

Confronting Stereotypes: Struggle for Identity in *Oleander Girl*

Dr.V.MEENAKSHI

Assistant Professor of English

Government Arts and Science College, Orathanad

Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Oleander Girl (2013) mirrors many concerns which find space otherwise in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's realm of issues. The book has been variously studied as a novel portraying quest for identity, migration, displacement and women empowerment. This paper makes an attempt to portray the stereotypical women struggling for their identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*.

Keywords: stereotypes, identity, stranglehold, patriarchal, gender, immigrant.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a world-acclaimed author, born in Calcutta, who published literary works of various genres with poems, novels and short stories paving new ways for understanding of humanistic issues of the world. Divakaruni has attracted readers' attention with her poetry and fiction dealing with the problems of Indian emigrants. Being an Indian-American, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni contrasts the two cultures juxtaposing them, bringing out the idiosyncrasies of each. Being an immigrant, she understands the pain and agony of living in foreign land. Her characters depict the problems faced by Indians outside the country. Her works take us into the tormented psyche of Indian women and give alternative understanding of South Asian Diaspora.

In every work of hers, the protagonist's struggle is mirrored in the struggle of other women. These women live fractured lives, torn between the stratified, hierachial existence which they once believed to be the ultimate reality and their struggle for identity. The truths that they once held sacred come crashing down as they are left adrift in the stormy skies of love and loss. What is remarkable is the courage with which they face this fracture, living many realities and truths while carrying in their wombs the genesis of change; the burning ashes from which a phoenix is born.

Oleander Girl focusses on the larger question of negotiating identities in the intersectionality of religion, caste, class and gender. The seed of the story of Karobi was already sown in the stories that have come before it and continues with the story that comes after it: Tilo of *The Mistress of Spices*, Sudha and Anju of *Sister of My Heart*

and Sabitri, Bela and Tara of *Before We Visit the Goddess*. *Oleander Girl* is framed in the context of this recurring struggle to confront the stranglehold of the hierarchy of power. It comes through as the journey of a writer who sowed the seeds of Karobi's struggles in Tilo, Sudha, Anju, and developed them in Sabitri, Bela, and Tara and many other women. It examines the forces that stratify society by creating stereotypes which break down only when man and woman wake up to their own identity and listen to the voices inside them. Ultimately, this leads to the reconstruction of identity in the changing landscape of the mind; which is possible, only through pain, destruction and sacrifice. The confrontation takes place at two levels, in the minds of the protagonists and in their decisions, which destroy as well as create. *Oleander Girl* depicts this struggle through the female characters of novel: Jayashree, Pia, Sarojini, Sonia, Anu, at various stages of surrender and negotiation, and destruction. The struggles of these women are part of the journey of the protagonist, Karobi, the Oleander girl. The struggle is framed in the intersectionality of caste, class, religion and gender, on whose fulcrum of social structures the identity of the protagonist and her family operates. Love tears this identity apart to question the verity of these structures.

Oleander Girl delves into these questions lightly but firmly, affirming that change comes through confrontation of the shadows that both bind and tear apart the mosaic of humanity. Yet this emerging of new identities and thereby new social orders does not come without its price, the breaking down of and sacrifice of the familiar, the known and cherished: the death of Anju, Karobi's mother; the

death of her grandfather; the cutting of Karobi's hair and her discovery of being black and bastard. In the fire of this questioning, pretense of purity, heritage and lineage and the love that binds them together burns and breaks down.

Oleander Girl chronicles the journey of a young girl's search for her father, which becomes a search for her identity, a struggle to confront the stereotypes which strangle her: the silken threads of race, class and gender. As she questions these empty pretenses, she suffers pain and loss and reconstructs herself in making her choices.

The Oleander Girl, Karobi loves her grandfather to distraction, she worships him and obeys his traditional bindings over her youthful urges. Her rigid, patriarchal and proud grandfather sets impossible standards, dampening Karobi's desires. She does not understand his fear, and why her mother, who is long gone, is not mentioned in their house. However, what seems like an unjustified restriction to Karobi, is the result of guilt and fear of a broken man who lies to his beloved granddaughter about her father's death, only to save her from shame. This sets Karobi on a journey to find her wronged father and to find her real identity. In this, she neglects the love of her life, leaving him to destroy his parents' life work through his foolish decisions and settle his own scores with a troubled past.

The first reality that breaks down for Karobi is the solid love and worship of her grandfather and his rules, for he was neither true nor upright. His actions lead not only to the death of her mother but also the estrangement of her father who is forced to believe the death of his wife and daughter in an elaborate subterfuge. All this is to keep Karobi to himself and uphold the family name. Worse still, he led Karobi to believe that her father was dead.

In America where Karobi is forced to cut her hair and assume a new identity, she discovers that she is a bastard and a black man's daughter. Struggling in a new world, where trouble lurks at every turn, Karobi faces the breakdown of every structure her grandfather had carefully woven around her-- caste, class, race and gender. And then the Oleander girl realizes that her mother never married her father, to honour the promise she had made to Karobi's grandfather-- that she would not marry without his permission. The journey her mother took to India was to repair the rift between herself and her father, and bring her daughter into this world honourably. Karobi rues that her mother died without being able to do so and thus the final

thread which binds her to her grandfather breaks, leaving Karobi adrift in an empty ocean, to find her true identity.

