

Narrative Technique of Chitra Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract:

A prominent voice in Diasporic literature, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uniqueness lies in her art of narrating a tale. She is a master story teller who understands the pulse of readers. Her unmatched skill of storytelling gives her novels a strong and complex narrative structure that binds the readers from beginning to end. This paper examines the narrative technique employed in *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, focusing on how narrative form shapes the representation of identity, memory, and diaspora. Divakaruni's fiction often foregrounds the inner lives of women while situating them within broader transnational and cultural contexts. In this novel Divakaruni adopts a third-person limited narrative perspective that closely aligns with the consciousness of the protagonist, Korobi Roy, allowing for a nuanced exploration of her psychological and emotional development. Through a carefully structured process of gradual revelation, Divakaruni constructs a narrative that unfolds like a mystery, centering on hidden truths about lineage and belonging.

Key-words : diaspora, identity, narrative

Few writers navigate the terrain between India and America, past and present, with such grace and power- San Francisco Chronicle

Oleander Girl is the story of a young girl, Korobi – conventional, simple, with small wishes of life. This novel is about her quest- quest to know about her parents, their unconventional marriage, and her identity and for finding the answers of all these questions her she undertakes her journey to America. Korobi, a simple traditional girl fascinates the reader because of her charming natural portrayal by Divakaruni. Korobi's quest for identity, leads her to many difficult situations, but she overcomes every

difficulty with courage. The story also deals with the issue of class conflicts, racial difference, and clash between tradition and modernity. In a conversation on India Real Times on March 23, 2013 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's tells Visi Tilak about her idea to write the story of *Oleander Girl*:

It came out of several recent visits to Kolkata. I saw the growing clash between old and new, modernity and tradition, and wanted to explore it through a novel. Korobi's family represents Old Bengal; her fiancé Rajat's family is the nouveau-riche. Their engagement will lead to unexpected conflicts and change both of them in unexpected ways.

The other issue brought out in the novel is the difference of opinion between generations. However, the writer also details the understanding that develops between them because of their adaptation to each other's views, bringing harmony in their lives. The People Magazine (2013) acclaimed Divakaruni as "a skilled cartographer of the heart" (www.simonandschuster.com).

The plot of *Oleander Girl* is compact and full of suspense as Divakaruni tells the tale of Korobi, with fine subtleness. This is the story of Korobi's transformation from a simple girl into a confident woman. The U.K. newspaper, 'The Day' positively comments that "Divakaruni is a gifted storyteller whose characters breathe and whose plots twist and challenge tradition, love, and family". Her name is also registered in literary word as a "gifted storyteller" (www.simonandschuster.com). By Abraham Varghese. To add more charm to the narrative, the writer has knitted a thread of suspense in the fabric of the main plot.

Divakaruni gives specific titles to her novels that show her inclination to emphasize the female characters, like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Oleander Girl*, etc. Although Divakaruni's titles are very relevant to the theme of the stories, *Oleander Girl* deserves a special mention here because it is inspired by the first Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's play, *Red Oleander*. Divakaruni often acknowledges that she draws inspiration from Tagore's writings.

The word 'Oleander' is also associated with a Greek myth, signifying charm and romance of youth. The name is originated from a mythical male character named Leander, whose ardent love ended in a tragedy. He swam the Hellespont(modern Dardanelles) every night to

see his lady love. One unfortunate night, he was drowned while trying to reach a flower for his beloved. His beloved cried passionately for her love in melancholy- 'O Leander,' 'O Leander' and when she found his body, there were flowers in his hands. These flowers became a symbol of their everlasting love. It is also a flower that grows both in India and America, connecting the two places to which our novel and its protagonist travel. Korobi, the protagonist travels to America, where her personality grows with the experience she gains in her quest to find her father. She is different from the other female protagonists in Divakaruni's other works. Divakaruni depicts the character of Korobi in the light of changing scenario between the old and the new India, someone both vulnerable and strong.

