

BIRTH, BELONGING, AND BICULTURAL SELFHOOD IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S OLEANDER GIRL

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* presents the journey of Korobi Roy, a young woman who searches for the truth of her birth while standing between tradition, family loyalty, love, and immigrant experience. Korobi is brought up by her grandparents in Kolkata with affection and protection. She grows up believing that both her parents are dead. Her engagement to Rajat, the son of a prominent family, seems to promise love, security, and social fulfilment. Yet a hidden love letter from her mother unsettles her life and leads her toward a buried family secret. When her grandmother reveals that her father is alive and lives in America, Korobi postpones her marriage and begins a difficult journey in search of her origin. In America, she faces loneliness, financial struggle, cultural difference, and emotional disappointment. Her meeting with her father does not give her the complete happiness she expected, since he has a new family of his own. Yet the journey gives Korobi strength, self-knowledge, and a more mature understanding of love and belonging. This paper examines Korobi's search for identity against the background of Indian traditional values and immigrant experience. It also studies how Divakaruni presents Korobi as an "oleander girl," beautiful, wounded, resilient, and strong enough to survive the truth of her birth.

KEYWORDS: Identity, heroic journey, culture, betrayal, birth mystery, unconditional love, immigrant experience, oleander girl.

Received: 02-June-2026

Accepted: 02-July-2026

Published: 14- July-2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an important Indian American writer whose works deal with women's lives, immigrant experience, family bonds, memory, love, and cultural conflict. As a poet, novelist, and writer for young readers, she does not limit herself to one theme. Her fiction often presents the strength and limitations of immigrants in America, the power of myth in human life, the weight of history, and the emotional world of Indian women. Her works have appeared in many magazines and anthologies and have been translated into several languages.

Divakaruni's female characters are often closely connected with Indian family structures, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and traditional customs. They live within families that protect them, but also restrict them. They receive love, but that love is often tied to silence, secrecy, and control. Many of her women have to move through pain before they understand themselves. Their journey toward selfhood usually begins when they question what the family has hidden from them.

Oleander Girl follows this pattern. Korobi Roy, the central character, is brought up by her grandparents after the death of her mother. She grows up believing that her father also died before her birth. Her life is protected by the Roy family's name, wealth, and tradition. Yet her identity is incomplete because the truth of her birth has been hidden from her. The mystery of her parents becomes the force that shapes her life.

The novel begins in India and moves to America. This movement from Kolkata to the United States is not merely geographical. It is also emotional and psychological. Korobi leaves the guarded world of her grandparents and enters an unfamiliar world where she must depend on her courage, judgment, and self-respect. Her journey becomes a search for her father, but it is also a search for herself.

This paper studies Korobi's journey as a movement from protected innocence to self-aware maturity. It examines how Divakaruni presents the conflict between traditional values and personal identity. It also explores how immigrant experience transforms Korobi's understanding of family, love, culture, and belonging.

2. KOROBİ'S PROTECTED CHILDHOOD AND HIDDEN LONGING

Korobi Roy is eighteen years old when the main action of the novel begins. Her grandparents, Sarojini and Bimal Roy, have raised her with care. Sarojini is kindhearted, while Bimal Roy is a conservative retired lawyer who values honour, tradition, and family reputation. Under their protection, Korobi grows up within the identity of the Roy family. She is loved and sheltered, but her life is built on a secret.

Korobi's childhood is marked by the absence of her parents. She knows only a small version of the story. She has been told that her father, an ambitious law student, died in a car accident and that her mother died while giving birth to her. She speaks of this limited knowledge with pain: "I know so little about my mother, only that she died eighteen years ago, giving birth to me—a few month after my father, an ambitious law student, had passed away in a car accident. Perhaps she died of a broken heart" (*Oleander Girl* 2).

This statement reveals the emotional emptiness in Korobi's life. She has family, comfort, and affection, but she does not have the love of her parents. Her identity is formed around absence. She laughs and behaves normally before others, but in private she longs for the mother she never knew. Whenever she returns home from boarding school, she follows the routine of sitting on her bed and secretly conversing with her dead mother. These imagined conversations become her emotional refuge.

Korobi's mother appears to her in dreams and shadows. Korobi shares her joys, desires, dreams, and engagement with Rajat with this silent maternal presence. These private moments show her deep need

for unconditional love. Her grandparents love her, but their love is mixed with authority and concealment. Her mother becomes the figure to whom she can speak freely.

The discovery of the blue paper changes Korobi's life. During one of her holidays, she enters her grandfather's library and finds a love letter written by her mother to her father. The letter falls from an old book of poetry. It is beautiful and painful. It reveals a love story that had been hidden from her. After reading it, Korobi longs to experience such sincere and unconditional love in her own life.

