
**KOROBI – AN EPITOME OF RESILIENCE IN THE NOVEL OLEANDER GIRL – BY
CHITRA DIVAKARUNI BENERJEE**

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Abstract: The Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore had a great influence on her. As she being a Bengali, belonging to Kolkata, she read him growing up. In her words, “I read and read and read I lot of Tagore and she loves, especially his short stories. She took the idea of ‘Oleander girl’ Korobi which was a Bengali play written by Tagore. She was very much inspired by his themes like love, family relationships, servants and the interaction with their masters all have influenced her. This led to the writing of the Oleander girl.

“Clouds come floating into my life no longer to carry rain or higher storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky”

– Rabindranath Tagore.

This famous quote of Tagore reminds me that life will have all its ups and downs but one should look at them in a different perspective. They no more bog you down but would add strength to your life.

Keywords: roots, embark, resilience, magic realism, devastating, metamorphosed, journey, experiences.

Introduction: Chitra Benerjee says “Doing research is much like a soother. I write about immigration because in many ways immigration made me a writer I grew in India. After seven years in America, I thought I would start writing. As I grew up with my grandfather, I have some nostalgic memories with India. So I wanted to write all my experiences. I realized that immigration process is one interesting topic that I wanted to write. This book is a mystery. There was an actual event that happened to lead me to write this book. It is a clash of the old, and new India, book of family secrets, how fast India is changing, how traditions are changing and also a journey to America (Authors@google:chitra Benerjee Divakaruni)

Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni’s novel ‘Oleander Girl’ presents us the story of a young girl named Korobi (means the oleander flower) who was orphaned immediately after her birth, was raised by her grandparents and was the apple of their eye. But she was troubled by their silence when it comes to the death of her parents. She grows inquisitive to identify her roots, and a love as powerful as her parents. Her dream comes true when she meets Rajat Bose the charming and only son of a high profile family who becomes instrumental in the wayfare. On the night of her engagement with Rajat, a small argument between her and grandfather Bimal Roy, triggers a heart stroke leading to his death. His sudden death reveals the family’s financial problems and another bolt out the blue was that, her father was alive and lives in America. Korobi embarks on her

journey to the unexplored country, jeopardizing her engagement as well as her future. This article throws light on Korobi who has learnt her lessons in a tough way. The journey in search of her father makes her transform into a woman of grit and determination highlighting on her resilience quality. The most important thing is that her work represents a genuine and honest thinking of women psyche.

How korobi has suffered in the absence of her parents – her psyche and mental agony: As a young girl she suffered in the absence of her parents though her grandparents raised her, she was brought up in a traditional way by her grand father. He was resistant to change. She misses her parents what they would have given her. She actually missed on one generation. Missed the sense of her larger world. The only memento she has with her is her mother’s letter she finds in her grandfather’s library- “you are in my thoughts every minute. I can’t believe that only three months have passed since the last time I held you in my arms to say good bye.....I want to make sure our child knows how your love surrounds her even though you are so impossibly far away in a whole different world”. She idealizes that love. The novel shows how complicated love is how baffling it is and yet how important love is. Here the most important thing to note is the author is talking about the human love. Korobi correctly guesses that the letter is from her mother and also their stay in different parts of the world. She understand how much her mother must have loved her father only from that piece of letter.

Though she loves her grandfather she is torn when she knows the secret of her mother kept by her grandfather. She was very upset with her grandfather asking how could he, to whom she had given her entire child heart, who had taught her how important it was to be truthful, have perpetrated such an enormous criminal lie? (Pg.55 Divakuruni). Immediately she reconciles to the fact as quoted by Tagore...from the opening of quotes of the article which also means that there is always a silver lining ahead of the dark clouds. Though she felt terrible

of her grandfather from keeping her under wraps, she also felt that it was like a blessing in disguise to know that her father was alive in America. It is not only bringing her dead father back to life and along with him, away to finally know my mother”.....(Pg.56 Divakaruni)

Inception of Magic Realism: Chitra Benerjee’s apt use of magic realism in the beginning of the novel gives a cue about some imminent covenant with the past that unravels some derailed path in her life. Korobi sees a strange sight of her mother in her dream just before her engagement creating inquisitiveness in the minds of the readers. The protagonist interprets it as an ill-omen as if to warn her on an impending disaster. (Divakaruni Pg4). She also sees sorrow radiating from her disappearing form. As Korobi was not aware of her past, she fails to expound. The longing desire, to be in the company of her mother always created a vacuum in her life. Just before embarking on her journey to America, she faintly notices her mother and grandfather once again as if the apparitions were blessing her. Finally when she sees them at the time of her marriage she bids a tearful adieu as if it was their final appearance.

Her Life with Rajat and Grandfather: Rajat’s enchanting disposition, left her in awe. The moment he met her he was mesmerized by her sincerity and attitude. This has transformed her life from a Sepia world to technicolour. It has gradually propelled to a healthy relationship bringing the families together. Rajat feels that she would never make anyone feel bored in her company and she understands one’s feelings, especially Rajat’s without her anything to say anything. Though they did not have anything in common yet he was fascinated with these differences. Korobi admires people for them being uncompromisingly themselves, hence she loves her grandfather for his tenderness that he tries so hard to

hide. She always longed to marry and manage the house on her own.

But all her dreams crumbled when she had a petty argument over an outfit with the grandfather as he disapproved her choice, that too for the engagement. This landed Bimal Roy in the hospital and he had his last breath. Before the death he plants a devastating news that Kor’bi’s father was alive and lives in America. Though this left her guilty, she was more hurt not just for the deception but that has come from a man who she has trusted more than any one. She was bewildered. All things she was proud of – family and heritage, were only half true. She wanted to reveal the world the other half of herself.