Korobi is the Bengali translation of word - Oleander. It is an evergreen shrub of which every part is highly toxic. It is not advisable to grow this plant at home. But Rob, Korobi's father planted "row upon row of Oleanders" (244) in his half acre land in the memory of Anu Roy. Divakaruni, in an interview with Debby DeRosa on 28 March, 2013 explains the reason why she chose this particular flower name for her novel. "The Oleander seems to be a perfect symbol for the book on many levels. It is ambiguous, positive, negative, beautiful and dangerous and capable of protecting itself." Anu Roy names her daughter 'Korobi' because she wanted her daughter to be tough and brave enough to survive in all kind of circumstances.

In the backdrop of this story, the writer has given references of Godhra riots and 9/11 attacks. The plot is set in 2002, and the after effects of the attacks are quite tangible in the story. Divakaruni wants to write about the growing intolerance in people, suggesting that the love and patience for each other can be our saviors in the crucial time.

In an e-interview, at India Currents on April 9, 2013 to Jeanne E. Fredrikson, Divakaruni says that 2002 was important:

It was the year of upheavals in the United States and India— the United States in the wake of 9/11 had created Homeland Security laws that were to affect people of Indian origin, among many others. A withering uneasiness and a feeling of distrust shrouded the country (Poison and Panacea).

In terms of this novel's theme, 2002 was significant in India too, because of the religion-based Godhra riots. The consequences of this event affect the lives of people in the novel, even though they live across the country in Kolkata. Clarifying the backdrop of the story, Divakaruni incorporates the Godhra riots and the 9/11 attacks in the narrative. In the first chapter, the date is Feb 27, 2002; preparations of Korobi's engagement are in full swing, and the household is in commotion. There is a news on the radio "On Akashbani Kalikat radio station" the announcer says, "over fifty people dead in a train fire in Gujrat" (6). The news on the radio reflects the still prevailing tension in the country. Later in the story, when Bahadur and Asif, drivers of Roy's and Bose's become friendly, they talk about the continuing massacres in Gujarat and about the growing tension caused by it, but they are quite careful not to hurt each other's sentiments as they belong to two different communities. They only say objectively – "concluding that it was madness" (46). Similar disturbance in the life of immigrants can be seen post 9/11 attack. When Korobi goes to America, Seema tells her that how her husband (Mitra) was taken away by police for interrogation, which changed his life. And she has been disturbed and frightened. Americans have boycotted south Asian businesses, and

some notorious youths vandalize their shops, especially those with Muslim names. Boses' art gallery in New York was named as Mumtaz ransacked by hoodlums. Even Vic remembers how his restaurant business deteriorated after 9/11. As he says, "We aren't used to shit like this happening inside our own borders, America the protected. We needed to find an enemy to lash out. Some people did, and folks like Mitra became the casualties" (151).

Divakaruni uses the multi-narrative technique in telling the story. The story glides effectively between first-person narrative - a subjective point of view of the protagonist, which gives the reader an access to personal feelings of Korobi and omnipresent narrator's account. The writer employs multiple narrative strands to unfold the events and actions in the story. Divided into seventeen chapters and two hundred eighty eight pages, each chapter has three to four segments, in which different character's voices can be heard. Korobi tells her tale in the first person and the rest of the narrative is told by the omnipresent narrator in the third person. The writer also employs the technique of mimesis and diegesis to give headway to the story. It starts with Korobi's dream. It is the morning of her engagement day, she has just seen a glimpse of her mother, who died eighteen years ago. She watches a hazy reflection in a female from near her bedroom window. She is astonished, and tries to find out what she is trying to tell her. That reflection points out far away from the window and dissolves after sometime. Korobi does not understand the meaning of this dream, but she is sure that her mother's hazy appearance at this significant moment has some meaning. This segment about Korobi's dream ends and another narrative thread is picked up about Sarojini through the omnipresent narrator. It is a challenging task

to collect different points of view and maintain coherence between the episodes narrated by different narrators. Divakaruni in the magazine of Silver Citizen says that

I'm fascinated by multiple narrators. Many of my novels such as *Sister of My Heart*, *Vine of Desire* and *One Amazing Thing* have multiple narrators. This allows me to present the contradictions and ironies between how two or more characters understand the same event in their lives. This is certainly the case of *Oleander Girl* (The Magazine of Silver Citizen).

