

# Loss of self-identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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**Abstract-** *The major issue of postcolonial literature is the search for identity, which is debated by many authors and critics. Many people's situations have a big impact on their life because of their culture and long, rich traditions. They may thus become marginalized and victimized in both society and their own families. These inquiries cause them to reflect about their lives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a young writer who is bringing social issues to light. She has been praised as a novelist who has explored blended identities in the majority of her works. Many of her works display autobiographical components that were employed in an artistic approach in her works. Her works are primarily about immigrant experiences, with India as a starting point and journey to other countries, particularly America, for better possibilities and normal lifestyles. Her work also challenges society's patriarchal control. In many of her novels, male characters are substituted with female characters. After coming to terms with their lives, all of her female characters become extremely powerful. Karobi's transcultural adventure has a significant impact on her life.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Women, Immigration, History, Myth.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a literary artist Divakaruni has proved to be a multi-dimensional figure by contributing as a poet, short story writer and as a novelist. Her mastery over all these genres of literature has helped her earn worldwide recognition. Herself being a diaspora, Divakaruni was highly influenced by the miserable condition of the migrants especially that of women in Indian Patriarchal society. Therefore, a thorough reading of her works enables one to trace her profound concern over these issues. Being a first

generation immigrant, she has been noticed disposed to maintain reflective or nostalgic memory of native soil and draw out depiction of Indianness and split identity causing Identity Crisis, one of the central thematic concerns in her works. It deserves mentioning that almost all Diaspora writers have dealt with numerous diasporic aspects and the struggles that the Diasporas face. But in Divakaruni's novel, in order to illustrate Diaspora psyche, the struggles are often identified through fragmentation. This is quite evident when we examine her characters, particularly the women characters who are noticed engaged in struggle while representing their national identity in their immigrant state, facing challenges of living in a multicultural world, and above all their discovery of self.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* is an elegant and highly evocative new novel which deals with multiple premises and artistic techniques. Divakaruni has been widely praised for her art of storytelling. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has widely earned the reputation of a silver-tongued story teller. She is hailed as a "gifted storyteller" by Abraham Varghese while the People magazine acclaimed her as a "skilled cartographer of the heart." Junto Diaz acclaimed her as a: "A brilliant story teller" (8).

Among the subjects that she explores in her writing include female empowerment, immigration, and the South Asian experience in the United States, as well as history, myth, magical realism, and multiculturalism. Specifically, she focuses on diasporic women protagonists who are living in two cultures and dealing with issues such as demarcation, isolation, and exile; mental trauma; dispersion and dislocation; and dislocation at the level of diasporic awareness.

In most of Divakaruni's works we notice her deep concern over the women characters, the problems encountered by them in their own country and in abroad and a powerful zeal in them to fight the adverse situation while establishing a distinct identity of their own. Living as a diaspora in the United States, Divakaruni herself has experienced the differences in between the two cultures that is the home and alien one. Consequently, she took it as one of the major issues of her writing which, in turn, worked as a medium of exploring one's own culture and the differences in between. In an interview with Julie Mehta, in *Arranging One's Life* Divakaruni maintains,

Immigrating was the most transformative experience of my life -- it exposed to me a life beyond my existence in Calcutta. Immigrating to America made me see my own Indian culture in a different way, it made me both appreciate my culture and question some aspects of my culture. (Divakaruni)

Men and women are fundamentally different in terms of their qualities, with men being perceived as hardworking, identical, rational, forceful, independent, and proud, while women are perceived as the opposite. None of these characteristics are easily associated with nature. Women are regarded as being domestic, devout, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful, simple, and beautiful; all of which are regarded as independent domains of nature, according to tradition. The natural world is therefore regarded as the epitome of all the attributes that women possess. Eco-feminists think that this relationship is exemplified by the traditionally 'female' qualities of reciprocity, caring, and co-operation, which are found in both women and nature, and which are reflected in the values of the environment. A common thread that connects women and environment is their shared history of oppression at the hands of patriarchal society. Activist Vandana Shiva asserts in her book "Staying Alive" that women have a unique connection to the environment through their daily exchanges, and that this link has been overlooked. She says:

