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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
"OLEANDER GIRL"

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment can be defined as the changing perception of how women feel about themselves. It can also be viewed as a force which gives women the courage to shed off the feeling of inferiority. Women are empowered to such an extent that they take charge of the environment in which they live. Empowerment points out to woman the need to fight for her rights and privileges in order to lead a comfortable life. This paper proposes to analyze the empowerment of women characters through emotional hardships in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's oleander girl. Oleander girl is a quest of a young Bengali woman and her journey to find her identity. The story involves women from three generations- Korobi the youngest, Korobi's mother Anu, and Korobi's grandmother, Sarojini. Each generation has some unique womanhood experience to share. There is a constant clash between Korobi's traditional upbringing and her longing to belong in Rajat's modern family. Her struggle to balance the two brings tension to both her family and Rajat's family. This eventually forces her to choose between security and the discovery of herself. Divakaruni focuses not only the conflict between Indian identity and transnational location but also the conflict between individual desire and social norms. Her novel, Oleander girl is a classic example of feminine identity and the question of women freedom.

Keywords: Identity crisis, displacement, mental trauma, isolation and discrimination.

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Empowerment refers to the increasing spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered individuals developing confidence in their own capacities. It is the process of creating an environment for a person to be able to achieve the desired results. It is the process or act of improving the lives of people through knowledge and skills. It is to boost the emotional capacity of a person and to claim the rights in society. In short, to empower a person, is to give power, ability, resources to a person, to be able to do something and achieve something.

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inferiority. Women are empowered to such an extent that they take charge of the environment in which they live. Empowerment points out to woman the need to fight for her rights and privileges in order to lead a comfortable life. It means something that can enable her to create a new atmosphere and to face challenges as a woman. It also means to give women the power, ability and resources to move beyond cultural, economic, social, religious and political restrictions, so that they can be more assertive.

South Asian fiction by women has given expression to their experiences that reflect their liberated condition. The women authors incorporate their experience in the eastern and western worlds in an attempt to make new, empowering image for women where the two experiences meet there lies a revelation, and a story. The stories of the recent writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiren Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many other women writers, realize both the diverse role of woman and the heterogeneity within each woman. Rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal, they push the paradigm towards the comprehensive expression of each woman's potential. These writers are working on the cultural set-backs that determine the women's life. Their works analyzed much on woman's alternative identities as wife, mother, daughter, beloved etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the acclaimed contemporary Indian women novelists in English deals with the feminine sensibility of the Indian women as well as the immigrant women in her works. She highlights diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, their delineation, isolation, exile, mental trauma, dispersion, dislocation at the level of diasporic consciousness particularly. Her themes include women, immigration, the South-Asian experience, history, myth, magical realism and diversity. Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013) is a novel suspenseful, coming of age tale about young women living in India but search for identity leads her to America which is transforming her life.

Oleander Girl revolves around the theme of quest for the lost self by the protagonist, Korobi, an eighteen years old orphan who is taken good care by her grandparents, stern and strict Bimal Roy, tender and sensible Sarojini and her entire studies has taken place in a boarding school. Throughout her childhood Korobi has longed for her parent's love whom she has never seen even. The only knowledge she had gathered about her parents (informed by her grandparents) was that her mother Anu Roy died while giving birth to her and her father who was a lawyer died in a car accident before three months to her mother's death. Though Korobi wanted to know much about her parents she could not explore as it would be painful to her grandparents. Korobi is engaged to Rajat Bose who belonged to one affluent Bengali family. He loved Korobi very much and her arrival in his life changed him into a responsible man taking interest in family business. So, Rajat's parents were happy to accept her though she did not match with their modern way of living.

The sudden death of Korobi's dear grandfather on her engagement night, the silence of her grandmother followed by the shocking revelation that her father might still be alive, open up an unknown and uncertain past in Korobi's life. It is a great shock for Korobi to learn from her grandmother Sarojini that her father was not an Indian, a foreigner, not a lawyer and that he did not die in a car accident. Anu wanted to marry that man who also loved her dearly but did not get the permission from her father Bimal Roy. Anu had to come back in hope of getting her father's consent but she was already carrying Korobi then. Though she tried all possible ways of convincing her rigid, conservative father, it was all futile. In a temper of arguments she slipped from the staircase and started bleeding. That is how she died in the hospital giving birth to Korobi. It was a severe heartbreak for Bimal Roy and Sarojini losing their only loving child in front of their eyes and the only light of hope for them to survive was the newly born baby, Korobi whom they would not lose at any cost and who was the only one to tie Anu with them. Bimal Roy took a promise from Sarojini in their temple not to reveal these facts to anyone not even to Korobi as she grows or to leave him for good.

Things were hard for Korobi to believe and accept. She was furious to hear from Sarojini that her grandfather had sent a telegram to her father mentioning both mother and child were dead and not to come to India as it would increase their distress more. She realizes that it is difficult for her to begin a new life with Rajat and not wise also until she finds out the true identity. She discloses her every fact to Rajat who has all sympathy for her but persuades her not to venture any further. Bimal Roy's family and mansion had earned a

good name and reputation of procuring the precious cultural heritage and tradition. That was the reason Rajat's parents had agreed for his choice though Roy's family did not match with their rich, modern high status. Now that Korobi was an illegitimate daughter of an unknown father, her going to USA would bring out what more in store was making Rajat afraid. Though he explained to Korobi that he least bothered about the past and interested more in present and future and that his love for her will never cease, Korobi is steady in her decision.

