

**DIVAKARUNI'S *SOLEANDER GIRL*: KOROBİ'S SEARCH FOR
IDENTITY AMID TRADITIONAL VALUES AND IMMIGRANT
EXPERIENCE**

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* traces the emotional and cultural journey of Korobi Roy, a young woman raised within the protected world of an upper-middle-class Bengali household and deeply troubled by the mystery surrounding her birth. The discovery of a letter among her mother's belongings disrupts the family history preserved by her grandparents and compels her to postpone marriage in order to search for her biological father in the United States. This journey transforms Korobi from a sheltered orphan into a self-aware woman who confronts betrayal, racial prejudice, cultural dislocation, and emotional loss. This paper argues that Korobi's search for her origins develops into a larger search for identity through which Divakaruni examines gender, family honor, migration, and bicultural belonging. Korobi's movement from Kolkata to America is simultaneously geographical, psychological, and ethical, because it forces her to reassess legitimacy, love, family, and selfhood. By the end of the novel, Korobi discovers the truth about her father and acquires the strength to accept a complex inheritance and return to India with a renewed sense of agency. The novel thus presents identity as an ethical achievement formed through painful knowledge and self-recognition.

Keywords: identity, migration, biculturality, family secret, gender, tradition, self-discovery

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies an important place in contemporary Indian English diasporic writing. Her fiction repeatedly engages with migration, women's experience, memory, family conflict, and the strain of negotiating Indian cultural values within transnational spaces. In *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni combines the structure of a family mystery with the pattern of a coming-of-age narrative in order to portray the inner growth of Korobi Roy, a young woman raised by her grandparents after the death of her mother and the supposed death of her father. At the beginning of the novel, Korobi appears secure within the affectionate and morally ordered world created by her grandparents. Beneath this security lies an emotional absence, since her life remains marked by the silence surrounding her parents and by a persistent longing for fuller self-knowledge. The novel gains momentum when Korobi discovers that the story she has long accepted about her parents is incomplete and deceptive. The revelation that her father is alive in America unsettles her emotional world and weakens the moral authority of the family structure that has shaped her upbringing. From that moment, the mystery of birth becomes inseparable from larger questions of identity, gendered obedience, race, migration, and cultural belonging. Korobi's journey to America exposes her to a reality far removed from the protected respectability of her Kolkata home. In that unfamiliar space, she confronts the truth about her father together with the instability of the social values through which she has understood family, love, and legitimacy. This paper argues that Korobi's search for her biological father becomes a wider search for identity through which Divakaruni examines the pressures of traditional family values and the unsettling realities of immigrant life. Her journey to America functions as an external quest for truth and an inward process of transformation. Through Korobi's experience, the novel reveals that identity emerges through the courage to confront painful truths and through the reconstruction of the self beyond deception and silence.

Discussion

Korobi is introduced as a young woman loved by her grandparents and shaped by an unspoken loss. Even within a protected environment, she grows up with only a partial experience of parental affection. Divakaruni captures that emotional void when Korobi reflects on the little she knows of her parents: "I know so little about my mother, only that she died eighteen years ago, giving birth to me—a few months after my father, an ambitious law student, had passed away in a car accident. Perhaps she died of a broken heart."¹ This

¹Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 2.

statement is important because it establishes the emotional and narrative centre of the novel. Korobi's childhood has been shaped by secrecy, and the limited knowledge she receives leaves her with a fragmented sense of self. Her longing is intensified by her private bond with her dead mother. Whenever she returns home from school, she imagines intimate conversations with her mother's memory. These private acts of remembrance create an interior world in which love, grief, and desire for belonging become inseparable. The discovery of her mother's letter in her grandfather's library deepens that desire. The letter introduces Korobi to a passionate model of love and leads her to imagine a life founded on sincerity and emotional openness. At this stage, Rajat seems to embody that hope; however, the romantic promise of marriage gives way to a harsher demand for truth.² The decisive turning point occurs when her grandmother reveals that Korobi's father lives in America. The shock of this disclosure is sharpened by the grandmother's confession: "Your dear grandfather lied to you—and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive. His name is Rob. Yes, Rob. He lives in America."³ This moment dismantles the moral authority of the household. The family that protected Korobi also deceived her, and that deception was shaped by conventional notions of propriety, caste, respectability, and patriarchal control. The truth exposes the extent to which tradition can serve as care and as an instrument of silence.

Divakaruni carefully prepares Korobi's movement toward self-discovery. Even before the revelation, Korobi senses that something lies beyond the known limits of her life. In a dreamlike exchange with her mother, she hears a silent call toward what lies "beyond the ocean," and she gradually comes to understand that this call is tied to the truth of her birth.⁴ The novel thus frames her journey in heroic terms, and that heroism grows from a willingness to confront painful knowledge. Korobi postpones her marriage, leaves the familiar world of Kolkata, and undertakes a journey that will test both her emotional resilience and her moral judgment.⁵

Her conversation with Rajat reveals the extent of her inner upheaval. She confesses: "I'm so confused. All the things I was so proud of, my family, my heritage—they're only half-true. The other half of me—I don't know anything about it. Except that

²Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 12.

³Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 52.

⁴Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 5.

⁵Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 66.

all this time my father was alive, and in America.”⁶ This admission marks the beginning of a new consciousness. Identity now appears fractured, provisional, and in need of recovery. The contrast between “half-true” family history and the missing “other half” of the self expresses the fundamental crisis at the heart of the novel. The novel also invites a closer reading of the home in Kolkata as a gendered moral space. Korobi is a beloved granddaughter there, and she is also shaped by a code of feminine restraint, gratitude, and obedience. Her grandparents give her protection, education, and social prestige, and they also define the limits of what she may know and how she should behave. Because the family story has been organized around silence, Korobi’s crisis becomes an ethical collapse as well as an emotional shock. A family history that once seemed noble rests on concealment, and the discovery teaches her that affection separated from truth can become another form of control. Divakaruni thereby presents the upper-middle-class household as a place where women are cherished yet disciplined, and where the preservation of family honor often takes precedence over a daughter’s right to self-knowledge.

This tension clarifies the importance of Rajat in the novel. At first he appears to represent stability, continuity, and the sanctioned future expected by both families. Once Korobi learns that her own history has been falsified, marriage becomes an ethical decision rather than a passive fulfillment of custom. Her decision to postpone the wedding marks one of the boldest gestures in the narrative, because it shifts her from the position of dutiful bride to that of an ethical subject who insists on truth before social performance. Rajat’s role therefore extends beyond romance. He becomes a test of whether love can survive the unsettling knowledge that identity is layered, unfinished, and socially vulnerable. The novel suggests that mature intimacy requires honesty, and that a woman’s consent gains meaning when it grows from self-understanding and family truth.

When Korobi arrives in America, the narrative shifts from domestic secrecy to immigrant vulnerability. Her search for her father exposes her to the precariousness of life in an unfamiliar country. She confronts practical hardship, loneliness, and financial insecurity. The collapse of arrangements made for her arrival, the uncertainty of movement through an alien urban environment, and her dependence on strangers reveal how fragile her former security truly was.⁷ America yields answers slowly and compels Korobi to rely

⁶Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 66.

⁷Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 89.

on her own judgment. This movement from dependence to self-reliance is central to her transformation.

America appears in a complex relation to India. Divakaruni presents a landscape of danger, anonymity, kindness, and moral ambiguity rather than a simple cultural opposite. Korobi's experiences reveal racial unease, material uncertainty, and emotional disappointment, and they also introduce her to forms of solidarity grounded in care, shared vulnerability, and chosen connection. The help she receives from strangers and acquaintances enlarges her moral imagination, because it teaches her that belonging may emerge through acts of care and through created bonds. In this respect, the immigrant world in the novel is fractured and generative: it dismantles inherited certainties while opening new possibilities for affiliation, empathy, and self-fashioning.

Financial difficulty becomes one of the most revealing dimensions of her journey. With too little money to continue her search, she keeps the burden on herself because dependence on Rajat would diminish the independence she is trying to build. Her determination is captured in the declaration, "I'll get the money, I say with jaunty rashness, though I have no idea how. I know this much, though: I'm not going to ask Rajat."⁸ Soon afterward, when she sells her hair in order to survive, she experiences both vulnerability and empowerment: "I feel light-headed, untethered. But once the money is in my hand I'm somewhat consoled. I now have enough for California, I've done it without having to beg anyone."⁹ These moments show that Korobi's quest is emotional and material at once. Her new identity is forged through acts of endurance that teach her self-respect.

The search for her father is repeatedly frustrated. The men initially identified as possible leads prove unrelated to her, and in these encounters Korobi is forced to confront exploitation, misrecognition, and humiliation. Divakaruni nevertheless presents her heroine as resilient and active. Supportive figures such as Desai, Vic, and Meera Anand help Korobi continue her search, and these relationships broaden the novel's representation of diasporic networks. America appears as a space of danger and a space of unexpected solidarity.¹⁰

⁸Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 172.

⁹Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 177.

¹⁰Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 179.

The eventual discovery of the truth about her parents radically complicates Korobi's sense of origin. She learns that her mother Anu had fallen in love with Rob Lancey in America and that her return to India was shaped by a promise made to her father as well as by the weight of social expectation.¹¹ Rob's explanation reveals both love and helplessness. He recalls Anu's seriousness about the promise she had made and explains that pregnancy still left that promise in force.¹² In this account, tradition appears as a force powerful enough to separate lovers and determine the future of an unborn child. Korobi's life has therefore been shaped by a moral code that valued obedience over emotional truth.

