



The Invisible Shackles of Affection: Women Under Familial Love in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract— This paper examines the impact of familial love and relationships on the development of women's identities in Indian-Bengali families, as depicted in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl* (2012). Similar to other feminist authors, she advocates for feminism through her literary contributions and social activism. Feminism has been dealing with different reasons for the marginalization of women in the patriarchal social structure, but to discuss the condition of women in the smallest unit of society, that is, the family, would throw light on the role of the family in the development, transformation and making of the personalities of women. Women in the world had to navigate society to find their place, but in country like India where family has a huge role to play the struggle starts at home. The research article primarily emphasizes the characteristics of Bengali individuals, given the novel's context of an Indian-Bengali family.



Keywords— Bengali women, Family, Feminism, marginalization, patriarchy

Family in social sciences has received several relevant definitions but no universal definition. Many hypotheses have been developed according to the diverse history, culture and situation that sought to define a family; hence, it became difficult for the social scientist to settle down to one theory. But on setting the technicalities aside the term family brings up the idea of one's close blood relatives, the smallest unit of a society. In India, the term family does not just limit to the reference of one's close blood relatives, rather it is a sense that keeps them emotionally tied to their essential responsibilities, duties and their complete existence as a person. Anyone who is a part of the family is meant to live according to the family norms through living up to its expectations and fulfilling the preconceived assumptions and demands. It is not viewed as a burden, but in reality, a kind of deep, satisfying delight is there in completing all these assumed responsibilities for one's family. However, with the setup of patriarchy in society, the labor areas for males and females have been assigned in a family in such a way that women live in a false ideology of an ideal woman for their families. The men are

accountable for earning money, but on the other hand, women have been endowed with countless chores to complete. These continuous chores which were established by the social order, had kept the women hidden from the outer world and slowly, in a male-dominated society, the household became synonymous for women as a person. Esha Dey ponders on the responsibilities of males and females in the Indian family in her study paper as; "The male is the official head of the family, who is the provider of food, shelter and clothing and also the defender against the attack from other males. The female is the bearer of children and nurtures all members of the household." (145) The vicious circle of female oppression got strengthened from such expected roles of males and females, along with other grounds of patriarchy.

Family has always been the most sacrosanct traditional institution in Indian society since the start of civilization. It has been considered above any single individual but with the relevance of every single member. Although with the passage of time, patriarchy established the males as the head of the family. Since man became the defender and

provider of the family, all resources and decisions came in his hands. Women in this due course of time were left only with two images, either the bearer or the destruction of the family. A firmly defined male perspective had historically marked descriptions of women's roles in India. Traditional Hindu legal codes and stories as gathered by Manu in *Manusmriti*, defined a woman's purpose in life as the bearing of children and emphasized the need for male control over her at all stages of her life. Legends and religious writings gave pictures of goddess Durga or Kali, who were either a docile wife and indulgent mothers or a destroyer. The woman of the house is supposed to face the whole duty of maintaining the family thread unbroken and linked together. Dasgupta and Lal state in the opening of their book, "The survey shows that the imaginary ideal of an Indian family requires the wife to be eagerly glad to sacrifice personal aspirations for the larger 'good'..." (13)

The existing paradigm of social structure of that time rendered the male superior in every regard and transformed the female into the other. They maintained their power by deleting and denying the female's independent identity. This constant subversion of women inspired feminism in the West, and various campaigns for the cause of women produced the alterations in women's existence. Having been inspired by the social upliftment in the West, women in third-world countries likewise raised their voices for improvements in their conditions. The autonomous personality of a woman of her own in India has become a new, astounding reality and a departure from the medieval past over the past few decades. Earlier, women were always a part of the family, but never an autonomous whole. This question of identity never arose earlier because all the discrimination and subjugation were accepted as normal by everyone, by the oppressor as well as the oppressed, due to the false consciousness among women, which is obviously passed on to them by their mothers and sisters within the patriarchal society, which never lets them think of a world where they are equal to their male counterparts. Instead, they were brought up in such a way that they viewed their house as their universe; more than that was the male arena where women were outlaws. The established roles for men and women by patriarchy made men paramount and limited women to the family.

