

# DECIPHERING THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN THE MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *OLEANDER GIRL*

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## ABSTRACT

The surge in immigration to the United States after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, altered both its demographic and cultural composition. The shift in its 'melting pot' theory that advocated immigrants to assimilate into America's cultural core to embracing a multicultural outlook, enhanced the nation's status as home to diverse cultures. However, America's transition into a multicultural nation often experiences set backs when occurrences like the 9/11 create a rift among cultural communities creating a debate on the politics of identity. In addition, dominant narratives of hegemony and prejudices are reinstated when such incidents seep into the multicultural fabric of the nation. Such is the case with India as well, where events like the Godhra Riots impact relationships within one's private sphere. Identities become markers of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' of an individual within the society. With Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013) as the vantage point for this study, this paper aims to examine the close relationship between power and identity at the individual, communal and national level. Located within the cultural spaces of Kolkata (India) and the United States, the novel traces Korobi, the protagonist's journey from India to the United States in the quest of her own 'identity.' The complex engagement between an individual's everyday life and larger aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender and class are also addressed within this paper. The paper concludes on the positive note emphasizing the enabling effect that power has over the creation, choice and performance of an identity with special reference to Korobi. Within the present context of strong divide between communities world over, it is essential to explore the idea of identity in her works.

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Multicultural societies are ubiquitous and will continue to remain so in the future as well<sup>i</sup>. As societies that harbor multiple cultures, multicultural societies have evolved as fertile grounds on which cultures are perpetuated from one generation to the other and have a ‘dialogic relationship’.<sup>ii</sup> This idea of ‘dialogic relationship’ emphasized by Charles Taylore, finds its actualization in the United States of America, especially after it reopened its gates for immigrants from South Asian Countries. The surge of immigrants since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to America’s demographic and cultural transition. The entry of South Asians, especially the Indians added to America’s cultural diversity. The withdrawal of the former demand for ‘swift assimilation’ of immigrants into the country’s core culture with the attempt to accept the practices of the immigrants’ cultural past, projected the United States on the path of becoming a home for diverse cultures. This resonance of U. S’s multicultural outlook continues to pull immigrants from all over the world even today.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s immigration to the United States in the 1976 and her appearance as a strong voice of the South Asian Diaspora in the literary scene in the same decade as ‘multiculturalism’ came into common parlance in the U.S., places her fiction at a pivotal position of this study. Her fiction deal with varied themes ranging from immigrant experiences, identity crisis, cross cultural experiences, alienation, mythology, history and feminism. Her fiction voices the sufferings of the silenced and marginalized individuals and communities who are left who occupy liminal spaces in society. However, her fiction distinguishes itself from the work of her contemporaries in her projection of how immigrants cope in their new countries after immigration. Her characters exhibit the potential to cope and resist against the challenges that they face as immigrants. They are not presented as victims of their situations. Rather they transform themselves into empowered individuals who voice their struggles and take charge of their situations. They debunk popular notions of how an individual should function within a cultural scenario by consciously choosing to resist against the powers that create dominant narratives of hegemony.

Through the analysis of Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013)<sup>iii</sup>, this paper acts as a vantage point to understand the relationship between identity and power, at the individual, communal and national level. Located within the cultural spaces of Kolkata and the United States, the novel traces Korobi, the protagonist's journey from India to the United States in the quest of her own 'identity.' Her immigration to the U.S., offers her several experiences ranging from feelings of exclusion to experiencing of liberation from the negative aspects of her past. She demonstrates her desire to refashion her identities to suit the present as well as to address the shortcomings associated with her former identities. She chooses the identities that she wishes to perform, rather than conform to identities prescribed by patriarchy and male hegemony. The current paper therefore also attempts to comprehend the role of 'power', its influence on the performance of an identity and how religious and cultural divides are outcomes of its impact. Subsequently, the paper charts the influence of America's multicultural spirit in refashioning identities that suit our present times. The complex engagement between an individual's everyday life and larger aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender and class are also addressed within this paper. The paper concludes on the positive note emphasizing the enabling effect that power has over the creation, choice and performance of an identity with special reference to Korobi. Within the present context of strong divide between communities world over, it is essential to explore the idea of identity in her works.

On the individual level, this paper analyzes the three prominent female characters- Korobi, Anu and Sarojini- to understand the influence of power in the process of identity creation and performance. Within the larger context, the paper dwells on how the stigma and prejudice attached with social identities can either create barriers of rejection or create safer boundaries of inclusion within multicultural societies of both India and the United States.

