
**PROCURING IDENTITY OVER LOVE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
NOVEL *OLEANDER GIRL***

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Abstract

Feminism has always underscored independence of mind and spirit and body. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the most important feminist writers, “The education and upbringing of women had created their limited expectations based on a self-image dictated by male gaze” (*Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* 3). Women used to see the world through the projection of men who take the privilege in deciding what they should see and seek. So they don't get any chance to analyze their capability and inner desire for dreaming. When women are bound by love, they spend their thinking and dreams over their partners. But at the same time unknowingly, they develop a sense of dependency, sensitivity and unable to think beyond their comfort zone. When this would be the prevailing circumstance, literature takes it partly in making women think above love, comfort zone and explicit the hidden prospects to satiate their mind and spirit. In that way, the Indian- American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl* focuses on the journey of the Protagonist Karobi Roy who by breaking the boundaries and repose sees the real meaning of success in finding her identity.

Keywords: *feminism, dependency, sensitivity, breaking boundaries*

(A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 38). Even if some men are ready to treat women equally, they hesitate to make their will free and control them in the name of love. Women are made for something more than making men fall in love. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the author of fifteen books including the award-winning short story collection *Arranged Marriage*. She also writes for children. She is the Betty and McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her novel *Oleander Girl* has been published in the year of 2013. The author's protagonist is a woman of protesting not for equality only but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals capable of intelligence and feeling. She does not seek freedom outside the house but within too and prepares to face the consequences of her choices.

Feminists and women writers have termed this ideology of woman as 'New Woman' and contributed to a fresh exploration of the role and status of women in contemporary Indian society. The novel opens with Karobi Roy, an eighteen-year-old girl's preparation of engagement with Rajat. Karobi had no chance of seeing her parents. Her mother Anu died during childbirth. Her father had died only months earlier in a car accident. So, she has been raised by her loving grandmother Sarojini and strict grandfather Bimal Prasad Roy. She loves both of them very much. When it comes to education, affection and marriage proposal, her grandparents have done their best to her. But still, she is longing so much to get to know her parents well.

Karobi never gets a chance to come out of her comfort zone. Now Rajat, a fine and loving gentleman adds promise to her safety, happiness, and dreams. She is dreaming about caring for the household and helping Rajat's business. It's going to be the most wonderful year, a sweet year of courtship, of enjoying the envy in the eyes of my college-mates, of evening forays into the glittering world of clubs and parties to which Rajat has promised to introduce me" (OG 19). Rajat's parents Mr. and Mrs. Bose, his sister Pia does not love Karobi less than Rajat. Rajat treats Karobi as his treasure and treats her gently in all set of situations. This makes her feel as if she has got a life partner as her mother quoted in her letter to her father.

But Karobi's happiness does not last long. It is shattered with the fall of her grandfather, who died at the very night of her engagement. Karobi takes guilt on her head. She believes her fight with Bimal over a sleeveless kurti, who strictly follows the dress code. After his death, she lost her temper often with Rajat and grandma. After three weeks, she is tattered by another secret of her father, who is alive in America. Sarojini explains her grandpa's promise as "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" (OG 52). Karobi could not bear this shock of betrayal. From here, Karobi's preference for settling in a love life has been changed into finding the hidden truths about her parents. She thinks that it would be the key to find her identity and fulfilling her mother's last wish. And along with him, a way to finally know my mother, that silhouette forever glimmering at the edge of my mind, those few scribbles of love on a page?" (OG 56).

Through Sarojini, karobi has learned about her mother's visit to America for studying, how she has fallen in love with her father, grandpa's stubbornness not to forgive her mother and her mother's last days in Kolkata. These things have worsened her respect and love for Bimal. She expresses it to Rajat, "What hurts, even more, is knowing that my grandparents – whom I loved more than anybody- would deceive me like this! It hurts so much" (OG 65). This paves the way for her new journey and transformation into a self-willed woman. Once for all, she wants to give it a try to find her origin and fixes it as her goal of life. She has discovered the way to feed her hunger of understanding her parents and she doesn't want to give it up at any cost. After revealing all the secrets to Rajat she says, "Until I find him, Rajat, I'm not sure I can get

married” (OG 67). At that moment, she decides to take up the journey, to come out of the comfort zone and not to be throttled by love.

Karobi determines not to give up the chance of finding her father, not even for the man she has loved so deeply till then. She tries to balance both her love and desire. At the same time, she doesn't want to cheat anyone for the sake of her happy married life with Rajat. She expresses her wish to Mrs. Bose, “I can't get married yet, Maman. ...I have located an investigator in America. He'll start work as soon as I make the first payment. It's going to be expensive, but he said if I travel to America and do some of the legwork for him, following up on his leads, it'll cost a lot less” (OG 76). Karobi denies the request of Mrs. Bose, who really wants to hide the secret for the sake of her business. She feels it would be a betrayal of her mother's last wish and to her own self. If she accepts it, it would be a cowardly act for the sake of security. At these kinds of situations, women need a friend more than a lover. But Karobi has no one as real friends.

This new transformation of Karobi may not be ideal or the best one. But she is rebelling to explore her inner strength, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs. She has carved a function for herself on her journey. She knows well that if she compromises by the provoking of others, she will never feel complete in Rajat's arms or anywhere else. Half of Karobi's desire has been fulfilled when she reaches America alone. Slowly, she makes herself free from all the boundaries and reliance which she used to have from her childhood. During her mission, she has faced many financial problems and immigrant issues. Sometimes, she feels alone and despairs. Hence, she is not ready to expose it and not to present herself as a weakling. She bears every physical and mental agony only to yield her longing. For the first time in her life, Karobi experiences all the life's situations by herself. Though it scares her, she has become immune to those situations. She shows her courage in making the fund to visit California when she sells her hair. She states, “I feel light-headed, untethered. But once the money is in my hand, I am somewhat consoled. I now have enough for California, and I've done it without having to beg anyone” (OG 177).

One among those bitter experiences is her encounter with the person named, Rob who has harassed Karobi physically. She manages to escape from that calamity as her friend Vic remarks, "I want you to know that you were brave and quick-witted in a situation where most women would have fallen apart. In every single experience, she befits a worthy lesson to train both her mind and spirit. It helps her to understand the culture and enhances the importance of her family members. Finally, she achieves her goal of meeting her father who brings the figure to all her imaginations about her mother. Though she has found out her father, he turns out to be an African-American. One of her greater queries is to know why her mother had named her after a flower which is poisonous. She is full delighted when her father explains the reason as, "Because

the oleander was beautiful-but also tough. It knew how to protect itself from the predators. Finally, she has managed to get her mother's message after eighteen years.

After settling all the things in America, she rushes to see Rajat and Pia who have been hospitalized due to an accident. But things have taken different terms then. Mr. and Mrs. Bose get shocked and hesitated to have a bond with a girl of mixed parentage. And Rajat has developed bitterness due to her behavioral changes. Karobi tries her best to save her relationship with Rajat and his family. But, Mrs. Bose accuses her, "Why should I believe you? You're only saying this because we already know your secret. Where's the proof that you weren't just planning to hide this information" (OG 273). Accountably, these incidents have molded a new Karobi, who breaks the engagement and says, "I'm Karobi, Oleander, capable of surviving drought and frost and the loss of love" (OG 275).

Fortunately, Rajat reunites with Karobi. Karobi is now ready to take the hands of Rajat as who she is. It gives her a relieved sigh after a long journey. They have started their married life with her mother's gift, a love poem. As heroes do, Karobi has ventured a journey of search and found her real self.

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