SELF-QUEST: UNVEILING THE JOURNEY MOTIF IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *OLEANDER GIRL*

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Abstract

The quest for self-identity posits crucially in diasporic discourse. This paper is an attempt to examine how the multi-faceted novelist, poet, activist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni evokes the journey motif in her bildungsroman novel *Oleander Girl* and strategically uses it to showcase the growth and development of her main protagonist Korobi trajectoryally. The focus will be an exploration of the parallel journey – one towards an outward physical destination, and the other one about an inner journey towards wholeness, completeness and selfhood. The research paper seeks to analyse how Korobi traverses through the various stages of the journey during her formidable quest to seek answers regarding her true heritage and how this turns into a journey of self-discovery as well.

Keywords: Quest, Journey, Diaspora, Growth, Identity, Selfhood

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all

....

Wise as you have become, so full of experience, you'll have understood by
then what these Ithakas mean.

- C.P Cavafy

These lines are taken from the poem "Journey to Ithaca", the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy describing precisely the main idea as explored through this article. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl*, we have the charming seventeen-year-old Korobi stepping out of her safe and secure sheltered abode to travel all the way across the seven seas to The United States of America. The poet Cavafy through the poem tries to convey that it is not the destination Ithaca which matters apart from having goals and aspiration while setting out on a

journey, but it is the process, the journeying, so to speak, that matters the most actually. These lines at the end of the poem convey the message clearly that it is the experience of the journey that enriches a person, and makes him wiser. All that the traveller absorbs till the final destination is the excitement at the beginning, the exhilarating memories and the heart-wrenching upheavals along the way, and, finally, the sense of satisfaction accompanying the sense of arrival, all together, the most valuable essence that a person should imbibe from the experience. And, it is this aspect of a journey which gets reflected in the transformation, apart from the showcase of growth and development in the character of Korobi, in the novel *Oleander Girl*, that this paper seeks to emphasize. How the journey motif as explored by the author in her bildungsroman novel brings about a desired change for the better in the main protagonist, is the focus of this paper.

In his seminal text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell, who is considered to be one of the prominent interpreters of myth, describes how a journey was undertaken by the protagonist results in his or her transformation, “a hero is any male or female who leaves the world of his or her everyday life to undergo a journey to a special world where challenges and fears are overcome in order to secure a reward which is then shared with other members of the hero’s community” [Campbell 7].

Through various illustrations, he demonstrates how certain patterns are followed by the myths of many cultures; the basic stages of the journey includes, “Separation”, which reveals details before the journey or quest has begun, followed by “Initiation” which covers all the fortunes and misfortunes that befall the person enroute; and finally “Return” which focuses on the individual’s return home empowered and enriched with the wealth of experience and knowledge, and finally being transformed into a new person. In recent years, we have seen that most expatriate women writers focus their attention on women characters who are either living as immigrants or are for a certain period of time-displaced from their home countries, and they describe how these women challenge the patriarchal mindsets and traditional boundaries to carve out their original independent identity. Regarding the intention of women writers, Veena Noble Dassin her book titled *Feminism and Literature* opines that ‘a search for [the] woman and a quest for the definition of the self in all situations’ is what most Indian women writers tend to sway towards (11). How Divakaruni, as hailed by the critics as a modern Jane Austen, uses the journey motif to develop her character Korobi to fulfil her quest to regain and establish her own identity, is what this article seeks to unravel. Focus will be on Korobi’s journey; how it begins by ‘separating’ from her near and dear ones and her

home territory to move out into the unknown to discover the hidden answers to questions regarding her parentage; how she goes through the 'rites of passage' in the hostile dangerous territory to get 'initiated', to finally accomplishing her mission of finding the missing links surrounding her birth and 'returning' home, more rooted in herself than ever before. Commenting on the characters in this novel in an interview given to Metka Zupancic, Divakaruni states that they are "typical of our global world and are engaged in a journey between cultures, between belief systems". She further explicates that even though this is a contemporary story, "it is really about the child in search of the father, which is the quest for the self and ultimately a spiritual quest." Lisa Lau makes an interesting observation about self-identity in South Asian Literature:

Identity is one of the most common themes in South Asian Literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding . . . Women writing in South Asia write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations, diasporic women's writing has different characteristics . . . Women of diaspora, instead almost always, without exception; testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities.(252).