The protagonist, Korobi is born into a traditional family in Kolkata as the granddaughter of Mr. Bimal Roy, a registered Barrister and great granddaughter of Mr. Tarak, after whom the lane leading to their house is named. In the absence of her parents, her grandparents Mr. Bimal and Mrs. Sarojini raise her within the strict boundaries of the cultural heritage. Mr. Bimal's position as a respectable public figure in the society, does not motivate Korobi to interact within the circles that he did. Korobi's upbringing within the Roy household makes it apparent that the cultural and social space within which she functions is very limited. Therefore, she derives most of her identities and the meanings associated for the same from her grandfather.

The society or the cultural space to which one belongs, assigns meaning to identities that individuals perform. As members of larger cultural spaces, individuals possess multiple identities. Thus, individuals develop feelings of belongingness in a given society through the identities that they perform and the acceptance of the same from those around. However, in Korobi's context, her grandfather becomes the source of her identity creation and performance. The similarity between Korobi and her mother Anu's and grandmother's encounters suggests that Mr. Bimal exerted power on how the women of the house performed their identities. Thus, power becomes an important source of identity dissemination and creation.

Bimal Roy's control over Sarojini, Anu and Korobi's lives is conspicuous in his imposition of patriarchal power on them. The expectation that Anu should talk in a lower voice with Bimal and in a louder voice at the debate sessions, creates a dilemma in Anu's mind. In the absence of a male heir, Anu had to play the roles of both the son and the daughter. Sarojini recollects the two passions of Bimal Roy's life with regard to Anu were "... that Anu should excel in whatever she did, and that she should be brought up as befitted a daughter of the Roy family" and that these passions "crashed constantly against each other"<sup>iv</sup>. Sarojini adds, "When she was chosen for her school's national debate team, he took a week off from court so that he could take her to Delhi for the tournament. But if they were in a gathering of his friends, he expected her to be respectful and silent"<sup>v</sup>. The complexities that Anu experiences with regard to her identity performance, spring from Bimal Roy's desire for a male heir, and the responsibility of protecting his daughter from the external world. Anu is expected to play both the roles of a son and a daughter. She does not resist against her father's authoritative power as she is conditioned to the understanding that a daughter is expected to be respectful. She does not have the courage to counter her father.

Anu's immigration to the United States, places her in an empowered position from which she reconsiders her former identities. The new land exposes her to the freedom that she had never experienced before. The distance from her home and the agency of power i.e., her father gives her the necessary space and strength to reveal to him about her African American lover, Rob. While Bimal made all the decisions for Anu when in India, her immigration compels him to give her the chance to choose between 'home' or Rob. Anu's decision to stay back with Rob causes her to have a fallout with her father who completely disowns her.

Although Anu loses touch with her parents, she cannot entirely dissociate herself from the power that her father wielded on her. This is mirrored in her resolution of not getting married to Rob without her father's approval. She lives with Rob and returns to India only when she is pregnant with Korobi. She visits India, to seek Bimal's permission to marry Rob. Bimal Roy's disapproval followed by Anu's desire to return to the United States ensues a fight. Her fatal fall from the stairs during the fight leaves the Roy couple with her child Korobi to care for.

Korobi's life and the identities that she performs are therefore influenced by her limited social and cultural space of interaction. This cultural space that she operates in is also chosen by her grandfather. He controls the narrative of her life to an extent that he weaves a false narrative about her parents' death. Korobi is made to believe that her grandparents were her only family and that she had to adhere to the cultural heritage of the Roy family. Bimal's utilizes his power to such an extent that he influences Sarojini and involves her in building Korobi's identity as an orphan.

Korobi's engagement with Rajat, the son of a famous businessman, widens her social circle. She finds herself torn between her roles as a traditional granddaughter and as an outgoing daughter-in-law of a rich family. While her grandfather emphasizes on holding on to her traditional identity, Rajat forces Korobi to bring out her modern side. Korobi's willingness to be called 'Cara' and her eagerness to wear the 'modern outfit' that her fiancé gifts her, shows the gradual transition in her personality. Bimal's objection over Korobi's outfit triggers a big fight between them leading to Bimal Roy's death by heart attack.

The power that Bimal asserts over Korobi and Anu's lives and identities find its inception in the societal norms and culture that he was raised in. The larger narrative of his lineage, family heritage and the cultural setup of Kolkata during his birth and afterwards, instill in him a sense of power that has to be utilized to keep his cultural past alive. An individual's power backed by an ideology that dominates a society creates definitions according to which individuals have to perform the identities prescribed to them. This power apparently determines experiences of women within a traditional patriarchal society.