The revelation that her father is African American introduces another crucial dimension to the novel. The concealment of his identity by Korobi's grandparents grew from social anxiety over race, respectability, and community perception. Korobi now understands that the lie surrounding her birth was also a lie shaped by prejudice. This discovery intensifies her emotional crisis because it forces her to reinterpret the silence of her family as exclusion and erasure. The issue extends beyond his survival; it also involves the removal of an entire part of her identity in order to preserve a socially acceptable family narrative.¹³

The novel also pursues a complex understanding of origin that exceeds bloodline. Korobi's discovery of her father matters profoundly, and the narrative presents biological truth as one part of a larger process of healing after secrecy. Her transformation becomes meaningful when she interprets that truth for herself and decides how it will shape her future. This is why the novel's bicultural dimension remains ethically important. Korobi learns to inhabit a mixed inheritance that includes Indian upbringing, American ancestry, maternal loss, and the afterlife of family deception. Identity in *Oleander Girl* is therefore dialogic and constructed; it emerges from memory, choice, and moral reflection and gathers its force through lived interpretation.

Her response to this truth is painful and immediate. When she realizes that her parents' union had remained outside marriage, she asks in shock, "I'm a—bastard?"¹⁴ The word reveals the violence of social categories internalized through culture. Korobi

¹¹Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 242–45.

¹²Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 245.

¹³Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 260.

¹⁴ Divakaruni, 245.

momentarily sees herself through the language of stigma rather than through the humanity of her parents' love. The novel then guides her toward a more mature understanding in which identity is separated from inherited dishonor and reconstructed through acceptance. Seen in this light, Korobi's return to India carries a significance deeper than reunion or closure. It is the final proof that knowledge has altered the terms of her belonging. She comes back as a woman capable of evaluating tradition, preserving affection, and refusing shame. That balance is central to Divakaruni's achievement, for the novel presents selfhood as something shaped through roots, movement, and reflective choice. Korobi's maturity lies in her ability to hold contradiction while remaining whole. The narrative thus closes on an idea of identity that is resilient, relational, and consciously chosen. The symbol of the oleander becomes central to this reconstruction. Rob explains that Anu named Korobi after the oleander because she wanted her daughter to possess a resilience she herself desired, and he later says that he has planted "row upon row of oleanders" as a memorial to that love.¹⁵ The flower's doubleness—its beauty and toxicity—captures Korobi's emotional evolution. She is tender, affectionate, and vulnerable, yet she also develops the strength to defend herself against betrayal and despair. The title of the novel therefore encodes the heroine's transformation from sheltered girlhood to self-protective maturity.

This reading is supported by Subhra Roy's observation that, by the time of her wedding, Korobi has become "a fully blown oleander—beautiful but tough, ready to take challenges."¹⁶ Roy's formulation is apt because it emphasizes physical and emotional endurance together with a conscious readiness to face life. Likewise, L. V. Padmarani Rao notes that Divakaruni's women are shaped by cultural change on both sides of the ocean and struggle to carve out identities of their own.¹⁷ These critical insights help illuminate the broader significance of Korobi's story. Her struggle is personal, and it also reflects the condition of women whose lives are formed at the intersection of tradition, migration, and social regulation.

¹⁵ Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 244, 253.

¹⁶ Subhra Roy, "The Unfolding of Korobi: The Gradual Growth of the Central Character in the *Oleander Girl*," in *Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Critical Response* (New Delhi: Delta Book World, 2016), 138.

¹⁷ L. V. Padmarani Rao, "The Short Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," in *Indo-English Fiction: New Perspectives* (Aadi Publications, 2011), 56.

The conclusion of Korobi's journey is particularly significant because it resists simplistic resolution. She returns to India with clearer self-knowledge after her meetings with her newly discovered father and after Vic's affection opens another possible future abroad. This return signifies mature choice. Korobi re-enters India as someone who can acknowledge the complexity of her birth, accept her bicultural inheritance, and choose love with full awareness.¹⁸

In this sense, *Oleander Girl* presents migration as dislocation and as a mode of self-knowledge. America functions as the space in which Korobi confronts racial difference, economic struggle, emotional disappointment, and the instability of received identity. India remains the site of family, memory, and cultural rootedness, though it now carries a revised relation to authority. By moving between these worlds, Korobi develops a more expansive understanding of selfhood. Her identity emerges through the acceptance of contradiction.

Conclusion

The Oleander Girl offers a compelling narrative of female self-discovery shaped by secrecy, migration, and emotional resilience. Korobi's search for the truth about her birth begins as a private quest, and it gradually becomes a broader confrontation with the structures that govern family life, female obedience, social respectability, and racial prejudice. Divakaruni shows that traditional values can both nurture and wound: Korobi's grandparents raise her with affection and care, yet the very system they represent suppresses the truth of her origins. America, by contrast, appears as a difficult and often hostile space, and it also becomes the site where painful knowledge turns into self-understanding. By the end of the novel, Korobi moves beyond absence, deception, and dependence. She carries her suffering into a life marked by greater moral clarity and emotional strength. Her return to India marks the emergence of a mature self capable of accepting a layered identity shaped by both Indian and American histories. Divakaruni ultimately presents identity as an ethical formation achieved through courage, suffering, and self-recognition.

¹⁸Divakaruni, *The Oleander Girl*, 250.

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