When Korobi decides to uncover the mystery around her birth and parentage, she realizes that it will be an arduous task that might unearth some harsh and unpalatable facts. However, both she and her grandmother finally realize that she will remain only half the person she is unless she gains an insight into her roots, and thus the journey has to be undertaken at any cost. On another level, the journey inwards also involves reconciling to the hidden, latent, or even darker aspects of our own personality. The myth of the hero's journey is considered to possess tremendous significance from the Jungian perspective which relates the journey's physical aspect to the psychological processes that individuals need to undergo in their lifetime to reach the 'destination' – namely, psychological wholeness, a complete "individuation". (Jung 275).

In her experience in the USA, for the first time in her life, Korobi feels truly independent. From learning to navigate her ways around the city to protect herself from the evil machinations of her adversaries to inspiring other women immigrants by her bravery and resourcefulness, Korobi achieves a lot more than what she set out to obtain. The beginning, however, is quite daunting for her as she is forced to reside in an extremely hostile

environment, with limited financial resources, apart from experiencing the challenging identity crisis that is commonly faced by most diasporic. Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes the identity crisis faced by Indians abroad in his book, *Feminism Without Borders*,

“ Since settled notions of territory, community, geography, and history don’t work for us, what does it really mean to be “South Asian” in the United States? Obviously, I was not South Asian in India: I was Indian. [...] However, in North America, identification as South Asian (in addition to Indian, in my case) takes on its own logic. “South Asian” refers to folks of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Kashmiri, and Burmese origin.”
(127)

However, Mohanty further shares her personal experience regarding how transformative such a critical journey can be for one, “After all, it is often moments of crisis that make us pay careful attention to questions of identity. Sharp polarizations force one to make choices (not in order to take sides, but in order to accept responsibility) and to clarify one’s own analytic, political, and emotional topographies.” (132) And this can be reflected in Korobi’s case as well as her moment of crisis and change that takes place during her US sojourn.

When Korobi decides to get her haircut , she faces the dilemma of daring to go against the traditional norms of not seeking approval from the family elders before a significant decision. She never in her wildest dreams would have thought that she, the sole heiress of the eminent traditional Bengali Brahmin, would one day be getting the quality of her hair evaluated at an institute in America, where they buy human hair and depending on the “purity” of her hair, she would be getting paid for it. Her innerscape has been beautifully described by the author in these lines:

When the woman asked me to unbraid my hair, it fell past my waist in glossy curls. The glint of admiration in her eyes went through me like a knife. Grandmother loved my hair. She would massage coconut oil into it, wash it out with *ritha* pulp, and braid it into different designs. One of my happiest memories is the feel of her fingers on my scalp. I try not to think of what she’d say if she knew what I was doing.

Stay focussed on the moment, I order myself. On the necessity of now. The woman calls me into the back room. The cold of her scissors burns the nape of my neck. I keep my eyes turned away from the mirror. 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. (*Girl* 177)

This extract reflects the strategies employed by the author to elaborate on the psychological turmoil brimming inside Korobi. The phrases, “went through me like a knife” and “the cold of her scissors burns the nape of my neck” evoke the feeling of violation and vulnerability felt by her as she surrenders her prized asset, her crowning glory, to obtain monetary gain. She is besieged by her cherished childhood memories revolving around her grandmother's tender loving care for her hair and in fact, she is so overwrought with emotion that she averts her eyes from the mirror and wills herself to think only about the present necessity of the situation. But at the end of it when she earns a handsome amount for her sacrifice, she derives consolation from it and the fact that most likely for the first time in her life she has earned money without owing it to someone; money which she is entitled to and free to use or invest in any project she deems worthy. That immense sense of satisfaction she derives at the end of it goes a long way in empowering her. Later, when Seema, shocked and pained, chastises her for cutting off her hair without seeking the approval from her grandmother and in-laws, and warns her that she would look like an “improper bride”, she does panic for a while, imagining the worst of it and has serious doubts about being considered as “damaged goods”. [Girl 178]

But challenging circumstances are strewn in the path of most immigrant journeys, as has been observed by many diasporic critics and scholars, and it is such situations that are shaping her up to face much more daunting realities that lie ahead for her. “Although such experiences are stressful, they also provide opportunities for creating a ‘new’ identity” (Ramaswami, et al. 151). Korobi rises up to the challenging situation as she retorts back at Seema that it was her hair, conveying that she was, therefore, free to get it cut or styled as per her discretion. However, even though she is putting up a defiant front, she confesses to herself, that her claim was only partially true; as is revealed in the lines, “that hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée, to Papa and Maman Bose's daughter-in-law to be.” [Girl 178] Vic's reaction to her new short hair is also interesting and encouraging; he compliments her and confesses that he never would have imagined someone like her to be bold enough to take a step like this. Her own thoughts on the matter are also revealed in these lines, “Once I get over the shock, I decide that I, too, like the new me. A mass of curls, barely reaching my shoulders, have transformed me into a stranger, glamorous and a little dangerous.” [Girl 177] This clearly reflects how the shy timid teenager is slowly