".....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! I can meet the man my mother loved so much! All my life I longed to understand my parents. Now fate has given me a chance."(Oleander Girl, 67)

Korobi's journey to find her father makes her shed all the unwanted burdens she used to carry as part of her personality. Korobi's power is neither western nor modern, but it is her ability in fixing her status in her family and at home. When she needed money she decides to sell her hair. The selling of hair makes her more liberated and confident.

"I feel light-headed, untethered. But once the money is in my hand I'm somewhat consoled. I now have enough for California, I have done it without having to beg anyone" (Oleander Girl, 177)

According to Jasbir Jain "Indian women writers adopt the strategy of foregrounding the female body as they try to handle the problems of communicating a cultural inheritance and creating space for construction or recovery of a self" (Jain 139). Korobi's act can be taken as assertion of selfhood and individuality.

Finally she meets the real Rob her father, Rob Lacey, from whom she learns the strong bond of love between her parents and also the fact that he was an African-American. He showed her that every place with which the memory of Anu was associated. Korobi could feel the unmeasured depth of love in his heart for her mother. He explained to Korobi that when Anu started to USA for further studies her father had made her promise in their temple that without his permission she should not marry to anybody. That was the reason a pregnant Anu had come to India to take her father's permission to marry and give birth to their symbol of love. A rigid conservative traditional father's attitude could not allow for that and Anu died while delivering the baby.

Korobi expresses her confusion why she has been named on poisonous flowers, which is hardly known to anyone. Korobi asked her father "Did my mother ever tell you why she wanted to name me Korobi?" Her father tells her the reason: "She did actually, because the oleander was beautiful----but also tough. It knew how to protect itself from predators. Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough of it herself."(Oleander Girl, 253)

The life of Sarojini was not less than a persecution either. Though she understood the feelings of her daughter, had faith on her right choice but could not support and help her. She was continuously under the pressure of patriarchy. She was forced to follow and accept the decision of her husband. Even she was not given a chance to offer suggestions for the well being of her daughter. She performed the duties of a conformist, conventional wife honoring the ideals of her husband without raising any question. But in her heart, she knew how much she wanted her daughter's happiness and at her loss how much she might have broken. With all the patience and sensibility she might have felt herself choked whenever Korobi had enquired about her parents. She might have shed tears in the dark chamber of her life recollecting every small memory of Anu without letting it noticed either by Korobi or Bimal Roy. It is only after her husband's death that she releases herself from the traditional suffocation and shares her every bit of pained memory with Korobi.

For Korobi the newly found facts opened up a different dimension to the existence of life. She was broken with the heartbreaking nightmare but also dared to stand in fetching the true identity to her fragmented self. In the venture of her quest in the foreign land the truth she ascertains is hard for her to believe. By thinking that it will take some time for Rajat and his parents to accept these events she does not disclose and decides to convey in person. Knowing well that it would create misunderstanding between both

of them she believes in the strength of her love. After coming back to India she finds herself rejected in the eyes of Rajat and his mother, but she is bold enough to face the test of time. Though there is a progressive milestone in the field of art, literature, science, technology and media while comparing the society of centuries ago and society of today with the transitions in generations but the world of patriarchy is often seen giving limited scope for women emancipation in certain aspects. Korobi experiences transformation in the manner of dealing with the circumstances and she does succeed in getting back her love freeing herself from the web of patriarchy being truly the beautiful oleander that her mother wanted her to be.

Oleander girl is a quest of a young Bengali woman and her journey to find her identity. The story involves women from three generations- Korobi the youngest, Korobi's mother Anu, and Korobi's grandmother, Sarojini. Each generation has some unique womanhood experience to share. There is a constant clash between Korobi's traditional upbringing and her longing to belong in Rajat's modern family. Her struggle to balance the two brings tension to both her family and Rajat's family. This eventually forces her to choose between security and the discovery of herself. Divakaruni focuses not only the conflict between Indian identity and transnational location but also the conflict between individual desire and social norms. Her novel, *Oleander girl* is a classic example of feminine identity and the question of women freedom. Divakaruni does offer empowerment to women of diaspora on various levels, including solidarity with other women and acknowledgment of the supportive, healing role women often play (individually and communally). On the other hand, Divakaruni also challenges traditional gender-bias expectations of South Asian men. This indicates she is questioning multiple assumptions based on gender, not just those that affect women. Ultimately and perhaps most powerfully, Divakaruni provides a multi-layered site upon which the strength of women is highlighted. Not only do strong female characters in Divakaruni's novel come to a point of independent, autonomous success but they also serve as support systems for the men in her novels. This emphasis on the resolution of fracturization by diasporic South Asian women provides a scenario in which they can be successful as women, as Indians, as Americans, as individuals, and as members of their new communities.

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