



A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Oleander Girl: To Find Self-Identity

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* is a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature, particularly in its nuanced representation of a young woman's struggle for self-identity. Through the protagonist Korobi Roy, Divakaruni examines how identity is shaped, withheld, fragmented, and ultimately reclaimed through a journey that traverses emotional, cultural, and geographical boundaries. This research paper analyses Korobi's evolution from a sheltered, tradition-bound girl to a self-aware woman who actively seeks her own truth. Themes such as family secrecy, patriarchal constraints, diasporic mobility, cultural dislocation, and personal resilience are central to this examination. The paper argues that *Oleander Girl* portrays self-identity not as a static entity but as an ongoing process of negotiation between past and present, memory and reality, individual desire and social expectation. Divakaruni employs symbolism, narrative introspection, and cross-cultural encounters to reveal that discovering one's identity requires courage to confront hidden histories and the willingness to reconstruct one's life story. Ultimately, the novel asserts that identity is an intentional creation shaped by truth, agency, and emotional self-definition.

Keywords: diasporic mobility, illusions, symbolic artifact, womanhood

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013) is a powerful narrative about a young woman's search for her authentic self in a world marked by family secrets, cultural tensions, and personal vulnerabilities. Set against the backdrop of post-9/11 America and contemporary Kolkata, the novel explores how identity is shaped by the interplay of personal history, social expectations, and the emotional landscapes one inhabits. The protagonist, Korobi Roy, emerges as a literary figure whose journey encapsulates the complexities of womanhood, diaspora, and the psychological need to belong. This paper argues that *Oleander Girl* presents self-identity as a dynamic and evolving process, one that requires the protagonist to dismantle illusions, confront painful truths, and embrace the uncertainty of self-reinvention.

Korobi Roy's identity is initially constructed in the shadow of absence. Raised by her grandparents in a conservative Bengali household, Korobi grows up with an idealized but incomplete image of her deceased parents. From childhood, she clings to a single love note written by her mother, an artifact that becomes the centre of her emotional and psychological universe. This fragmentary narrative of love and sacrifice shapes her early sense of self, giving her a romanticized origin to hold onto. Divakaruni describes how Korobi "pressed the note to her heart, believing it held the secret of her life" (Divakaruni, *Oleander Girl* 5). The attachment to this symbolic artifact suggests that identity is often built upon inherited stories, imagined memories, and emotional projections rather than factual truth.

The theme of secrecy is central to the novel's exploration of identity. Korobi's grandparents, out of love and fear, conceal vital information regarding her parentage. Their silence reinforces the idea that families often curate identity through selective storytelling. However, when Korobi's grandfather dies suddenly, this carefully constructed narrative collapses. The revelation that her mother, Anu, had a relationship opposed by the family destabilizes Korobi's understanding of herself. The shattering of this illusion marks a turning point in the protagonist's journey, prompting her to question everything she believed about her origins. Divakaruni captures this moment poignantly: "The walls of my childhood had begun to crack, letting in light I wasn't sure I wanted" (*Oleander Girl* 28). This metaphor of breaking walls symbolizes the dismantling of inherited identity and the emergence of a more authentic but challenging self-awareness.

Korobi's search for identity is also shaped by patriarchal structures that dictate how women should behave and what choices they should prioritize. In Kolkata's conservative society, a

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woman's worth is often tied to family reputation and marital alliance. Korobi's engagement to Rajat. He was a wealthy, modern businessman, illustrates these social dynamics. Though Rajat appears liberal, his family embodies the contradictions of contemporary urban India: outwardly progressive yet deeply bound by patriarchal and class-driven ideals. Korobi's attempts to adjust to their world highlight how marriage can become a site of identity negotiation for women. Rajat's mother expects Korobi to fit into their privileged lifestyle without questioning, while Rajat himself oscillates between love and emotional immaturity. Divakaruni uses this relationship to reveal the gendered pressures placed upon women to conform and sacrifice personal desires. Korobi's increasing discomfort within these dynamic signals her growing need for self-definition outside expected roles.