The question that then arises is what happens to these women when this agency of control is withdrawn from their life? For Anu, who is in the United States, her father's absence affects her but distance enables her to move on with her life. America empowers her to live the life of

her choice. But for Korobi and Sarojini, the death of Bimal Roy causes an interruption in the performance of all their identities. As a patriarchal figure, Bimal Roy, the dispenser of most of their identities, dies leaving Korobi and Sarojini to fend for themselves. The Roy household is caught in:

“...the stillness of a fairy tale where dark magic has cast the kingdom into a waking dream. In all her fifty-five years Sarojini has lived with her Bimal, she can’t remember feeling adrift like this, not even after Anu’s death.... And Korobi, who has not been to college since the night of death, spends her days in bed, leafing through the musty books she has taken from her grandfather’s library”<sup>vi</sup>

The internalization of power and the conformity to it by Sarojini and Korobi makes it difficult for them to function when the agency of that power is detached from their lives. Bimal’s absence hinders their lives from regaining its normal course. His death brings the Roy household to a halt. The house swings back to its former pace when Sarojini takes charge. This highlights the close relationship between power and identity performance. Her decision to reveal to Korobi about the possibility of her father’s presence, shows how Sarojini chooses to wield her power differently, unlike Bimal.

Korobi’s exposure to the hidden truths of her life, followed by her experience of freedom after her grandfather’s death, kindles in her the desire to take up this journey of self-discovery. Her determination to locate her father motivates her to travel to the United States of America. This truth about her father, proves that meanings associated with identities can be temporary and may need redefinition. She expresses this turmoil in her mind when she says, “I’m so confused. All the things I was proud of, my family, my heritage-they’re only half-true. The other half of me-I don’t know anything about it. Except all this time my father was alive, and in America”<sup>vii</sup>.

Korobi’s quest for identity overshadows all the cultural pressures that earlier tried to control her life. The necessity of protecting her grandfather’s image in society and the obligation to stay away from controversies as the prospective daughter-in-law of the Bose family, does not stop her from travelling to the U.S. The Bose family’s association with advocates of Hinduism for their business purpose could be tarnished if Korobi’s father turned out to be an American. As a matter of fact, Rajat’s love for Korobi was amplified because of her family’s history, tradition, their temple and house. As the narrator observes:

“One of the things that had always charmed him about Korobi was her background. Old Bengal through and through, her great-grandfather the judge, her grandfather the barrister, her father the brilliant law student cut down tragically in his prime-khandaani something with heft, something you could never buy your way into”<sup>viii</sup>

The sudden change in Korobi’s life makes their relationship vulnerable enough to alter. When the authenticity of the past is questioned, the present runs the risk of being irrelevant. This is what Korobi implies when she ventures to look out for her father. The quest for her identity becomes crucial for her to make sense of her being.

On the contrary, Rajat suggests not digging into unwanted details of the past and absorbing oneself into the future. Social identity plays its part in keeping individuals and their identities connected to the larger groups, culture and society. The affiliation of the Bose family with many social groups necessitates that they adhere to their religious identity. They exhibit their religious identity in order to maintain good relationship with Mr. Bhattacharya, an influential person more so an advocate of Hinduism. His popular support can escalate Mrs. Bose’s business. Korobi’s quest for her father in the U.S. could affect this alliance and thwart this potential relationship between the Boses and Bhattacharya. Religious or social identities are therefore closely associated with power.

On the one hand, Korobi faces challenges with regard to her conception of her ‘self’. While on the other hand, the rising divide between religious and communities both in India and the United States threaten the scope for the survival of multiculturalism within its borders. These conflicts impact the roles that individuals play within their families, workplace and other social spaces. ‘Identity’ becomes a vantage point from which an individual is either ‘included’ or ‘excluded’ from the group.

The multicultural principles of ‘inclusion’ and ‘equality’ are closely intertwined with the politics of identity and difference. America’s transition into a multicultural nation that acts as a refuge to diverse individuals, groups and cultures is jeopardized primarily when individuals are ‘othered’. The most gripping of all the challenges is the attempt to hold the multicultural fabric intact when external occurrences cause a rift in the society. As corollary to these happenings, the urge to exclude the immigrants from the grand narrative of the mainstream American identity becomes rampant. But the society often springs back to its urge to include

the immigrants. The urge to include the immigrants within the grand narrative of the mainstream American identity versus the tendency to exclude them on the basis of their difference makes the study of 'identity' inevitable. While the diversity that is present within the heart of multicultural societies empower individuals to maintain their distinctive and group identities through their culture, it also becomes a cause for divide in the societies. These are reflected in Korobi's experiences in the United States.