In Bengal, with the penetration of the Western school of thought, the rational thinking in schooling and broadmindedness grew among the males, and their views towards their women altered considerably. The desire to draw women out of the four walls of their house for social activities prepared the way for the edification of women. But the education of women did not start merely with the concept of emancipation of womenfolk, but it was for the social image of their husbands, who wanted to flaunt an

educated and sophisticated life partner among their friends in the British circle. Judith Walsh also brings out the same in her study paper, 'Increasingly during the last half of the nineteenth century, Western educated Indian boys resisted the idea of marriage to illiterate girls who knew nothing of the culture of the western world in which their husbands would live and earn'. (4) And in the same way, the education offered by the parents was greater for seeking a better partnership for their daughters. On the whole, there was no thought to make the women independent and strong enough to have control on their own lives. Even in the twenty-first century, women are conditioned and raised in such a way that they become the centre of the familial system. The complete duty of keeping a family blissfully joined together is laid on her shoulders, that too without any authority in decision-making and finances.

Chitra Banerji Divakaruni is a second-generation American writer of Indian heritage and her awareness of the realities of Indian women is unparalleled. She is an Indian-Bengali by origin and has a first-hand experience of the Bengali society and family. Her novel *Oleander Girl* (2012) is also constructed on a Bengali backdrop and has Bengali-families in the heart. It is a tale of a young girl, Koroby Roy, who was orphaned at her birth and nurtured by her maternal grandparents. The tale begins on the eve of her engagement to her lover, Rajat, son of a high-profile family. But all the bliss changes into a chaotic and drastic upheaval with the dying of her grandfather Mr. Bimal Roy as it uncovers all the financial issues of Roy family and the sad secret of Korobi's life. This secret pushes her on a quest for her identity, which further puts her in uncomfortable situations. Though the story is about Korobi's search for her roots but it also best exemplifies the family's impression on the female characters of the work. The protagonist of *Oleander Girl*, Korobi, which means oleander, was named by her mother thus, as she wanted her daughter to have the hardiness of an oleander, as she lacked that attribute. The four female characters in the family frame in the story complete the picture of a Bengali woman.

Anu, the protagonist's mother, was extremely intelligent and talented, but lost her love and her life just because she could not shake off her guilt of crossing the limits her father had set. She was swinging in nowhere as she could neither be with her parents nor with her love entirely due to her conventional guilt-filled thinking because of her upbringing of „family first“ and the promise she had given to her father. She had dared to choose and decide a person as husband for her life without her father's concern, which was like a crime for a girl who had always done what her father had decided and dictated to her. She was a woman brilliant enough to have bagged a scholarship to study

abroad, but this achievement was of no significance to her lawyer father, who had already decided her fate by fixing her marriage of his choice. In reality, decent education for females meant beneficial partnership in the marriage market in all the cultures of India, as writes Vrinda Nabar on the new trend of education for girls in India:

Middle- class ladies are educated mostly as a concession to a cosmetic social change. Given the new executive atmosphere, a pleasant wife has become a vital appendage. Matrimonial ads typically list at least a BA degree as one of the necessary assets of a would be bride. Large numbers of girl-women are now enrolling for degrees as a result, while many depart halfway if a "good match" is procured. (68)

Anu accepted that alliance without even seeing that man because she had always consented to her father's choice; for her, his happiness was foremost. But her wish to study abroad transported her to a far distant nation where she was happy and independent, doing things of her choice, to live her life as she had then taken charge of her life. "In America she grew adventurous. She would tell us in her letters about folk dance courses and performances she had seen in San Francisco. She visited the huge redwood and observed migrating whales." (58) But the upbringing is always a part of one's personality and perceptions; she could not accept the condemnation of her father over her decision of having a partner of her choosing. She could not get it through to suffer that severity given by her father, and to seek permission from her father, she came to India but could never return to her love and life.

Sarojini Roy, the eldest lady in the tale, was an exact picture of a complete woman of a man's expectations; dutiful, loving and complying in every sense and situation. She always obeyed her spouse, loved him more than her life. She did not complain even when her husband compromised her life for the sake of his family name, which he feared would end up with him. He had her give birth to his child even after the doctor had warned them after three miscarriages. He confined her duty to only a feeding hand to their daughter and eventually to their granddaughter as everything else was decided by him for Anu and Korobi. He also made Sarojini to break off from their only daughter Anu, after Anu's decision to go against him. When she objected, he threatened to renounce her, "I will have nothing to do with a wife who does not stand beside me in a crisis, he said". (59). He never told Sarojini the authenticity of their daughter's life and death. She was manipulated by him in all imaginable ways. Even after the death of Anu he had her promise on god to keep the truth a secret from their granddaughter. He indulged her in his

