

## Search for Identity in Oleander Girl by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly tries to focus on search for identity in Oleander Girl. It deals with the protagonist Karobi's strong desire to know about her father and her immigrant experience. To know the root of her father, she simply keeps her marriage plan aside though she knows and loves her boyfriend Rajatvery much. The paper also emphasizes Karobi's transformation in India as mild young girl and in America a strong matured woman who is ready to resist if anything goes wrong. It portrays the identity clashes, immigrant issues and the willpower she gains to raise money to live with financial independency. It focuses how Divakaruni used feminism to empower the characters. When she goes to America in search of her father, she experiences cultural clashes as an immigrant. It shows how she explores her identity and discovers her father after facing several physical encounters.

**Key Words:** Identity, Search, Transcultural, Immigrant, America, Transformation, Marriage.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Search for identity is the most discussed topic by several writers and critics in the post-colonial literature. The circumstances play a major role in the life of many people because of their cultural and rich traditional background. Therefore, they are sometimes getting isolated and becoming the victims in the society and family. They themselves question that who am i? Where am i from? Why am i here? These questions make them to haunt about their life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among the youngest writers bringing out the social realities. She has been well received as a writer who has explored the hybrid identities in most of her novels. In many of her works project the autobiographical elements which were used in her works in an artistic way. Her works mainly focus on an immigrant experiences having India as base and travelling to other countries especially America second for better opportunities and standard life styles. Her works also challenge the patriarchal dominance in the society. Men characters are replaced by the women characters in many of her novels. All her women characters are so powerful after getting realization about their life. The protagonist Karobi's transcultural journey has a strong impact on her life.

Karobi Roy, the protagonist of this novel is a 17 year old girl who lost her mother at birth. After that she has been brought up by her grandparents Bimal Roy and Sarojini. Bimal Roy is a powerful person, a retired barrister with high social status in his society. His wife Sarojini also belongs to the family of high social class. They are traditionally and culturally rich and very much respected in their locality. Their only daughter is Anu. She won the scholarship to study in America. Her parents are very much reluctant to send her study in America especially her father doesn't want her to send her to America. Finally, all his and Karobi's well-wishers ask Bimal Roy to send her saying it is a wonderful opportunity for Anu to show her academic talents and will be able to win in her life. As he gets enormous motivation from all the sides, he accepts her to send to America for her studies. However, he gets a promise from Anu not to marry anyone from America. He gets afraid due to the multi culture in America which motivates young people to mingle easily and so Anu may get married that spoils the entire reputation of his family. However, Anu loves Rob and wants to get married in America. But there is barrier to get married that she has promised her father not to marry anyone in America. As she gets pregnant, she longs to visit her parents for which she seeks permission through her mother Sarojini. When her father Bimal Roy accepts, she comes to her home where she is denied to return to America and gives her birth a female child named Karobi and then died.

Karobi is brought up by her grandparents in their village giving her an identity as a grandchild of Bimal Roy family. She has been given over care and never permitted her to ask anything about her parents. She finds a kind of darkness in her mind and feels complete isolation in her life. There is a silence that leads her life

thinking that whether they are alive or not. The only evidence about her parents is the letter that Karobi gets from her mother's book. The death of her grandfather Bimal Roy during her engagement with Rajat completely scattered into pieces about her life. She says to Rajat, "I'm so confused. All the things I was so proud of, my family, my heritage- they're only half- true. The other half of me- I don't know anything about it. Except that all this time my father was alive, and in America" (66). Feeling terrified about the death her husband; Sarojini opens the truth of Karobi's parents saying her mother Anu died and her father is an Afro – American named Rob who is still alive in America. Immediately Karobi has taken a strong decision to go to America keeping her marriage and Rajat aside in search of her father. Her eagerness and curiosity to know about her father propels her in her search. Many of the critics praise Karobi's decision at the youngest age all by her. Initially Rajat doesn't want her to go alone. After understanding her strong and determined willpower, Rajat is ready to support in her search. Mrs. Bose suggests to conduct the marriage at the earliest but Karobi wants to search her father first. She denies though she understands Rajat is a very good person and she is going to have a perfect blessed life if she marries him. She has a feminist determined mind that is why she has chosen searching her father first.

