘New America’. Her feeling of despondency is obvious as she desperately tries to get in touch with Rajat. Moreover, Mr. Mitra’s dealing of avoidance keeps her alienated except for Seema’s endearing interactions with her. Although from different families, the women bond together and support each other in creating their self-constructed identity.

Korobi encounters a cultural shock when Seema disapproves of her wearing a salwar kameez to meet her prospective father. Instead, Seema gives her a pantsuit to wear. This endorses the existing cultural disparities. All hopes of finding her father are shattered at this meeting and she falls prey to Rob Macey’s deception. Finding her alone, he tries to molest her. Albeit, she does not buckle-under pressure, rather she fights back and sensibly saves herself with Vic’s support. Vic is Divakaruni’s voice encouraging women, “I want you to know that you were brave and quick-witted in a situation where most women would have fallen apart. You deserve to be proud of yourself” (Divakaruni 205). These words calm the traumatized Korobi, encourage her to extend her stay and continue the ongoing search for her father.

Another episode of cultural shock awaits Korobi, when Vic suggests that they spend the night in a motel due to heavy snowing in Boston. She asserts, “You don’t know how people think back in India! I can’t spend the night alone with you. Well, not with you -ah, you know what I mean. Engagements have been broken for far less” (Divakaruni 154). Nevertheless, her ability to adapt to situations while upholding traditional values is best revealed as she accepts the suggestion and insists that they have separate rooms despite the prevailing financial crunch.

Determined to accomplish the purpose of her visit and desire for economic freedom is palpable when she sacrifices her tresses to meet the need, “Stay focused on the moment, I order myself. On the necessity of now” (Divakaruni 343). Accounting for the haircut episode, Vic remarks, “It was a big step to take. I must say, I didn’t expect you to go through with it” (Divakaruni 177).

Her actions of sightseeing with Vic and haircutting lead to psychological controversy. She wonders how would her fiancée Rajat, her in-laws, the Boses, and her grandmother, Sarojini react? These thoughts spring forth as Seema cries out, “Oh my God! What have you done! All your beautiful hair, gone! Does your grandmother know? Did your in-laws give you permission?” (Divakaruni 344).

Finally, Korobi fulfills her desire of finding her father and accepts the bitter-sweet truth of her parentage. The fact that her father is African -American does not deter her from accepting him. Before leaving America, she promises to keep in touch with him regardless of the reactions of her grandmother, Rajat, or in-laws. The character of Rob is impressive, although married, he considers Korobi’s future his responsibility and spends time with her before she leaves migrant shores. His concluding remark at the airport reveals his love for his daughter, “I’d love to have you closer to me, you know that. Make you part of my life, make up for some of the lost years” (Divakaruni 483). It is also a powerful reminder that love dissolves boundaries of colour, race, or nation. It is this realization that promotes mutual respect and harmony with oneself and all beings.

A victorious Korobi returns to India, however, her new identity brews opposition and suspicion, as her in-laws are unwilling to accept this new Korobi. Undeterred she proclaims, “I’m Korobi Oleander capable of surviving drought and frost and the loss of love” (Divakaruni 275). Sarojini is in awe of this new Korobi and exclaims, “The girl Sarojini had seen off at the airport could never have managed it” (Divakaruni 276).

Korobi’s journey is an eye-opener to diasporic women, to grow out of the caterpillar stage of luxury and comfort and view every stage of migrancy as a vehicle to transform the way they live. As depicted by Korobi, immigration should be considered as the beginning of another beautiful phase of one’s identity.

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