Divakaruni gives a touch of magic realism with the introduction of Korobi's mother's ghost in her dream in the first segment of the first chapter. This ghost is pointing its finger towards the sea, may be giving a clue to Korobi that she has something important to find across the ocean. Later, when the secret of her father is revealed by her grandmother, Korobi's confusion about her mother's appearance is cleared. She admits:

Now I knew what my dream mother had wanted. She wanted me to understand that I had a future across the ocean, someone waiting there for me, although he didn't realize it yet (69).

Even at the end of the novel, when Pia takes their marriage photograph, Korobi notices "two small ovals of light" (288) above their heads. She believes that her mother's spirit is blessing her.

Korobi, the main protagonist, grows up courageously, overcoming all hurdles posed by life. She discards all social conventions, and pursues her quest for her father. In doing so, she transforms from a sweet charming girl, not strong enough to offer fire to her grandfather's dead body into a brave, courageous girl who can handle people like Mitra and Mariner. Her

grandmother Sarojni also marvels, "at the easy roll of Korobi's voice -neither abject nor overly confident" (276). Korobi gains confidence through her journey.

Fiction requires characters that evolve within the world in which they live. Divakaruni believes that a fiction exhibits the tales of its characters joys and sufferings, and the positive and negative changes in their lives brought about by their actions. She keeps her focus on the portrayal of characters and their behaviours in the given situations. This makes the characters in the book close to life. The main character, Korobi, undergoes transformation in the course of the novel and matures as a woman of substance.

The prominent male characters of the story are Rajat, Bimal Roy, Rob, Vic and Asif and minor characters are Mr. Bose, Mitra, Mr. Desai, Mr. Bhattacharya, and Sardar Ji. The main female characters are Sarojni, Mrs. Bose, Pia, and the minor characters are Shikha, Seema, and Sonia. Major characters are round characters which evolve during the course of the story. They adjust and change their identities according to the situation. Rajat, the fiancé of Korobi, is a handsome party boy, leading a wasteful life but at the end, he turns out to be a mature person who overcomes his distress and problems arisen due to miscommunication. He apologizes to Korobi for his behaviour and changes himself to a responsible and caring person. Bimal Roy is the flat character that does not change his natural 'self'. He is a principled man, devoted to his cultural Hindu values. He intimidates the priest by correcting Sanskrit Mantras at Korobi's engagement ceremony in chapter one, and in the last segment of chapter two, before he breathes his last, he reprimands the hospital staff by saying that "he would sue them if they did anything against his will" (39). Asif's character is

an important one. He is a driver of Bose family, and a loyal Mussalman. He loves Pia as his own sister, nurtures brotherly affection on her, and is very protective towards her. He doesn't take up the job with Sheikh because of his love and loyalty towards Bose's family, but when his integrity is questioned, he accepts the offer by Sheikh. But his love for Pia does not lessen, and when it is required, he puts his life in danger to save Rajat and Pia from the attackers. Mr. Shanto Bose, a tactful businessman, is a loving husband.