Feminism challenges the patriarchal structure and strongly resists the long accepted stereotypes and gender-roles thrust upon women. It fights for equal treatment and opportunities for women. According to dictionary.com, the word feminist means "a person whose beliefs and behavior are based on feminism". Divakaruni shows Karobi as a strong woman who dares to face any challenges in her life. According to R.S. Malik and Jagdish Batra, "Feminism" takes a hard look at the real position of women in society which discriminates against women mainly due to sexual difference" (76). Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an eminent postcolonial feminist in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" discusses about the hegemonic feminist approach of the west. She criticizes the portrayal of the Third World Women by Western feminists. She critiques "Eurocentric Feminism" which homogenizes and systematizes the experiences of different groups of women of the Third World countries by erasing all marginal and resistant modes of experiences.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar, literary theorist and feminist critic in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" emphasizes that the subaltern cannot speak because they don't have the power. If they raise their voice for anything immediately they are suppressed that she says in her essay "the incapability of the colonized to speak up". This theoretical formulation can be ideally applied to the deprived condition of women in liberated Third World countries including India, where structures of power do not permit the subaltern to articulate his or her predicament. Women are not permitted to voice because of patriarchal hegemony. However, feminism completely opposes women's subordination to men especially in the society and family. It tries to equate the patriarchal dominance. Divakaruni has portrayed Karobi as a feminist who wants to follow what her heart says and wants to take decisions herself without worrying about the consequences that she will face. Karobi is a Bengali name means Oleander. It is very beautiful to see and touch but very strong and tough in characteristics. Here, Divakaruni shows Karobi as both the blend of beauty and toughness along with determination. Seema Panjwani in her research paper writes that "the title of *Oleander Girl* has a profound meaning and it is a prevalent image throughout the novel. Even the young girl Karobi is named after the oleander flower in the Bengali language."

When Karobi decides to travel to America to search her father after knowing the real fact from her grandmother, she keeps aside of her marriage plan though she has been insisted to marry first. A young girl, who is an orphan, has lost her protective grandfather, who has supported her all the ways. It is her own courage stands by her decision of searching for her father. She is not afraid of anyone and the comments people make. She just wants to follow her heart. She boldly declares, "But neither do I want a trouble to you. I understand how much of a problem for you my heritage has become"... "If it is so important for your business, I'm willing to release Rajat from the engagement" (79). Karobi is ready to take up a new journey to New York in search of her father with mixed feelings. Her grandmother's blessings give her immeasurable strength and confidence to start her journey. During her stay in America she gets assistance through Rajat. His family runs an art gallery in New York. One of the staff from his art gallery helps her to search for her father. She lives the life of an immigrant woman with determination to find her father. She faces identity crisis at many times

When Karobi plans to travel to California in search of her father, she understands that she doesn't have enough money. Immediately Mr. Desai suggests her "call your young man, ask him to wire you some more funds" (172). However she is so determined and not be ready to ask any amount from anyone especially from Rajat. Divakaruni gives a strong voice to Karobi when she writes, "I'll get the money," I say with jaunty rashness, though I have no idea how. I know this much, though: I'm not going to ask Rajat" (172). Karobi wants to sell her thick and black hair to get money for her California trip. She stays with Seema in New York. Seema gets shocked by Karobi's decision to sell her hair for money. If any of her relatives knows about her plan of the haircut, they never permit her to do it. Therefore, She gives herself a kind of justification saying that "It's my hair, "I Say defiantly. But my statement is only half true, That hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée, to Papa and Maman Bose's daughter in law to be" (178). From this it is well

understood that she wants to have the financial independency and she can't be controlled by anyone but she wants to control her life herself. Divakaruni presents Karobi as an independent woman and she takes decisions based on the needs and requirements of her life in America. She is well developed and transformed personality who has the courage and confidence and also feels that it is not required to get the permission from anyone to cut and sell her hair. Here again we see Karobi's feminine sensibility. She exhibits her autonomy on her life. Mohanty opposes the misrepresentation of women living in non-western countries. She insists that the most valuable kind of feminist research must avoid specious generalizations about the Third World Women and take the lived experiences of specific women into account as a basis for theorizing.

Dr. Priyanka Vaidya in her book "Feminist Explorations: A Study of Contemporary Indian Women Writers" while discussing about the theme of "Displaced Existence" well used by Feminist Indian Diasporic writers, elaborates on the influence of transcultural journey on various protagonists of different authors. She speaks about Ashima in Names Homi K. Bhabha in his book, *Location of Culture* expounds about the concept of hybridity applicable to the diaspora. The identity of immigrants in any society is threatened by the culture of the host country. The immigrants experience location, dislocation and relocation. The process of acculturation is not only slow but also one sided along with a feeling of a sense of loss. It is also not a clear transformation; it gives rise to hybridity marking different stages of acculturation.