crime of secrecy and lies to a father and a daughter about each other's existence. "All my life I've cared just about what he desired. Obeyed even when my conscience cried out against it".(59) Dasgupta and Lal write about the condition of a married woman in an Indian family in the introduction of their book as "Woman within a family has been regarded as the outsider who is expected to conform to the regulations of the marital home, with very low or non-existent agency". (18) But after his death, she felt free from the confines of her spouse and confessed the truth to her granddaughter. She mustered the strength to speak up the truth, which may have cost her the loss of her granddaughter. As a mother and grandmother, she constantly lavished affection; in fact, her motherly gestures inspired even the extreme characters like young Rajat and the brilliant politician Bhattacharya.

Divakaruni also highlights the possibilities of a woman, how she can handle both career and family together through Jayashree Bose, Korobi's would be mother-in-law, a businesswoman. Through her character, the author presents her idea that when love, freedom and support are provided to a woman, she may generate the best of the results in all aspects of life. As, Divakaruni has often been mentioned, thanking her family for their assistance at home and in her work. She herself is an example in real life of such women, who managed different fields and proved herself due to the love, trust and independence granted by the family. Jayashree is a woman from an affluent family, yet this affluence is the result of her own hard work. She is a lady with a strong will, who knows how to draw others to her bargain. She is a master in worldly matters and manages most of her deals autonomously. She defies the stereotype of people about working women that for them, family becomes secondary. Instead, her priority had always been her spouse and children; she never kept her work before her family. The safety and happiness of her family constantly lingered in her mind. Divakaruni offered a twenty-first-century mother-in-law through Jayashree, who is, if not supporting is at least not a hindrance in the life of her prospective daughter-in-law. This character even contradicts the concept of stereotypical mothers-in-law in the Indian setting.

Korobi, the protagonist of the tale is a small girl raised up by her grand-parents. She was kept away from the hectic and stylish life of Kolkata by her grand-father. She did most of the things to please her grand-father, even her good scores were simply for him. Her grand-father agreed to her choice for marriage at an early age due to his former experience with his daughter's decision, who had chosen a black American as a life partner, which he could never accept. But as soon as the greatest secret of her life was disclosed to her, she went in quest of her African American

father. She jeopardized her bright and lucrative future for her need for a complete family picture that illustrates the importance of a family in a woman's life. She did not want to hide any facts from her would-be in-laws, but her fiancé asked her to wait for the perfect time. She never wanted to betray anyone, even when she understood that her new identity was not very acceptable in a Bengali household, but she showed the strength to venture out in a totally new country in quest of her father, as she had longed for her parents since her youth. In the new country, she had different challenges, but did not give up the goal to find her father. She did all feasible things to find her father and at last found him. But that meeting with her father came with a shock, as she got to know that her parents were never married. She became humiliated of her identity, which was absolutely inappropriate in an Indian Bengali community. Her desire for her family image took her to that tricky circumstance. "Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this awful shame." (246) But as her anger melted down, she understood the situation which her parents had undergone. She merely craved his acceptance and blessings. Towards the end of the story, one can also see the strength of Korobi, when she breaks off the engagement but does not beg to prove her truth, which is like saying no to the *agnipariksha* to show the chastity that Sita had to face in Ramayana. She sought to return to a normal life with her grandma and leave her fiancé to uncover the truth and realize his error on his own.

CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wove several women characters of different colors in her story. They always keep their family as their priority, no matter what their age is. The oldest or the youngest women in the family feel the same obligation towards the family, but their style of expression may be different. They are ready to sacrifice even their most loving item in the name of family. When the family supports the woman, she can achieve the pinnacle of success in all areas, be it on the personal front, be it on the public front, as can be witnessed in Mrs. Basu and Korobi. And when a woman is not supported by her family, she is doomed, even when she is brilliant or educated. She is unable to move beyond the wishes of her family; she is saddled with the weight of responsibilities, commitments and family name, which does not let the woman stand for her choices and decisions, as in the case of Anu and Sarojini. So, it should be for everyone in the family that they love and respect ideology, perspectives, objectives and choices of each other and give liberty to all (particularly women who have been denied any unique

identity for eons) so as to have their own life and personality.

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