Rajat seems to offer that possibility. He is charming, loving, and the only son of a prominent family. Their engagement appears to give Korobi the future she desires. Yet the love letter does not allow her to remain peacefully within that future. It opens a door to the past and forces her to question the story she has been told about her parents.

3. FAMILY SECRET AND THE COLLAPSE OF INHERITED IDENTITY

Korobi's life changes after her engagement to Rajat. Soon after the engagement, her grandfather suffers a cardiac arrest. This crisis reveals that the Roy family is also facing financial problems. In this difficult moment, Sarojini finally discloses the secret that has been kept from Korobi. She tells her: "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" (52).

This revelation breaks the foundation of Korobi's identity. Until this moment, she has believed herself to be the orphaned child of dead parents. Now she discovers that her father is alive. More painfully, she realizes that the people who loved and raised her also lied to her. Her grandfather's protection becomes an act of betrayal. Her grandmother's silence becomes part of the same deception.

Korobi begins to understand the meaning of her mother's dreamlike presence. Earlier, she had sensed that her mother wanted something beyond the ocean. She asks, "There's something out there you want? Beyond the ocean?" She nods... 'You want me to go and get it?' She nods. 'Where must I go? What am I look for?' (5). After learning the truth, Korobi realizes that her mother has been urging her toward the hidden part of her identity.

The secret also reveals the power of traditional values. Korobi's mother, Anu, had fallen in love with Rob Lancey while studying in America. Rob is a foreigner of Afro-American descent. Anu's relationship with him and her pregnancy before marriage become unacceptable within her traditional family background. Bimal Roy hides the truth to protect family honour and social reputation.

Korobi learns that Anu returned to India to seek her father's permission to marry Rob. She had made a promise in the temple that she would not marry against her father's wishes. Rob later explains, "She took the promise she'd made in the temple—that she wouldn't marry against her father's wishes—very seriously. I couldn't understand it, but there it was. That was one of the reasons she went to India—to ask her father to release her from her promise so we could marry before you were born" (245).

Anu's tragedy grows from the conflict between love and obedience. She loves Rob, but she cannot fully free herself from her father's authority and the traditional promise she has made. Her return to India leads to confrontation, accident, heavy bleeding, and death. Korobi is delivered from her mother's womb through an operation. Her birth is therefore surrounded by love, secrecy, sacrifice, and loss.

After learning the truth, Korobi feels that half of her identity has been denied to her. She tells Rajat, "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 all this time my father was alive, and in America" (66). This confession shows the depth of her crisis. Family, heritage, and belonging become unstable. Korobi has to search for the missing half of herself.

4. KOROBİ'S HEROIC JOURNEY TO AMERICA

Korobi's journey begins in the known world of her grandparents' house in Kolkata. Yet the real journey begins inside her mind. She has to leave behind the identity given to her by the Roy family and move toward a truth that may hurt her. This makes her journey heroic. She does not travel for pleasure, education, or wealth. She travels to discover who she is.

Before leaving for America, Korobi gathers as much information as she can from her grandmother. She learns about her mother Anu, her relationship with Rob, and the circumstances that led to her return to India. These fragments become the only map Korobi has. She has no clear plan, little money, and no direct knowledge of her father. Yet she decides to go.

Her decision also affects her relationship with Rajat. She loves him deeply, but she postpones the marriage. This is one of the first strong acts of self-assertion in her life. She refuses to enter marriage while her identity remains incomplete. She understands that the truth of her birth must be faced before she can give herself fully to another relationship.

In India, Korobi has lived a protected life. Her grandparents have made decisions for her and guarded her from unpleasant truths. In America, she has to face uncertainty. She must move through strange places, unfamiliar people, financial difficulty, and emotional risk. This change transforms her from a sheltered girl into a self-reliant woman.

The immigrant experience in the novel is not shown as easy or romantic. People leave their home countries for many reasons, including education, economic progress, family ties, and personal freedom. But the foreign land also brings alienation, vulnerability, and fear. Korobi experiences these difficulties when she reaches America. The person arranged by Rajat to receive her at Kennedy Airport fails to arrive. She is left confused and helpless in a strange country.

Later, she receives help from Desai, a detective arranged by Rajat, and from Vic, Desai's nephew. Vic becomes her sympathizer and helps her in the search for her father. Desai shortlists three possible men: Rob Davis, a writer at the Santa Cruz club; Rob Mariner, a San Francisco estate lawyer; and Rob Evanston, an architect. Korobi meets them with hope, but each meeting leads to disappointment. None of them is her father. One man makes sexual advances toward her, while another assumes she needs money. These experiences expose her to danger and humiliation.

