

Hybrid Identity: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl***Aarthika M.**

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Abstract

The quest for identity has become a crucial discourse in the field of diaspora literature. The process of migration brings along the issues of identity with it. The sudden contact with a new culture brings a change in individual and it naturally leads to the necessity of reconstructing their own identity that happen both consciously and unconsciously among the migrants. Personal competence, the objective of migration and cultural differences between their homeland and the host country, and personality traits and many more factors would influence the process of reconstructing one's identity, depending on these factors, one can develop both beneficial strategies and devastating effects while reconstructing their own identities.

In this modern globalized world, distance between countries and cultures are cut down due to the advancement of technology and increased migration. The boundaries are made blur as there is a heightened interaction between people from various geographical locations. Every individual in today's multicultural world encounter a deep effect on their own identities, as they are exposed to many cultures, and they have the freedom to choose their cultural affiliation. Migration allows the people to the parallel journey to self-discovery. So it is essential to identify to what extent, a hybrid identity can be favourable at the same time to what extent it would be challenging. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delineated the lives of migrant's problems through the novels. Especially this novel, *Oleander Girl* clearly reveals the plight of the protagonists who discover themselves during their transcultural journey. This paper aims at highlighting the hybrid identity – an accepted, evolved multi-cultural identity of the migrants through *Oleander Girl*.

Keywords: hybridity, identity, multi-cultural, reconstruction, and migration.

The concept of self-identity becomes more relevant context in diaspora and globalization regarding the evolution of the individual's personality. According to Erik Erikson's psychological theory, the term identity represents the capacity to keep a continuity and an inner coherence. Identity issues are the most significant approach of migrant literature. Identity is created based on a person's natural environment, so it is essential to comprehend his life events, Kaufmann stated that, "identity is the story that everyone tells about himself".

There are various reasons for migration that is based on personal reasons political, economic, and social factors. Some people migrate involuntarily as refugees, they are forced to migrate to a foreign land for many other reasons their decision of migration is not voluntary but a forced one. Political and religious turmoil, wars, natural disasters or economic crisis can be the reasons for their migration. These migrants find it hard to integrate with the culture and practices of host country as they live with the memories of the memories of their country of origin. There are migrants who intend to migrate to a foreign land willingly hoping for a better life in the host country. As they voluntarily migrate to a new country, they encounter political stability, freedom, better economic condition and a great chance of being successful in their own terms. They migrate to achieve greater standards of living and they fulfil their desires and interest which are not merely possible in their own homeland. These migrants who are willingly migrated in spite of nostalgia, the sense of longing of their family and culture of their homeland they are more open and prepared to integrate with the host country.

Some migrants are well developed and have clearer notion of migration would like to experiment the multi-cultural factors they look for adventure and want to explore and widen their own cultural horizon. These migrants consciously dislocate to create their own identity and willing to do more experiments.

The term hybridity is closely associated with the term diversity. In general hybridity holds the meaning of combination, mixture and interbreeding.

"Hybridity can have at least three meanings - In terms of biology, ethnicity and culture. In its etymology it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, hybrida, and this genetic component provides the first meaning. A second definition of hybridity might be understood to mean an individual "having access to two or more ethnic identities" (Easthope, HJEAS 145).

The major idea of hybrid identity is belongingness. The first generation migrants are closely associated with their homeland with a clear sense of belongingness. Whereas the second generation migrants tend to disconnect their association with their ancestral land during their attempt of socialization. Instead of developing the sense of nostalgia by finding similarities and dissimilarities between the countries they are related to. The second generation migrants accept the process of migration and face to switch from one culture code to the other. They find hybrid identity as a solution for the problems of migration. This hybridization is led by their lack of cultural background and so they understand neither of their place of residence nor their ancestral land. Due to this unstable perspective, alienation and the pressure of adapting to the new country, these migrants would develop an inner sense of anxiousness and become instable.

Migration literature portrays characters who try to accept the consequences of migration in different ways. This reaction varies from the experience based on the uncertainty of the migrant protagonist as “destructive, agonizing, and painful” to the positive migrant experiences such as “productive, fascinating and appealing”, both the experiences, whether positive or challenging, result in “rewriting identities in order to evoke their impure and heterogeneous character” (Frank; 18-19).