Here Karobi becomes one with the many women that Divakaruni has sketched before her: Anju who loses both her husband and baby to the love of the 'Sister of her Heart' and Sudha who loses her husband and lover, only to carve a new self with her binding shame; Tilo, the Mistress of Spices who loses her secret powers and her position as Mother to become human and to love and suffer, for sorrow of a broken city; Sabitri, Bela and Tara who lose each other and their loved ones in the search for the self. All of them show exceptional courage in carving new identities. Divakaruni has in her books sketched a long line of struggling women whose beliefs in the old order lay broken: Lalita whose husband rapes her (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*), Sabitri who betrays and is punished by her husband who takes to drink and Bela whose husband turns her daughter, Tara against her (Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess*). Yet both Sabitri and Bela rise above their daughters' hatred; Bela who loses husband, daughter and mother and yet conquers her guilt to write books and do cookery shows, Tara who her conquer her kleptomaniacal tendencies and the loss of her child (Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess*). All these struggles to understand their lives and their own selves form a kaleidoscopic mirror of the many selves that lay the seed of Karobi, who ultimately transcends the breaking of the earth underneath her feet, the earth made up of the sands of race, class, caste and gender of being legitimate or illegitimate, honoured or condemned. The spirits of these individual stories have not only converged in the creation of Karobi but also allowed her to transcend their identities.

In *Oleander Girl*, other women connected to Karobi, frame her struggles: Sarojini struggles against her husbands' cruelty, rising above his repression and false brahminical pride and emerges strong and stable after her husband's death; Pia who has already broken the boundaries of race and class defies her brother in order to talk to her old friend Asif, causing him to save them almost at the cost of his life; Jayashree whose father-in-law spit at her, causing her to vow in anger to rise above her class, to become rich and famous; Seema who escapes the strangle hold of her husband's grip, and sells her hair and jewelry to return to India. These women through their own struggles mirror and frame Karobi's questioning of the bindings of race, caste, gender and class which are built on hypocrisy so as to affirm the power in the hands of the few. When the women in Divakaruni's books break through their

stranglehold, they suffer loss and pain but emerge victorious.

In Indian culture race, caste and gender have their own symbols that proclaim their identity: clothes, jewelry, cars, houses, beauty, temples and servants. In the confrontation of stereotypes these symbols are destroyed, ravaged and vandalized. In *Oleander Girl* Rajat's Art Gallery in America and in his warehouse are vandalized, Karobi has to cut off hair, Sarojini and Seema sell off their jewelry, Asif sacrifices his employer's Rolls Royce. With this destruction comes the release from bonds and Asif becomes a part of the Bose household, Karobi accepts herself as bastard, black and penniless like a kite set free from the strings of her brahminical origins: the Roy heritage and its definitions of her duty as a granddaughter. Later when cast out of the Bose household she sheds her ideas of what a betrothed should do, to affirm her identity and becomes the real Oleander girl. This journey is true of the male characters as well: Rajat in finding his car destroyed and his life in danger, undergoes a transformation, Mr. Bose sees the danger of holding on to the vandalized Art Gallery in America and sells it. In her earlier works, Divakaruni does not explore the development of male characters as fully as she does in *Oleander Girl*. In *Oleander Girl*, Mr. Bose cooks gourmet meal and gives the credit entirely to his wife; it is a secret between his wife and him. He is the alter ego of the stereotypical caste, class and gender conscious male who follow all the rules: Mr. Bimal Roy, Karobi's grandfather. Asif, who is insulted by Rajat and Jayashree loves Pia as his own sister and struggles to please and protect her. The bond between Asif and Pia is examined in the development of both characters; Asif emerges stronger as Pia affirms their bond and because of Pia he grows and confronts both Sheikh and Mrs. Bose to transcend race and class. Mr. Bhattacharya finds a new self, very different from his class and heritage conscious pride, when he prays at the Roy's temple where Netaji once prayed. He confronts the hypocrisy of those who upheld Netaji's lineage and his own desire to build a stronghold of that lineage. He becomes human again in the

company of Sarojini and heals his own wounds by repairing her home.

Yet, this is not true of all the male as it is not true of all the females. In America, Karobi experiences class, race hatred, gender stereotypes in the men who accuse her of being a fraud and try to take advantage of her; beginning with Mitra and the other people whom she approaches in search of her father. Even her father first reacts in the same manner. Yet Rajat chastised by Pia changes and sheds both his class pride and his arrogance after a disastrous mishandling of an explosive situation at the warehouse which escalates into a racial riot.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an activist, professor and writer. Her novels are placed squarely on the shoulders of her experience of helping immigrant women. She weaves through the magical idiom of a master story teller these struggles of shifting identities transformed by the winds of change. *Oleander Girl*, a major milestone in this journey is also remarkable for its visual quality, the story unfolds before us like a movie. The words woven into a fabric of magic, come alive and enact, and cast the spell of reality so true that you want to touch the people it weaves you and itself around. This is why her stories are so popular, not because they are crafted from and through experience but because they like the clouds purge themselves in rain and transform the lives they touch by transcending the boundaries of class, caste, religion and gender to give new meanings to life.

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