At this stage, Korobi almost gives up. Yet her meeting with Meera Anand restores her hope. Meera helps her learn more about Anu Roy and reveals an important truth: Korobi's parents were not married, and her father is of Afro-American descent. This information deepens the complexity of Korobi's identity. She now has to face not only a hidden father but also the social shame attached to illegitimacy and racial difference in traditional Indian society.

5. FINANCIAL STRUGGLE AND SELF-RESPECT

Korobi's search in America is also shaped by financial difficulty. She has come without proper planning and without enough money. As her search continues, her need for money becomes urgent. Desai advises her to ask Rajat for help. But Korobi's self-respect prevents her from depending on him. She says, "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" (172).

This moment is important because it shows Korobi's growing independence. Earlier, she lived under her grandparents' care and later under the emotional security of Rajat's love. In America, she learns to stand

on her own. She does not want her search for identity to become dependent on another person's money. Her refusal to ask Rajat becomes a statement of selfhood.

Korobi finally sells her hair to raise money. This act is painful, but it also gives her confidence. Hair often carries emotional and cultural meaning for women. By cutting and selling it, Korobi gives up a part of her old self in order to continue her search. She says, "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" (177).

The word "untethered" suits Korobi's condition. She is no longer tied completely to the protected world of Kolkata. She is also not yet rooted in America. She stands between two worlds, but this in-between state gives her a new strength. Her financial struggle becomes part of her emotional education.

6. MEETING THE FATHER AND FACING THE BITTER TRUTH

Korobi finally succeeds in finding her father, Rob Lancey. She learns that he had once gone to India in search of Anu and the child. Her grandparents had hidden the truth from both sides. They made Korobi believe that her father was dead, and they prevented Rob from knowing her life. This discovery makes Korobi understand the depth of the family lie.

Rob explains his love for Anu and the struggle they faced. He tells Korobi, "She explained the promise she'd made. When love ambushed her, she fought it every step of the way. But finally she had to call your grandfather. We both knew by then that it would be wrong for her to marry someone else" (242). He also speaks of his helplessness when Anu decided to return to India before their marriage.

Korobi expects that meeting her father will end her suffering. But the truth is more painful. Rob now has another family. He is married and has three children. Korobi realizes that she cannot simply enter his life and receive the fatherly love she missed for eighteen years. The discovery wounds her deeply. She asks herself, "I'm a—bastard?" and struggles with "this new, shameful me" (245).

This moment shows the emotional violence caused by social ideas of legitimacy. Korobi's birth is the result of love, but society may mark it as shameful because her parents were not married. She has to fight this shame within herself. The truth about her birth hurts her, but it also frees her from illusion. She no longer lives under a false story.

Rob gives her memories, not a new home. He tells her about Anu and shows her the oleanders he has planted. He says, "I have a half acre where I've planted row upon row of oleanders" (244). The oleander becomes a living connection between Anu, Rob, and Korobi. It holds the memory of love that could not become a family.

Korobi returns from this meeting with pain, but also with knowledge. She now knows who her father is. She knows the truth about her mother. She knows why the Roy family hid the past. This knowledge does not make life simple, but it makes her selfhood more complete.

7. Vic, Rajat, and the Question of Choice

In America, Korobi also encounters a new emotional possibility through Vic. Vic supports her, understands her struggles, and becomes drawn to her. Korobi feels affection toward him. His presence, along with the freedom of American life, creates a new confusion in her mind. She admits, "I'll have to make my new decision: Vic or Rajat, America or India" (218).

This choice is not merely between two men. It is also between two worlds. Vic represents America, newness, freedom, and the possibility of beginning again. Rajat represents India, commitment, tradition,

and the love that existed before her journey. Korobi's heart wavers because both choices offer something meaningful.

Yet Korobi does not allow temporary attraction to destroy the love she has already accepted. Her conscience warns her that deceit in love would damage her character. She chooses to return to India and remain sincere to Rajat. This decision shows maturity. She does not reject America because it is foreign. She does not choose India simply because it is traditional. She chooses after testing her own mind.

By returning to India, Korobi does not go back as the same protected girl who left Kolkata. She returns with a clearer identity and stronger self-respect. She is ready to marry Rajat, but now she enters that relationship as a woman who knows her truth. Her love is no longer based on innocence alone. It is supported by experience.