As a prolific diasporic author, Divakaruni has delineated the lives of immigrants, their joys and sorrows, the alienation and discrimination that they face and the way they acculturate. She endlessly creates and recreates her characters who encounter cultural complexities and experience the discrimination of being a minority that lead to the quest for identity to go beyond the memories of the past and to evolve to reach personal maturity. Divakaruni, in her novel, *Oleander Girl*, projects a transformation of the protagonist named Korobi, from a young immature girl, who encounter rootlessness, problems of lost identity and cultural complexity, to a matured person accept her multi-cultural and hybrid identity. The representation of in-between spaces, where the protagonist of hybrid identity dwell, bridge the gap of native and foreign lands. Thus there is no more homelessness as the negative connotations are vanished and conditions of borderless transnational tradition prevail. This distinct feature of migration literature in contemporary reference is cultural "hybridity" which manifests the experience of "cultural in-betweenness, processes of intermixture, fusions or doublings of two or more cultures or two or more systems of significations" (Moslund, 4).

Oleander Girl is a widely read novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This novel portrays the life of a seventeen years old young Korobi Roy, who is born to an Indian mother Anuradha Roy and an African-American father Robin Lacey. Korobi is raised by her grandparents imposing the culture and tradition of their orthodox Bengali family. She is unaware of her mixed identity and clueless about her parents as the information about her parents is kept as a secret by her grandparents, assuming that would separate Korobi from them and cause damage to the reputation of Roy family. Only after the death of her grandfather, Sarojini, her grandmother confesses the long hidden truth of her parents to Korobi.

Oleander Girl is also considered as a coming of age novel that describes the life of the protagonist, Korobi. She is brought up in a safe confines of her grandparents. Her grandparents' house is her world. She has studied in boarding school, spent most of her time alone. She has spent the rest of her life with her grandparents' palace-like house. She lives in her comfort zone enjoying safety and security under the shelter of her grandparents until she is informed about her father, who is alive in California then she resolute to go in search of her father. She is determined to travel alone all the way to California, a dependent girl crosses continents in search of her father. During her journey, she meets different kinds of people, and the experience out of it mould her as a strong individual. Earlier, she is identified only with the identity of her family, as Korobi the granddaughter of Bimal Prasad Roy, the retired barrister. She doesn't have any special identification beyond her family. She is engaged to Rajat, heir of Bose family. He is fascinated to marry her for her so called identity. It is evident through, "Old Bengal through and through, her great-grandfather the judge, her grandfather the barrister...Khandaani, something with heft, something you can never buy your way into" (66). But Korobi always feels that her identity is not just what she is known for, the identity of her grandparents or of her future in-laws. It is something more than what she and others know about her. The quest for self-discovery is evident even before she is aware of her parents' mixed culture. She tells Rajat, "All the things I'm proud of, my family, my heritage - they are only half true. The other half of me - I don't know anything about" (66).

Korobi is raised by her grandparents. She has never seen her parents. She has seen her mother only in photograph. She is told that her mother died during her child birth and her father died in a car accident. But when it is known to her that her father is alive, she is

desperate to find her father. She takes great risks to travel all the way to California alone. She is even ready to call off her engagement if her in-laws are not willing to accept her with her past and real identity.

The author expresses that she is unique in her activities and quiet different from others in appearance that provide a hint for the readers to question about her identity. Divakaruni narrates that, "...a mass of tangled curls cascading down her back. Where she got those curls, Sarojini can't figure out. Everyone else in the family has stick-straight hair" (9). Though Sarojini hides the truth of Korobi's parents, the love of the grandparents for Korobi never faded away.