Karobi as an immigrant faces several problems and challenges which are well shown by Divakaruni in this novel. Mr. Desai, the detective who tries to attack her for which she immediately resisted. Mr. Desai is a native man doesn't have the mind to accept the immigrants. When he tries to assault Karobi, she manages the situation cleverly. From this incident she learns the survival skills to manage any critical situation in America. Divakaruni explains the issues Karobi has to go through to empower and stand herself holding her head with dignity and determination and so she can have the strength to fight against all odds to find out her father. Her determination in searching her father gives her strength to adjust all strange incidents in America. She shows Karobi's process of cultural modification and her hybrid identity. Though Vic is a stranger to her, she feels normal. The American culture and her feministic attitude make her to follow the complete dress code as the native American. Whenever she goes to meet people, she wears Seema's dress which gives her a real American look. In India, she has been so traditional and led her life based on the wish of her grandparents. She is never permitted to travel with any of stranger in India. But in America, she never hesitates to travel and do anything with any one because of her acculturation.

Seema gets motivated by whatever Karobi does so she comes forward to cut and sell her hair along with jewellery to raise money to come back to India for delivery. She doesn't have the interest to stay with Mitra as he doesn't have any concern over his wife. Seema walks out of her married life because she doesn't want suffer silently facing the patriarchal dominance of her husband. The challenging character of Karobi motivates Seema to consider her as an example in her life and shift her life from devoted wife to dedicated mother. Finally she loves to be with her mother so that she feels safety and comfort in her delivery and then the baby can be cared very well.

Karobi faces physical assault from the persons whoever comes across her way in search of her father. She is completely torn into pieces because of these unpleasant barbaric incidents. However, she gets an appreciation from Vic for handling things smoothly. Vic admires, loves and offers a job for Karobi. The job he offers makes her stand on her own. However, when Vic proposes her she gets tempted. The proposal and financial independency empower Karobi to think about her identity. Here, she gets complete confusion about choosing her life whether to be in America with Vic or to be in India with Rajat. She comes to understand about her father from Meera Anand who is a friend of her mother Anu. When she meets her father after a long struggle, she is very happy with her new identity. During the meeting with her father Rob, initially he is not ready to accept her but Karobi learns about their life. Her father Rob and mother Anu haven't got married but her father doesn't have an intention to cheat her mother and Karobi was born out of their physical intimacy.

Feeling disappointment Karobi questions herself whether she is legitimate child or illegitimate child. This completely destroys her happiness. She says "some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame. I'm furious with everyone- my mother, my father, my grandfather" (246). Feeling frustrated Karobi comes to India with a new identity as illegitimate child whom the Bose family doesn't want to accept. She doesn't feel anything for that. Therefore she decides to continue her studies. Her grandmother Sarojini feels excited to see Karobi as a empowered woman. Karobi's father Rob and Vic very often talk to her over phone inviting her to come to America. But she decides to be in her home country with Sarojini. She says, "I feel a twinge, I can't deny that America's siren song had pulled at me. But I came back, of my own choice. Surely that counts for some-thing. I love my mother. But I am not her. My journey has taught me that" (280).

Subhra Roy, in her research article describes Karobi's character in a sensible way. She states, "While in America, with many temptations around her, Karobi manages not to succumb to them, but she does understand her contradictory self better." Karobi is a strong woman and she knows her vision in America. she succeeds in

the search for her father and her own identity. Understanding the actual realities of Karobi and her parents, Rajat's family makes all arrangements for marriage. They all feel so satisfied with Karob's courage and come to know the condition of art gallery business in America. Finally, her candid nature and genuine love for Rajat make Bose family accept her wholeheartedly as her father is an Afro – American.

## II. CONCLUSION

This novel mainly focuses on the feministic perspective of the protagonist Karobi's journey to America at the young age to search for her father. Her strong enthusiasm with determination has motivated her search for her father. Though she faces physical assault and temptations, she kept all aside focusing her only vision. As a result she finds her father. The American life and its culture makes her a strong woman. The portrayal of Karobi, Anu, Sarojini, Seema and Ms. Bose are very strong women by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The Indian and American culture both influenced her a lot. Karobi inherits the sense of belongings for her family from Indian tradition. She gets the empowerment and is ready to face the challenges that she learns from America. Therefore, she could find her identity.

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