Sarojini, Korobi's grandmother is a traditional Hindu woman, docile to her husband, and unconditionally follows his words. She keeps the family secret, but after the death of her husband, she considers it her moral duty to share the secret with Korobi about her father. She has lived all her life under the shadow of her husband, never spoken a word without his permission. After his death, she finally gathers courage to disclose the truth to Korobi about her parents. In addition to this, she also grants her permission to Korobi to pursue her quest. She sells her dear "dowry jewelry" (89) to bear the expenses for Korobi's journey. Korobi notices her grandmother's transformation, and appreciates her understanding. Mrs. Bose, a sophisticated wife, is a businesswoman, and a loving and caring mother, who "cares too much for social acclaim" (31). She always tries to present herself at a higher pedestal. Actually, the words "A shopkeeper scheming daughter" (30) spoken by Mr. Bose's father, her father-in-law haunt her, and she wants to crack the bitterness of these words by celebrating every event of her life lavishly. But at the end of the novel, readers see a transition in her personality; she becomes a carefree woman, who hardly worries about the gossips of the uninvited. Sonia is a minor female character who appears for a short stint in the story. She is the ex-girlfriend

of Rajat, and a spoilt brat from an extremely rich family. She bribes Asif to deliver a letter to Rajat, but because of his loyalty to Bose's family, Asif never delivers it.

Divakaruni's language is rich in imagery, which makes the description effective and touching. For instance, when Bimal Roy suddenly dies, and grief pervades the Roy household, the writer beautifully draws a comparison: "Stillness has invaded 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road, the stillness of a fairy tale where dark magic has cast the kingdom into a waking dream" (42). Korobi goes to her grandmother after overcoming the feeling of betrayal that arises in her mind. This emotional scene is beautifully described by the writer: "She was sitting by the shuttered windows in the melancholy, slatted moonlight. I sat by her. We didn't speak, but I leaned into her and felt something begin to mend, as when one blind end of a fractured bone finds its partner under the skin" (69). The writer skilfully uses the images that suit the poetic tone of the story - "A many-facet story of discoveries, *Oleander Girl* is a part mystery, part search, but mostly the story of a young girl finding herself and deciding where she belongs" Settle Times (www.bookbrowse.com).

Korobi grows in a disciplined environment. After the death of her grandfather, she has realized that her grandfather had been harbouring a deep secret in his heart about her parents. It changes her life, and she feels an urge to reassess her life from a new angle. She decides to leave Kolkata in search for her father, which eventually transforms her identity. She goes in search of truth but faces many troubles during her stay. But, she is determined to find her father. In a conversation with Hudson cultural map community, Divakaruni was asked about *Oleander Girl*, "to what extent were you thinking about Korobi's journey as a hero's journey?" It is

the male hero who undertakes the journey and faces all the troubles and the heroine stays back and waits for him. In this story, Korobi is the one who embarks on an adventurous trip to America alone, and her fiancé Rajat stays back and waits for her. Korobi's story follows Joseph Campbell's hero journey in many ways. She replies, "Yes, I love Campbell. I've read him over and over. It is really the hero journey. It turns her (Korobi) life upside down. She has to make a decision. She had to leave to the familiar world. I was definitely thinking of the hero's journey! I even re-read Joseph Campbell before writing Oleander Girl. I've always been fascinated by myth and the timeless pull it has on the human psyche. The actions of the story take place in India, and in America".

Divakaruni beautifully portrays the human emotions and the inner conflicts of her characters, the external pressure on the human psyche, social stigmas, changing social status and a deeply rooted tradition, resolving beautifully the conflict between old and new tradition to capture the pace with changing time in Indian society.

The novel begins with the second stanza taken by William Butler Yeats poem "The Young Man's Song (1865-1939)

"Oh, love is the crooked thing,
There is nobody wise enough
To find out all that is in it
For he would be thinking of love
Till the stars had run away,
And the shadows eaten the moon
Ah, penny, brown penny, brown penny,
One cannot begin it soon".