metamorphosing into a strong independent young woman with a firm head above her shoulders. And this strength and independence she gains empower her to face turbulent times ahead when she returns back to India later. Commenting on the transformative aspect of the journey, Divakaruni, in an interview conducted in Chicago, discloses the closure she felt after she finished writing the novel *Vine of Desire*; “So, the overarching moment of the novel is “You come from India, you come to America, things happen to you here, you go back, you’re transformed, and the place you go back to is transformed because of that. But again, by going back to India, to your roots, you’re transformed again.”

While in the US, when Korobi finds herself in an uncomfortable situation when she is accosted by a stranger whom she hoped would turn out to be her missing father, she is able to extricate herself from the threatening spot that she has landed into and manages to escape out unscathed from there. Even Vic credits her for her courage and quick thinking and states that she “deserves to be proud” of herself (Girl 205). From being a submissive innocent girl who meekly submitted to the wishes of ‘the men in her life’ on issues ranging from appropriate engagement dress to serious matrimonial matters, to proactively taking charge of the issues at hand, one can see quite a development in Korobi’s character. She has begun to take independent decisions and is experiencing the pros and cons of doing so.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* opines, “Once a woman is self-sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator” (689). Witnessing Korobi’s growth, the readers can surmise how true this statement proves to be in her case.

At the start of the novel, Mrs. Bose impression of her son Rajat’s girlfriend, Korobi is that “she’s a sweet girl, charmingly unspoiled. But it’s as though she’s been living in a different century. While introspecting on Rajat’s girlfriend Sonia, she observes “when she and Rajat quarrelled, she [Sonia] held her own”. However, Korobi, Mrs. Bose predicts, “will crumble like tinfoil” (Girl 32). Three months later, post her trip to the US, Mrs. Bose has no qualms in admitting to herself that she has been proven wrong. She has witnessed the hitherto hidden courageous side of Korobi, who has proven by undertaking a challenging journey all by herself, putting her marriage to the most eligible rich bachelor in the city on hold, and even has succeeded in emerging stronger from the most arduous challenges thrown in her path. Even from the reports that Mrs. Bose manages to get from her sources, she was startled to find that her son’s fiancée is no longer the green girl from another century, much in awe of

her fiancé and his sophisticated family she knew before she left India, but has changed into quite a worldly-wise, go-getter who is now fully equipped to take on her role of being the daughter-in-law of one of the most prominent elitist business family of Kolkata.

There are other significant changes that can be witnessed in the novel delineating the development of her character during her US sojourn. From an unseasoned, school-girlish naiveté and timidity, Korobi slowly but surely starts showing signs of womanish maturity as is reflected in the chosen extracts from the novel. The first time Rajat sees her, he is completely bowled over by her “earlier era” charm, as he confesses later, “The way you’ve grown up, orphaned at birth, hidden away in some mountain valley, and now guarded in that ancient, beautiful mansion by your ogre of a grandfather – why, just listening to you was like entering a fairy tale!” [Girl 17]. Thus one can see it was Korobi’s innocence and naïve that Rajat falls for. In the US, after multiple failed attempts to hunt out her missing father, when at last she is almost on the verge of giving up, she calls Rajat, who advises her to return back home, she introspects that she would now be “safe forever in the care of men of the family. A month ago, I would have been grateful” (217). Hugely disappointed with Rajat’s advice, she tells Vic how no one is able to truly understand her turmoil and all everyone expects, “is for me to go back, pull the blanket of status quo over myself, and *dwindle into a wife*.” (italics mine) (217). When Vic proposes marriage to her, in spite of knowing about her engagement, she doesn’t immediately refuse. She is in fact quite tempted to accept his proposal and clearly weighs the benefits of settling down in the USA as an empowered, financially independent woman, as is revealed in the following passage:

It’s tempting. In spite of the troubles I’ve faced here, I love what I’ve seen of America. And there’s so much more, unbounded and bristling with possibility. Here I could become a new Korobi. Vic – easy going, good-humoured – wouldn’t try to mould me into his concept of sweetheart or wife. It would be so easy to fall in love with him. Maybe I am already half in love. (Girl 218)