Because they produce and reproduce wealth in collaboration with essence, women in

subsistence economic systems have long been recognised as experts who possess a comprehensive and environmental understanding of humanity's greatest procedures. The reductionist framework, on the other hand, does not recognise alternative ways of knowing that are geared toward public welfare and subsistence needs because it does not recognise the interconnectivity of nature or the link between people's experiences, collaborate, and understanding and the accumulation of money. (*Staying Alive* 23)

Most of Divakaruni's works take into account the journey of Diaspora, particularly the journey of women while experiencing it. Her novels and tales speak of the life of the immigrants in alien land, the difficulty they come across, the identity crisis that develop due to the clash of cultures, the clash between the old, inherited one and that of the new and alien one. They can neither give up their inherited one, nor can they accept the new one. This especially happens in case of the first generation Diasporas. In such a situation, they find themselves in an in-between condition. At this point develops the identity issue of the immigrants.

When we look into the works of Divakaruni, we find that most of the time, her diasporic characters, instead of deep identity crisis, are able to establish an identity of their own. Her women characters are essentially remarkable in this respect. We notice that this loss of identity leads one to develop a unique sense of freedom. Divakaruni deserves credit for the way she bridges the gap between Kolkata, India, her inherited land, and California, the adopted one. Through her works she represents the old and the new, the Indian and American culture in close contrast with each other through the activities of her characters especially through the female ones and tries to bring about a balance between the two, when those characters, in their quest for identity, succeed in establishing an identity of their own juxtaposing the two cultures. Again most of her female characters are awesome and genuine portrayal of diasporic Indian women. Her depiction of female characters is not restricted to any particular group. She is rather concerned with females of varied race and beliefs with known experiences.

In this context, there is satisfaction, peace of mind, silence, self-restraint, and purity of thinking, all of which represent mental austerities. To be happy ourselves and to ensure the happiness of our loved ones, Divakaruni says that we must cultivate these values in our surroundings and ourselves. She has shed light on those areas of our lives that we tend to overlook in the midst of our daily effort to satisfy our insatiable demands. Reading *Oleander Girl* is such a beautiful journey that it made each day feels more meaningful while I was reading it. Through the lovely and nuanced language of this work, we are taught the ultimate meaning of life. It increases our appreciation for the natural beauty of the world. It illustrates how critical it is to cultivate a broader range of perspectives and to abandon our preconceived beliefs about the world. *Oleander Girl* comes to a satisfying conclusion with sweet, ultimate, and immortal joy.

Woman has faced challenges while establishing her identity; she is always in dilemma whether to follow traditional ways of living or unconventional ways while fighting for maintaining her identity. She is always taught how to be a perfect wife from childhood. A perfect wife is active, is a vital part of the family and her primary task is childbearing and right from their childhood girls, as an integral part of their duty, have to render help in household chores. But the predominant idea is that girls are kept under the family's watchful eye till she reaches marriageable age. Her social and intellectual growth is also confined to family and close friends. She is totally dependent on the economic status of her father and then on her husband. But in *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni tries to convey the message that a girl has to realize her abilities and give priority to her choices and likings. Divakaruni has projected her female protagonist beautifully who confronts tough challenges in her life. Korobi's character unveils one important fact that girls are also an important part of the society. They can also show their witty and intelligent side of their personality during the time of adversity. In the continuous research of identity, women's role identity constantly change. They can emerge as new and enlightened personality and reinvent their identity completely. Divakaruni also displays the courage of a girl who follows her own

voice and not that of the tradition, generally followed by girls who are always influences, guided and pressurized by society and cultural traditions at each and every step of their lives. Through the character of Korobi, Divakaruni has also given importance to the place of women in Indian society. They can survive in any crucial circumstance and take their own decisions. She has shown an unconventional girl who behaves differently from the traditional mind-self of the society.

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