Korobi and her family are shocked to know that her father is an Afro-American. It added more grief to Korobi when she comes to know that her parents never married. She has got a disappointment of being 'illegitimate' which is certainly not accepted in Indian culture. She is devastated by the truth but even then she wants to find her father. Korobi thought of approaching a detective to find her father but that is not accepted by her family and with the help of Rajat she convinced her family. They have given two months of time to stay in California and to find her father, she is supposed to return to India whether she finds him or not. On this condition, she is sent to the U.S. Sarojini has sold her jewellery to give money to Korobi. Rajat arranged for her stay in the U.S. though her family members supported her trans-cultural journey, they are not fully satisfied with it. They might have thought that finding a person in America only knowing his surname without photographs or any other details is not a possible goal to achieve within a couple of months. It is evident that only for the satisfaction of Korobi, who feels she is deceived by her own grandparents. She is allowed to travel across seas to find her father but not in a hope of reunion with him.

This transcultural journey of Korobi is not only to locate her father but to determine her own identity also. This journey has transformed her personality as she is exposed to new cultural scenario through which she learns new lessons of life. She understands that, it is necessary to observe the nuances of social behaviour of the new country and tries to establish cordial relationship with people she meet in abroad. Her only motive is to find her father and determine her identity. Korobi is seen acculturating and adopting the ways of new land. Actually, migrants learn new things and unlearn certain things from the culture and traditions of mother land. When survival becomes the only aim practices, courtesies and customs which

they have followed in their own country are gradually given up. She admits that, “Already I’m losing my Indian courtesies; I’m thinking in terms of survival, like an immigrant” (94). Her mannerisms are also changed in times as the modern culture is so alluring the migrants tend to adapt to it easily. Once she called Rajat ‘baby’ while talking over phone, she has never addressed him with this term before. Rajat wonders, “It’s been only a few days. How did she pick up that American endearment” (131).

Korobi has developed a nice acquaintance with Vic during her stay in California, he has helped her in all terms. Vic is interested in Korobi, she also feels strongly infatuated to him so, her time with Vic actually tested her love for Rajat. She is in a dilemma whether to stay in America or to go back to India, she realises that she has “become a new Korobi” (218) in America. Vic is always been a ray of hope whenever she is down as her journey of finding her father has brought continuous disappointments. He further motivates that she can find her own identity by saying, “You need to look away from someone else’s past into your own future. You think if you learn who your father and mother were, it’ll teach you who you are? But you are someone already. You’d see if you weren’t so busy focusing elsewhere” (217).

Korobi’s identity is completely based on her family. But in America she is open to accept the culture of the new country through which she tends to create her own hybrid identity. She decides to make her own decision that would define her identity. For instance, when she is facing financial problems in the U.S. She decides to cut her long hair and sell it for money. Her hair is portrayed as a symbol of her culture. She knows how it is praised by her family members, “hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini’s granddaughter, to Rajat’s fiancée to Papa and MamanBoses’ daughter-in-law to-be” (178). To the point of survival, culture and tradition are at times given up. She decides to cut her hair to meet the financial burden through this decision she has proved that she has right over her own life.

Though the new land gives her complete freedom which she has never tasted before in her life, she decides to go back to India even after finding her father and regaining her own identity. She India as her home, the transcultural journey has given her the maturity to understand the complexity of cultural transformation and her hybrid identity of being born to an Indian mother and an African-American father who never married she comes back to India. She also aware fact that Rajat’s family would never accept her hybrid identity. But

Korobi decides to live with Sarojini and to be successful in her life without getting any sort of support from her in-laws.

She has planned to pursue her studies. Sarojini wonders at Korobi's transformation into a new person. Absolutely, Korobi's journey has brought a substantial change as her attitude towards life that is evident through, "the girl Sarojini left at the airport could never have imagined it" (276). Korobi feels her freedom from the shackles of family reputation and pride now she focusses on her personal development. The transformation of Korobi's character has resulted in finding her hybrid identity as the elements of both Western and Indian culture are reflected in her.

The journey undertaken by Korobi by crossing cultural boundaries has redefined her identity. Divakaruni has attempted to prove that amalgamation of diverse culture leads to a creative process which bring up new cultural values, her protagonist merged both Indian and American values to enrich her identity without causing damage to Indian sensibilities. This ambivalence emerge from her struggles and once the process of adjustment is completed, she is evolved as a hybrid, heterogeneous character. Thus the novel, *Oleander Girl* recreates the lost identities by a deep perception of the space between native and foreign lands, the experience of hybridization.

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