So, we can observe that she has changed from being the lost-in-the-woods, besotted, head over heels in love and ready to be swept off her feet anytime by the much-in-demand Kolkata hunk Rajat, to a composed young woman, aware of her worth and wise enough to coolly weigh her options without being overwhelmed with emotions. James L Christian, Professor Emeritus Philosophy, Santa Ana College, defines an autonomous person as someone who acts. She “determines [her] own behaviour and makes decisions consonant with what [she]

really is, in contrast to the norms set by others that may be discordant with [her] own needs” (Wondering 120). Korobi seems to be moving in that direction. She is developing a strong sense of self-worth and sees herself as an individual having her own ethics and values and she is not willing to compromise this original image of herself. So when she has to come to terms with the harsh reality of being the product of a mixed-race heritage illegitimate relationship, though she does reel under the shock for quite sometime, especially when she thinks of the imminent repercussions that threaten to uproot her life – be it the stigma that she would carry to the Bose’s family or her position in the society at large, she displays immense courage in facing the facts squarely and readies herself to fight the inevitable battles awaiting her back home in India to the best of her capacity. Hitherto admired as a respectable traditional Brahmin girl hailing from the prestigious Roy family, she was now likely to become a subject of ridicule and shame. And yet, she doesn’t take the easier route, to just meekly accept the amiable and good looking Vic’s proposal and settle down in the US which has numerous opportunities for her; she also doesn’t listen to Mr. Desai’s advice to immediately share the unpleasant secret related to her birth with Rajat before the scheming Mr. Mitra discloses it to her-laws; instead, she decides to take the much tougher route that is to fly back to India and talk it out face to face with Rajat, even though few days would elapse before the meeting would take place and that would give Mitra an advantage over her. So, we are able to see that Korobi has now become her own person and started to think and act autonomously. She is definitely becoming less impressionable and less hesitant to speak her mind.

After her humiliating reception at the Bose residence on her return from the US, she doesn’t acquiesce to Rajat’s demand of offering any ‘proof’ for her innocence; in fact, she holds her own and decides to cancel the engagement as she feels if her fiancé cannot trust her words, their future together is unseeable. Even though she’s in pain over her decision, she decides to put the matter behind her and instead of moping around her misfortune or going back on her decision and chasing Rajat and offering proof, she channelizes all her energies into starting afresh by joining college and resuming studies. Even her grandmother notices the change in this new US returned Korobi. When she overhears Korobi’s conversation with the principal of the college, she is all admiration for the clarity and confidence Korobi displays. The grandmother listens from the other room, “marvelling at the easy roll of Korobi’s voice – neither abject nor overly confident – as she explained her situation.” She admits to oneself that the girl she “had seen off at the airport could never have managed it” (Girl 276). Finally, Rajat realizes his grave mistake of not trusting her and proposes to her

again, assuring her that her past would never be a hindrance to their future. This proves that during the trip, Korobi has been initiated into the intricacies of wisely and accurately assessing others. Whether it is standing up to the daunting Mrs. Bose, logically reasoning with Rajat, clarifying her stance to her beloved grandmother or shedding aside any insecurity or envy she might have harboured for Rajat's ultra-glamorous ex-girlfriend Sonia, Korobi displays wisdom, maturity and restraint befitting a woman of substance. A renowned critical thinking specialist Crooks observes that an individual's capacity of making judgments based on evidence does not imply that an individual will always exercise this skill. However, in the case of Korobi, various incidents reveal that she displays consistency and stability in her wise and accurate evaluation of others as well as about external situations.

Thus we can witness how the solo journey to America in search of clarity regarding her parentage, helps transform the sweet charming teenager into a strong and independent capable young woman. In her quest for her parentage, she faces numerous obstacles and threats and her path is strewn with treacheries, misunderstandings and misgivings, but at the end of the journey, her life comes full circle and she lives up to the title of the novel as well as the name Korobi, chosen for her by her unwed mother, which meant a 'beautiful but tough flower'.

In an interview conducted by Jeanne E. Fredriksen, while answering the question as to which character in this novel had the hardest decision to make, Divakaruni states, "Korobi's choice is the hardest because I think she grows and learns the most, and her world and her vision of her world changes because of that." From timidity and trepidation to confidence, clarity and self-assurance related to her relationships or her personal identity, Korobi's development and growth traverses the entire graph successfully. While being interviewed by Atiya Hasan, Divakaruni states that she wanted this story to be about how to "find courage within ourselves when the world throws at us all that is unexpected and new" and she uses the journey motif strategically to that end in order to fulfil Korobi's quest for wholeness and individuality.

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