The poet tells the confusion that arises in the heart of a man that whether he is old enough

to understand love or he is not mature to grasp the intensity of this deep emotion. He is flipping coin in the air to get an answer whether he might love, since, love is a crooked thing- difficult to comprehend, and nobody in the world is wise enough to figure it out. Human beings spend their life, trying to understand love, but the real meaning of love is not easy to comprehend. The theme of the Oleander Girl is also love - it is love of Korobi and Rajat, the love of Anu and Rob, and the love of Bimal and Sarojini, and that of Shanto and Jayashree. Love has various shades in the lives of these characters, but the core of love is a deep understanding and commitment. Their love also goes through much turbulence in life, but finally love finds its way through. The novel ends with the lines of a poem sent as a blessing by Korobi's father. The lines are:

He who binds to himself a Joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise (288).

These lines render a beautiful message that when a person is allowed to have ample personal space in his/her love life to create his/her identity, the personality is holistic and stable. Love should not restrain the lovers as restraining destroys life, but free love fills the lives with eternal sunrise. When Korobi goes to America in search of her father, she remembers her promises to Rajat. The fascinating life of America lures her for a while, but her commitment to her love brings her back to Rajat. Bimal Roy binds his daughter Anu away from her love, and never allows her to create her own space. As a result, she suffers terribly; she got the true love of Rob, but couldn't marry him because of her vow to her father, eventually destroying her life.

Divakaruni gives a special place to letter writing in her narrative technique. It is the incomplete letter of Anu, the only souvenir and a talisman that takes Karobi to America. It shows her deepest love of her mother, and for her longing for her father. Sonia also writes a letter to Rajat, telling him about her motives.

The novelist does not forget to include her favourite dream telling technique in the story of *Oleander Girl*. In the very first chapter, it is the dream of Korobi that drops a hint for the reader that there is a suspense brewing up in the subsequent pages. The author adds the touch of magical realism with the introduction of Korobi's mother ghost which points toward the sea. Divakaruni uses ghost as an archetype. Like Great dramatist William Shakespeare, Divakaruni also uses ghost in her story to deliver an important message.

A vivid description of Indian ceremonies and Indian way of life is skilfully fabricated in the story by the writer. There are also accurate references of the 'Akashbani Kalikata radio, Parle-G biscuits and chocolate-filled Sandesh from Ganguram Sweets' (things which a Bengali would easily be able to identify) which makes the milieu come alive for us. (Sept 13, 2014 review by Ananya Sarkar at (induswomanwriting.com)) Divakaruni uses Bengali food delicacies to create the traditional Bengali ceremonial ambience in the minds of the reader. On the day of Korobi's engagement, while Sarojini is taking care of all the domestic things, suddenly her mind fills with Korobi's mother thought. But the terrain of thoughts is disturbed with the "luncheon smells rice from the kitchen- khichuri made of golden moong and Gopalbhog rice from their ancestral village, sautéed brinjals, cabbage curry cooked with pure ghee and cardamom". (7) Sarojini adorns Korobi with a "pink silk sari" and "pins the

gold disc in the shape of a sunburst" in Korobi's braid, and "the long necklace crescent-shaped diamond pendant, the earrings so solid that they need to be supported by little chains that hooked to Korobi's hair. The two-headed-snake armbrands fit perfectly around her upper arms.' Sarojini has other pieces of antique jewelry too, 'each piece has its name: mantasha, chandrachur, makarbala" (9).

Oleander Girl is a realistic story of human relationships. Though communal riots disturb the harmony in society, in the story, they deliver a healthy message that love is stronger than hatred, and human bonds are more important than religion. Asif, who puts his own life in danger for Rajat and Pia, is a fine example of that. Divakaruni brings up issues that are of concern for the society with details and foibles in the story. She encourages her readers to understand the emotions of others, if this happens, it will certainly help maintain harmony in society.

Through the tale of this novel – *Oleander Girl*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni perfectly demonstrates how narrative technique can become the very medium through which complex questions of identity, memory, and belonging are explored. The novel's carefully controlled third-person limited narration and gradual unfolding hidden truths about the key relations of its main characters and Korobi's quest, her journey across geographical and emotional landscapes collectively create a narrative structure that mirrors the protagonist's journey toward self-realization.

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