7. The Oleander Symbol and Korobi's Transformation

The title of the novel is deeply connected with Korobi's character. Korobi's mother names her after the oleander, a beautiful but poisonous plant. The oleander is attractive, but it also has the strength to protect itself. Anu wanted this toughness for her daughter because she herself did not have enough of it. Korobi is told, "Anu wanted that toughness for you because: she didn't have enough of it herself" (253).

This image explains Korobi's growth. At the beginning, she is beautiful, sheltered, emotional, and hungry for love. By the end, she becomes stronger. She learns to protect herself from humiliation, betrayal, and emotional collapse. Like the oleander, she carries both beauty and toughness.

Korobi's journey transforms her into a bicultural self. Indian culture gives her compassion, family attachment, emotional loyalty, and respect for love. American experience gives her independence, courage, self-confidence, and the ability to face difficult truths. She does not reject either culture. She learns from both.

Her identity is no longer limited to the Roy family's name or to the secret chosen by her grandfather. She accepts her father's Afro-American background. She accepts the fact that her parents were not married. She accepts the painful story of her mother's death. This acceptance allows her to live without shame. She reveals the truth to others because she believes that true love can face social judgment.

Subhra Roy's observation is apt in this context: "On the day of her wedding, she is a fully blown oleander—beautiful but tough, ready to take challenges" (138). Korobi becomes an oleander girl because she survives pain without losing tenderness. She learns that identity is not destroyed by truth. It becomes stronger when truth is faced.

8. TRADITION, IMMIGRATION, AND BICULTURAL BELONGING

Oleander Girl presents the tension between Indian tradition and immigrant experience. Korobi's life in India is shaped by family honour, caste-like social expectations, obedience, marriage, and guarded femininity. Her grandparents protect her, but they also control the narrative of her life. Their silence comes from fear of social shame.

America, on the other hand, becomes a space of discovery and difficulty. It gives Korobi the chance to search for her father, but it also exposes her to loneliness, financial hardship, danger, and cultural confusion. Divakaruni does not present America as a perfect place of freedom. It is a place where Korobi must struggle. Yet that struggle helps her grow.

The novel shows the lives of immigrants who stand between two cultures. They carry memories of the homeland while trying to survive in a new country. They feel loyalty to one place and attachment to another. This dual belonging creates ambivalence. For Korobi, the question is even more personal because she belongs to India by upbringing and to America through her father.

Her journey helps her understand that identity need not be pure or single. She is Indian, but she also carries an American connection. She is the granddaughter of the Roy family, but she is also the daughter of Rob Lancey. She is Rajat's beloved, but she is also a woman who has faced temptation, loneliness, and choice. Her selfhood becomes richer because it contains more than one world.

Divakaruni's novel therefore gives importance to bicultural identity. Korobi does not mourn forever over her mixed origin. She learns to accept it. Her American experience does not erase her Indian values. Her Indian upbringing does not prevent her from gaining strength in America. Both cultures contribute to her transformation.

7. CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* is a novel of female growth, identity, and emotional courage. Korobi begins as a sheltered young woman raised by loving but secretive grandparents. Her life changes when she discovers that her father is alive and that the story of her birth has been hidden from her. This truth forces her to question family, heritage, love, and selfhood.

Korobi's journey to America becomes the central movement of the novel. She leaves the protected world of Kolkata and faces an unfamiliar country with courage. Her search for her father brings disappointment, financial struggle, danger, and emotional pain. Yet it also gives her strength. She learns to depend on herself, protect her dignity, and face the truth of her birth without shame.

The novel also shows the conflict between traditional values and personal identity. Anu's love for Rob is destroyed by family honour and social restriction. Korobi, however, learns to move beyond the silence that destroyed her mother. She accepts her mixed identity and returns to India as a stronger woman. Her return is not defeat. It is a mature choice.

Korobi's transformation is beautifully expressed through the symbol of the oleander. Like the flower, she becomes both beautiful and tough. She carries pain, but she also carries resilience. Her journey teaches her that identity is not given by family history alone. It is created through courage, memory, truth, and choice.

Dr. L. V. Padmarani Rao's words about Divakaruni's women are suitable here: "Chitra Divakaruni's stories are as irresistible as the impulse that leads her characters to surface into maturity, raising their heads above floods of silver ignorance. Her Indian wives and daughters are all too imperfect heroines who are drawn with a rich, dense detail that allows the reader to feel the silent, strong undertows directing their lives. Both liberated and trapped by cultural changes on both sides of the Ocean, these women struggle fiercely to carve out an identity of their own" (56).

Korobi belongs to this world of Divakaruni's women. She is imperfect, emotional, wounded, and brave. Her journey from secrecy to self-knowledge makes *Oleander Girl* a significant narrative of female identity, bicultural belonging, and personal freedom.

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