



Migrants' Agony and Ordeal as Reflected in *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract

Diasporic writers are always hankering for their native land and can't come back from the host land and are supposed to continue with the same situation there because subconsciously they are attached to the traditions, customs, values and language of their homeland. Diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni always gives attention to the issues of migrants in her writings. She specially highlights the psychological conflicts and dilemma that the migrants undergo, while compromising on an adjustment with the new culture in which they are placed. Getting physically and mentally settled and psychologically comfortable in the new country and unknown culture proves a tremendous ordeal for the migrants therefore they also undergo an enormous agony and torture that result in severe anguish. In Chitra Banerjee's novel *Oleander girl*, the same is found in an eighteen years old Korobi Roy's character. This paper is a humble effort to focus on the psychological conflict, agony and ordeal that Korobi experiences.

Key words: migrants, diaspora, agony, ordeal, identity crisis.

Chitra Banerjee is one of the prominent and acclaimed writers of Indian origin and has numerous national and international readers, since her first publication. It is noticeable that she has been concerned tremendously with experiences of migrant Indian women. Chitra Banerjee was born in Kolkata and moved to America for her graduate studies. In her novels, we find the heart of her work. It has been her desire to "go beyond silence" about the migrant women and to penetrate into their problems and their desires and ability to fight the circumstances. Divakaruni speaks at IIT Gandhinagar, she says, "my migration made me writer because I missed my life in Kolkata." Hence, she started writing about migration and displacement. So, diaspora becomes her major theme of writings which deals with two cultures, two attitudes, two personalities of same person, due to this a diasporian gets caught into mental state of agony and frustration. Neelu Jain says "Divakaruni

relates the tales and traditions through her characters hint towards the means used by immigrants to keep intact the Indian culture among their children in an alien land." Award-winning South Asian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays mainly the truthful picture of the plight of Indian women, their great suffering, their humble submission and undeserved humiliation in male dominating society. It can be clearly seen in the woman character named Korobi Roy, in her novel *Oleander Girl*. Based on her own life experiences, Divakaruni manages to blend the two cultures beautifully of native land and host land. D. Dhanlaxmi in her thesis titled, "Diasporic Experience of Women in Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" has found out that Chitra Banerjee mainly discusses the experiences of migrant women and their conflicts. Chitra Banerjee's characters specially women, when go to other country, they feel alienated and lost. In search of their self-identity

and respect, a lot of mental friction occurs in their minds which results in mental distress, trauma, anger, agony and ordeal. Chitra Banerjee skillfully portrays her characters and brings out all the psychological aspects of her characters in vivid manner.

Oleander Girl, a bildungsroman novel built around crucial moments in the lives of three generations of women in an Indian American family. In *Oleander Girl* also Chitra Banerjee has shown that Korobi, an eighteen years old girl struggling against all odds and how she takes a journey to America in search of her lost father after 9/11 and encounters with many challenges and thus results in psychological agony and ordeal. According to Rustomji – kerns – 1995, “Divakaruni once again reveals her ability to create subtle image of women’s anguish when trapped in terrible relationships, when forced to live within rigid codes”. V. Samuel Morris, M. Poonkodi in their research titled “Deterritorialization and Traumatic Experiences of the protagonist in *Oleander Girl*” have found that Korobi undergoes series of traumatic experiences, but she becomes strong enough through troublesome encounters and find her real identity by herself.

The protagonist of the novel is an eighteen years old young girl stays with her grandparents and studies in boarding school. She knows very less about her mother, who died while giving birth to her, and her father a lawyer, who died in a car accident,

In her boarding school her reputation is of a daredevil person, and she has always been scolded by principal, which did not matter to her. After finishing school, she enters into adulthood and gets engaged to Rajat. She comes to know the reality about her parents and suddenly feels like she has lost her identity. Her grandmother reveals the truth about her father to her that he is alive, and he lives in America and his name is Rob and this discovery about her parents completely ruins her peaceful life and shatters her deep within.

In the quest of her true identity, she motivates herself across the ocean to investigate to whom she was born. She experiences tremendous psychological conflict and agony. All she knows

about herself was a lie, to find out the truth, she decides to go to America and to explore the whereabouts of her father. Thus she takes up the challenge to dig out the truth about her self-identity and ventures towards a foreign land. She knows that it is going to be a very challenging path to search a man on a foreign land without a photograph. She gives up her peaceful, secured and settled life in Kolkata and even her love in order to find her identity.