On her arrival at the United States, Korobi observes the changes that she encounters in the way she perceives herself. She states, "Already I'm losing my Indian courtesies; I'm thinking in terms of survival, like an immigrant"<sup>ix</sup>. Immigration becomes a condition for change, where the individual attaches to the 'self' the identity of an immigrant. In addition, the changed geographical and cultural scenario and the outlook of the people in the new country influence an individual's perception of the self.

While Korobi battles the identity-conflict within the personal realm of the family, she is exposed to the larger narrative of how her identity as an Indian immigrant impacts her being within the United States. As a distant observer of the twin tower attack, Korobi had not realized its impact on the immigrants. It is only when she immigrates and assumes this identity of an immigrant that she gets to experience these shortcomings. The location of an immigrant in a multicultural country that is wedged between fear and intolerance caused by the 9/11 attack, even the colour of the skin and the clothes that one wears is enough to categorize the immigrant as the 'other'.

The dominant narrative, that projected immigrants as threats, influenced everyone's perception of immigrants, so much so that, even Second-generation immigrants who considered themselves as citizens of U.S. felt 'othered'. This feeling was a reflection of the boycott that immigrants had experienced at various levels. The vandalization of the Barua and Bose Art Galleries in New York that belonged to her in-laws and the shutting down of Vic's pub due to less business mirrored the unrest and distrust towards the immigrants.

Vic observation highlights how certain unfortunate incidents can alter the relationship that exists between cultural communities, causing unrest and distrust all over. His acknowledgement of the changed attitudes towards immigrants is suggestive of how America's multicultural fabric is vulnerable. He states:



“I remember how terrified and furious I felt right after. That’s when my own restaurant business-which had been doing quite well-started going under. People just stopped coming. Nine-eleven injured the people of this city in so many ways- we still haven’t been able to tally up the casualties. We aren’t used to shit like this happening inside our borders, America the protected.”<sup>x</sup>

The closure of Vic’s hotel is primarily because people did not want to eat at a place called ‘Lazeez’ (169). Although Korobi’s experiences in the U.S. significantly vary in intensity, she is not excused from it. It is for the first time that she becomes aware of her skin colour, when she and Vic are pulled out of the line at the airport. She recounts:

“Both Vic and I are pulled out of line and made to wait over one side, even though we walked through the detector without any problems. Almost everyone waiting with us is brown-skinned. I point out to Vic, but he motions to me to be quiet.”<sup>xi</sup>

The narrative of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is not conditioned to the U.S. alone. India too has these narratives causing a split in society. In *Oleander Girl* the unrest caused after the Godhra riots depicts how a large incident influences the way one deals with his near ones. The riots had bred hatred between religious communities. This is pronounced in the way Asif, Bose’s driver is treated after the Godhra Riots. Despite being a trustworthy and hardworking employee, his religious identity eclipses all his other identities. Mrs. Bose is always pushed to the edge by her friends to doubt Asif. His fondness for Pia, Rajat’s sister often threatens Mrs. Bose. In spite of her conscious efforts to draw an end to this tension and conflict in her mind, she cannot help but identify Asif more as a Muslim and less as a man who served her for many years. Amartya Sen emphasizes this in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Identity*. He says:

“It is extremely odd that those who want to overcome the tensions and conflicts linked with Islamic fundamentalism also seem to be unable to see Muslim people in any form other than being just Islamic, which is combined with attempts to redefine Islam, rather than seeing the many-dimensional nature of diverse human beings who happen to be Muslim.”<sup>xii</sup>

The Godhra riots had created an atmosphere that had bred doubt and hatred among Hindus and Muslims, so much that, even individuals who were not associated with the event felt like a part of it. This is evident in Korobi’s grandfather’s response when he looks at Asif during Korobi’s

and Rajat's engagement. He remarks, "Your driver- isn't he a Muslim?... If I were you, I wouldn't have him taking my family around, nights and all".<sup>xiii</sup>

Regardless of other people's opinion of him, Asif works sincerely in the Bose family. It is only when Mrs. Bose begins to doubt him that he resigns from his job. His loyalty as a driver is questioned. He therefore chooses to leave his job and work elsewhere. He returns only when the family realizes his worth in his absence. Thus, multicultural societies also create possibilities for amendments and bridging gaps between individuals and communities that are separated due to prejudice and bias.