One of the most significant aspects of Korobi's journey is her migration to the United States in search of her biological father. Migration, in Divakaruni's narrative, is more than a geographical act it is a metaphor for psychological transformation. America, with its cultural pluralism and post-9/11 tensions, represents both opportunity and alienation. Korobi enters this unfamiliar world with vulnerability but also determination. As she moves through American landscapes meeting strangers, facing discrimination, and piecing together fragments of her parents' lives she discovers dimensions of herself that remained dormant in Kolkata. Stuart Hall's theory of identity as "a production, always in process" (Hall 225) is deeply relevant to Korobi's diasporic experience. Her identity becomes fluid, shaped by interactions with American society, encounters with people from diverse backgrounds, and her evolving understanding of her parents' struggles.

Divakaruni employs symbolism throughout the novel to reflect Korobi's internal transformation. The oleander flower, from which the novel takes its title, is a complex symbol beautiful, resilient, but poisonous if mishandled. Korobi, too, embodies this duality: she appears delicate and sheltered, yet possesses an inner strength that surfaces as she confronts unsettling truths. Divakaruni notes that "the oleander carries its secrets within" (Oleander Girl 12), suggesting that identity, like the flower, contains hidden layers that require careful unravelling. The love notes, the old photographs, and her father's letters function as symbolic threads that weave together the fragmented pieces of her identity. These objects are not merely narrative devices; they represent emotional inheritances that shape how Korobi perceives herself and her place in the world.

The narrative technique of the novel particularly its close third-person perspective plays a significant role in shaping the reader's understanding of Korobi's evolving identity. This perspective grants intimate access to her thoughts, fears, and emotional conflicts. Divakaruni's writing style, rich in introspection and sensory detail, captures the nuances of Korobi's inner world. When Korobi experiences anxiety, doubt, or revelation, the narrative mirrors her fluctuating emotional states. This technique emphasizes the inward journey as much as the outward one, reinforcing the idea that identity is constructed through internal dialogues and emotional negotiations.

Interpersonal relationships become mirrors through which Korobi sees different facets of herself. Her interactions with Rajat force her to confront issues of trust, dependency, and autonomy. His initial reluctance to reveal his own past while expecting complete honesty from Korobi highlights the double standards that women often face in romantic relationships. In America, Korobi encounters individuals who challenge her assumptions about culture, morality, and family. These interactions broaden her worldview, prompting her to reevaluate the definitions of home, belonging, and identity. Through such encounters, Divakaruni suggests that self-identity is relational; it is shaped not only by one's inner battles but also by connections with others who influence, challenge, or support one's transformation.

One of the most important realizations Korobi reaches during her journey is that identity cannot be inherited it must be chosen. The revelation that her father was African American and that her mother's relationship crossed racial and cultural boundaries forces Korobi to confront the complexities of her heritage. This discovery unsettles her but also enriches her understanding



of herself. Divakaruni uses this moment to comment on the fluidity of identity, highlighting that it is not limited by geography, race, or culture. Korobi's acceptance of her mixed-race identity marks a profound shift from passive recipient of family stories to active creator of her own narrative.

Korobi's eventual return to India represents both closure and new beginnings. She returns not as the uncertain, sheltered girl who left Kolkata but as a woman who has confronted painful truths and emerged stronger. Her decision to return is not a retreat into tradition but an informed choice, grounded in self-awareness and emotional maturity. This final stage of her journey reflects Divakaruni's belief that identity is not discovered once and for all but continuously shaped through experience, memory, and resilience. Korobi's transformation embodies the essence of self-identity: the courage to embrace one's complexity, the humility to accept one's past, and the strength to chart one's future.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *Oleander Girl* offers a rich and deeply layered exploration of a young woman's quest for self-identity. Through Korobi's journey, Divakaruni examines themes of secrecy, patriarchy, diaspora, cultural conflict, and emotional resilience. The novel reveals that identity is neither predetermined nor static; rather, it is an evolving process shaped by personal truth and lived experience. Korobi's movement from innocence to awareness, from dependence to autonomy, demonstrates that self-identity is found not in inherited narratives but in the courage to seek and shape one's own story. Divakaruni's portrayal of Korobi's journey affirms that the path to self-identity is both transformative and empowering, making *Oleander Girl* a vital text in contemporary feminist and diasporic literature.

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