“We’ll get married in a couple of months, she shakes her head impatiently as though she didn’t even hear his declaration of love. “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! All my life I longed to understand, my parents. Now fate has given me a chance.” (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *OG* 67)

Diasporic consciousness of the author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni always reflects in her works through various characters, situations and experiences. Korobi takes the risk of leaving everything behind and moves to an unknown land in search for her identity and to unveil the family secrets. When she arrives at America, Mitra is supposed to come for her escort but after a pretty long time, since her arrival, she finds him nowhere. She gets scare, and becomes worried and annoyed and says,

“Always I’m losing my Indian courtesies, I’m thinking in them of survival, like an immigrant”. (*OG* 94)

In New York, an unknown city, Korobi travels from end to end by bus, because taxis are very expensive. She was not used to of such type of life in Kolkata. Due to all these experiences, she undergoes all types of emotions of anger, sorrow, distress and disgust in this host country. Korobi suddenly plunges into illegitimate child for Rajat’s family and society. She takes all the risks of social as well as geographic arena and like other migrants, Korobi also gives up all the comfort and luxuries in the foreign land.

Furthermore, she meets up three men, all named 'Rob' but experiences which Korobi encounters, leaves her shattered because one of the men she meets to investigate whether he is her father, attempts a physical abuse on her. This incident makes her disturbed, dismayed and distempered.

In another incident, a man named Rob, thinks she is doing all the investigations to confiscate his money. She meets up all three men, but discovers to her disappointment that they are not her relatives. This rummage of her to locate her father goes in vain, and she feels tremendous disappointment, frustration, and dissatisfaction. All these emotions bring a psychological conflict in her, and she is about to give up her search. Korobi's search faces various obstacles and hurdles one after another.

To my chagrin, I find myself drifting off as I listen to Rajat. I shake my head, I pinch my arm, but never have I experienced such lassitude, descending on me like a evil spell, perhaps my body longs to escape, in the only way known to it, from this country where I'm unloved. (OG, 121)

It is seen that author Chitra Banerjee has successfully shown the psychological conflict that Korobi goes through, due to social and cultural dogma, in her writing that characters experience in the foreign land.

Korobi restores her hope and mental strength and meets Meera Anand, who accepts of knowing her mother Anu Roy and also her father Rob Lacey. Enormous pressure and conflict surrounds her when she comes to know that her father is an African-American.

"Because we all made a huge wrong assumption. Grandma I want to you to sit down by the telephone before I tell you. My father's not white. He's black." "It sounded like you said my father's black." "That is what I said. My father's African-American." (OG 224)

When she travels to California, she runs out of money, then Mr. Desai, an investigator she hires, suggests her to call her fiancé Rajat ask him to send some more money to her but she decides to sell her

hair and not ready to ask for money to anyone. This makes her more confident and wants to keep her search continue until she gets the result. Divakaruni exhibits the way Korobi undergoes agony due to lack of money, as money is important thing on an alien land and the way this young woman withstands with all the problems courageously.

When she goes with Vic to Boston to enquire about Rob Evanston, she learns that this man is nothing to do with her mother, despaired and demoralized Korobi felt hopelessness. Weather in Boston was very unfavorable to travel further, so they have to take shelter in an inn for a night, Korobi struggles with conflict, whether to spend night with Vic or not, due to her Indian upbringing and cultural values. Korobi faces a lot of problems here in California and Rajat is doubting on Korobi that she has an affair with Vic. Korobi was going through very tough time and she lost into the labyrinth of her thoughts.

"My life feels too heavy for me to shoulder alone. I'd thought myself strong and brave, smart and adventurous but I was just a girl who needed someone to hold me." (OG 161)

Towards the end of the novel, Korobi learns from her father that her parents are unmarried and she is born out of wedlock and she is an illegitimate child, this fact devastated her and the entire notion about herself of who she is shaken up.

"Your mother and I were never married." For a moment, the words hover in the air between us, meaningless. Then I stare at him aghast. (OG 245).

Now she decides whether to go back to India or to stay back to America because Rajat and his mother have not liked the facts about Korobi's parents, and Vic is very much interested in her and she again faces conflict whether India or America, Rajat or Vic. Korobi is now stronger after learning about her parents, she comes under dilemma whether to give back the engagement ring to Rajat and to free herself from the ties of this relationship.

I must see Rajat right now in his anger. If he isn't willing to listen when I tell him the truth, if he's

unable to accept me as I am, there's no future for us.
(OG 271)

Chitra Banerjee being a diasporic writer brings out skillfully the challenges of the migrants into her writings. She knitted the conservative and contemporary values very proficiently in bringing out psychological state, faced by Korobi in the patriarchal Indian society. Under the name of traditions and customs, society ruins the love life of Korobi's mother and father and brings suffering to them due to cultural mindset of not accepting inter-religion marriage. Korobi that is Oleander Girl gets trap under the shackles of identity crisis due to which she has to go through an ordeal. Thus, Chitra Banerjee articulates the life of migrants and their quest for self-identity gets caught between two worlds and two cultures and result in all types of conflict left them with agony and torture.

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