Symbolic Significance of the name Korobi: The novel focuses on the journey of a girl in search of her roots who faces untethered hardships in an alien country. The protagonist has the qualities of an Oleander flower that is beautiful yet poisonous in terms of detracting her enemies. Though the flowers fascinate with their intricate nature, one has to be cautious of its poisonous nature, if taken for granted. Probably Anu has christened her daughter as ‘Korobi’ for this quality that she found lacking in herself. Anu must have admired the oleanders for their appealing beauty and defensive quality. On the day of her journey to India Korobi couldn’t resist from asking her father why she has been named ‘Korobi’. The answer was, “Anu wanted that toughness for you because she did not have it for herself”. Korobi could not stop appreciating the alluring quality of the oleanders for being close to her. She must have pitied her predicament and must have suffered silently.

A Girl of Resilience: Korobi though raised by her grandparents Bimal Roy and Sarojini, spent her schooling in a hostel due to her grandfathers will. He believes that girls have to be toughened so that they can survive a world that presses harder on women. As he was bereaved of his daughter he suffered the loss. Sarojini always silenced herself by not protesting to his demands. She felt Korobi takes after Anu in many ways the troublesome yarning towards the world and the radiant simile. She is also gifted with the physical attributes of her mother Anu. Korobi’s maturity never made her question the reasons for her stay in a hostel. But many a time she would plead her grandmother to share the memories of her mother. Sarojini would swallow the ache in her throat and offer Korobi something innocuous.

She did not know the reason why her daughter called her Karobi though proudly she would say that oleanders are beautiful and alluring. Korobi always appeared happy and cheerful though there are tragedies that piled up in her. This nature of her has groomed her to be a resilient and matured woman. The upbringing was quite unique and the old house of the Roys was always surrounded by culture and heritage that left an aura.

Her Journey in pursuit of her Roots: Korobi's nonchalance and aplomb during hard times have always been her best character traits "I am furious with everyone".....(Divakaruni 246) was only an impulsive outburst at the disclosure of certain facts that she was not aware of earlier. But she rises like a phoenix out of ashes to prove her mettle. In spite of Rajat, her fiancé, standing by her in this turbulent journey, deep down she felt, if she failed, things would go back to how they were. She procured all the requirements for the errand. Her mistaken encounters with the probable fathers in America must have churned her up and left her desperate. As a last straw when she meets Rob Lacy her biological father an Afro American. She must have been shattered to pieces and must have felt the earth under her feet swallowing her. She slowly musters courage to come to terms with reality but was once again hit under the felt about the illegitimacy of her existence. One can imagine how devastating her birth was maybe she must have prayed for a new life with a better lineage.

Hearts longing desire fulfilled: After failing to know her real father from the two people whom she believed to be her father, Korobi was losing all hope she was feeling bitter. That day was the last day for her to call a person by name Rob Lacey on who she was totally banking. She was in a conflict, hesitation, anxiety whether to call this Rob Lancy or not because she had very bad experiences with the previous two Robs. When Mr. Desai faxed to the motel, the information, she was not able to come to terms. She did not want to jinx her chances. Finally she musters courage and dials the number. He attends to the call and answers as Rob Lacey. But Korobi was not in a position to come to terms with reality. All her hopes disintegrated with her previous experiences Korobi immediately begins to say and talks about her that her mother Anu Roy who is from Calcutta, and also tells that her name was Korobi, the Oleander. But Rob Lacey refuses to believe because he was told by

the grandfather that Anu & Korobi died and he was also in possession of the death certificate and ashes. This gave her a sense of resolution at last.

During her stay on America, Korobi's thoughts were always to be successful in her quest when she was adjusting to the place where she was living as there was no choice emotionally she had no one to share her turmoil. She had to travel to various places with a stranger like Vic. She had to resist herself from the emotional dependency on Vic as he was the only person she could be with, who was able to understand her. She felt all this was worth when she finally met her father Rob Lacey had a point, when he said that he had visited India in search of his family. He was told about the death of Anu and Korobi and he was sent back with a death certificate and ashes. This moved Korobi and was jubilant as he made an effort to find out what happened. She felt a sense of resolution. But it was difficult for her to make him believe about her and the relation. Maybe his experiences were also bad in this regard. She feels helpless when her father doesn't believe her and breaks down. But immediately she receives a call from Rob Lacey and makes her feel half the battle won. The time she meets her father Korobi observes him intensely, with some sort of reverence and was in awe with him. She felt there was so much to learn from him in little time. Rob Lacey also must have been shocked to 'learn that his daughter was alive. He would have once again been taken back to the memories of his love, Anu. He also must have felt assured that she was only daughter because she was relating to some of the memories of Anu and her name as well - Korobi. He could confirm that only by her name as it was Anu's choice and this would be more than enough to prove that Korobi was his daughter.

Conclusion: There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in her novels at a deeper level they show a conflict between tradition and modernity. The trials and tribulations and the struggle to maintain the modern values and to carve out an identity of their own in the new and ostensibly stifling environment of her protagonists make them a feminist. They reconcile themselves to the rigidity of tradition but with reservations and carve out their own identity as new women 'living within the ambit of tradition. Though Divakaruni is now settled in the U.S it is the feeling of belonging and rootedness to India and her interest in women make her right on such themes. Here in this

novel the sacrifices she made for her search and sustenance and trials and tribulations she endured in her life's journey must have transformed the cocooned Korobi to a bloomed Oleander. One

cannot stop appreciate her resilience and acknowledge that she is a true epitome who would define empowerment in the right perspective.

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