The prevailing narrative that associates the colour of the skin with violence haunts the minds of individuals in most of the Western countries. Occurrences like the 9/11 reiterate these narratives. This is evident within the Indian cultural context as well. Bimal's dismissal of Rob is rooted in his dejection of his identity as a African-American. Bimal Roy's prejudice against Rob is also influenced by India's preoccupation with caste system and religion. In order to maintain his dignified identity within Kolkata, he creates an alternative narrative according to which both Korobi's parents die in an accident. Rob's identities as Anu's lover and Korobi's father are overshadowed by his identity as an African-American. Bimal's exclusion of Rob by creating a narrative of his death, shows how the Indian multicultural society still runs the risk of falling back on the fault lines of colour, caste and religion. Social identities tend to exert more power over how an individual is perceived within a larger cultural space.

Korobi's response on learning that her parents were unmarried and that her father was a African American is quite distorted. She does not reject him but she finds it hard to accept him as her father. Her perception about her own identity changes drastically with this disclosure. Besides, Korobi realizes that the revelation of her parents' unmarried status can disturb the relationship that the Bose family is trying to build with Bhattacharya. She describes to Rajat the difficulty that she faces to accept this truth as she says:

"...I feel shocked, from time to time, when I think of who I really am. It's so different from what I thought I was. Illegitimacy. A mixed-race heritage that might surface in our children. Most Indian families would have a hard time accepting these problems."<sup>xiv</sup>

Korobi's worries are similar to Sarojini's. On learning the truth about Korobi's dad, Sarojini expresses her concern. She:

“...wants to explain the complicated gradations of racial prejudice in India, how deep its roots reach back. Why, for so many people, having Korobi’s father turn out to be black would be far worse than if he were merely a foreigner. But it’s beyond the present capacities for her muddled brain. Don’t open that can of worms,’ she begs her granddaughter. ‘Just come home’.”<sup>xv</sup>

Sarojini’s reaction and her awareness that others from the family may respond in a similar fashion, shows the ingrained prejudice that societies all over hold against the blacks. Mrs. Boses’ reaction, “How can we have our son marry a girl of mixed blood who has moreover, such a scandal in her past?” validates Sarojini’s fear<sup>xvi</sup>. She realizes the reason behind her husband’s dismissal of Korobi’s father. The situation however spurs debates on Korobi’s decision of welcoming her father to India.

Although Korobi was raised by her barrister grandfather and grandmother in Kolkata, her identity as Anu’s and Rob’s daughter cannot be erased. She notices how her physical appearance are in line with her father’s. She says, “Today I was looking at myself in the mirror, my skin, my hair- I’m seeing everything differently now. Every detail has taken on a new meaning”.<sup>xvii</sup> These physical features help her feel like a part of her father. She does not feel distant from him.

Rob’s presence for Korobi’s wedding in India and his active involvement in the same depicts the possibility of change in how one perceives oneself and one’s situation. While Korobi finds it difficult to return from the U.S., after her long stay, Rob too encounters acceptance within Korobi’s family. This suggests that although multicultural societies cannot escape the overarching power wielded by narratives of hegemony, they always overcome these inequities and become inclusive cultural spaces.

Although it is easier said than done that human beings must be solely identified as members of groups and by the identities they play within their personal realm, without bigotry, our cultural stance i.e. the society in which we live and its ideologies do predominate both the manner in which we see others and also perceive ourselves. The protean nature of identity suggests that the meanings associated with it are altered gradually leading to change in identity. Multicultural nations therefore act as experimental grounds where individuals’ perceptions are given the freedom and the choice to retain their former identities and embrace new identities but with

careful reasoning so that it makes room for inclusivity and celebration of diversity both in identities and in experiences. Thus, within multicultural spaces, the close relationship between identity and power can be wielded to create an enabling and inclusive space for individuals.

## END NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> BHIKHU PAREKH, *RETHINKING MULTICULTURALISM: CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND POLITICAL THEORY*, 336 (Macmillan Press Ltd 2000)
- <sup>ii</sup> CHARLES TAYLOR, *MULTICULTURALISM AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION* (Princeton University Press 1994).
- <sup>iii</sup> CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, *OLEANDER GIRL* (Penguin Books India 2013)
- <sup>iv</sup> *Id.* at 56.
- <sup>v</sup> *Id.* at 56-57.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Id.* at 42.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Id.* at 66.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Id.* at 66.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Id.* at 94.
- <sup>x</sup> *Id.* at 150-151.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Id.* at 183.
- <sup>xii</sup> AMARTYA SEN, *IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: THE ILLUSION OF DESTINY* 14-15 (Penguin UK 2015)
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Supra* iii, at 21.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Supra* iii, at 279.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Supra* iii, at 225.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Supra* iii, at 265
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Supra* iii, at 226.