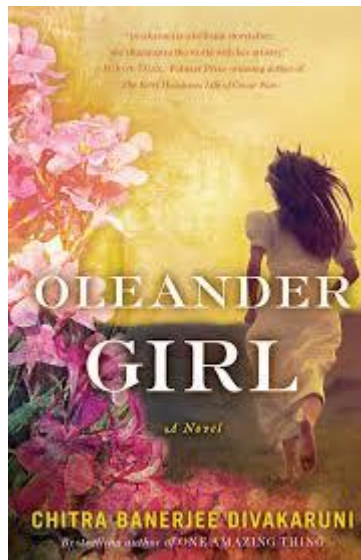


## **The Unfolding of Korobi: A Critical Analysis of the Gradual Growth of the Central Character in *Oleander Girl***

**Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., B.Ed., NET, SET**

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### **Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her novel *Oleander Girl*, presents before us a girl's quest for the identity of her father. In the course of this crucial journey of her life, Korobi meets many people, goes through crisis, understands how life works and, above all she understands her own self. Korobi with her simple girl-next-door image charms the readers, and, when she decides to go to America in search of her father, the people in her life get justifiably anxious about her well-being. But the docile college-going granddaughter of Bimal Roy is not weak as we may be led to think; she gets stronger with each trouble that is thrown in her way. Korobi finds her father after going through many emotional hardships. Her world comes almost on the verge of total disorientation when she discovers two glaring truths about her existence; though she doesn't have any problem in accepting the first one, she gets shattered while dealing with the second. But she is a strong woman now, stronger than we can assume.

While in America, with many temptations around her, Korobi manages not to succumb to them, but she does understand her contradictory self better. Her newly-born attraction for Vic on one side and her vows of faithfulness to Rajat on the other, make her go through an emotional

turmoil, which make her fathom her inner self. Even when she is going through financial crisis, she doesn't act like a damsel in distress, as she might have done in Kolkata under the overbearing patriarchal care of Grandfather or Rajat. She decides to cut her long hair to sell them for money; this has been a very difficult decision for her, but, when she does so, she feels "untethered", free from the burden of overblown family dignity and tradition. But even after getting lured towards the free and self-dependent life in America, Korobi comes back to her lonely Grandmother; she comes back to Rajat. But she is a mature Korobi now; life has taught her tough lessons. In this article, I have tried to analyse the long path that Korobi has travelled to be transformed into a stronger and braver woman. It can be concluded that Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* is a bildungsroman which highlights the gradual growth of Korobi, who possesses all the qualities of an oleander – beautiful, yet tough.

**Key words:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Oleander Girl* novel, Korobi, problems faced, girl-next-door, quest for identity, emotional hardships, oleander, untethered

“He who binds to himself a Joy  
Doth the winged life destroy?  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's Sunrise.....” (Divakaruni 288)

### **Korobi and Her Mother**

These are the treasured lines of the poem etched out on the book that Korobi had hidden under her wedding pillow, only to be read to Rajat in their flower-filled bedroom. The poem is not an ordinary one; it's the one that "...My mother has sent to us...." (Divakaruni 288). Korobi, the central character in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*, must not have expected a more valuable gift than the anthology of poetry containing the poem which was often read by her mother. Moreover, it was sent to her on her wedding day by her father, to find whom she had left no stones unturned. The search for her father which took her to America, had metamorphosed Korobi into a much stronger woman – "...beautiful – but also tough" (Divakaruni 253), like the oleanders. When she started her journey, cut away from the cocooned world of 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road, she must not have imagined the harsh facts that would turn her world upside down for a while! With gradual experiences in a foreign land, far away from Kolkata, Korobi turns out to be a courageous woman who had learnt to make peace with her past, as well as with her future. In this article, I would be highlighting on this process of transformation which Korobi has gone

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

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through, while searching for her father in post 9/11 America which is alluring but unwelcoming at the same time.

### **Surreal Appearance of Korobi's Mother**

The surreal appearance of Korobi's mother at the very beginning of the novel gives us the cue about some impending tryst with the past which holds some secrets in the dark! Korobi, who is going to get engaged with Rajat very soon, is oblivious of the existence of her father who is equally unaware of hers. When the household at 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road bustles with the preparation of Korobi's engagement, the oleander girl is visited by her mother, Anu Roy who was dead eighteen years ago. Korobi had tried hard to get a glimpse of her mother when she was in her boarding school, away from her grandparents:

“...All through my years growing up, I longed for a visitation from my mother.... I prayed for it in secret, and, when that didn't work, tried to put myself in calamity's way.... But only ended up with bruises, sprains...” (Divakaruni 2)

### **Stubborn and Hidden**

These facts reveal Korobi to be quite stubborn and headstrong. But her grandfather's disguised pamper and strict guidance have made her gain a conventionally obedient poise. But deep inside, she is the befitting daughter of Anu Roy, and love for adventure lurks within her. And, this sudden visit by her mother leaves behind a trail for her, to be followed later on.

The docile granddaughter of Bimal Roy can't afford to hurt or disobey her grandfather and her love for her grandfather makes her accept his decisions, though a bit grudgingly sometimes. But, Korobi is an amalgamation of contradictions – docile but confident at the same time. When she buys an “off-the-shoulder kurti in maroon chiffon with slim-fitting pants” (Divakaruni 18), she is unwittingly trying to be adventurous in her own way. But, nonetheless, she is afraid of her grandfather's reaction - “From time to time, I imagine with a mix of horror and pride – what Grandfather's reaction would be when he saw me in it”. (Divakaruni 18)

### **Tragic Argument with Grandfather**

Korobi ends up having an argument with Bimal Roy who likes her to wear saree and disapproves her new dress. Soon we come to know that Bimal Roy has suffered heart attack,

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which, according to Korobi, must have been triggered by her argument with him. In a fit of guilt, she tears the kurti apart! Korobi's mourning for her grandfather continues to be strong enough to make her lovelife get eclipsed for a while. But soon she comes face to face with a shocking truth which slips out accidentally from her grandmother – “your dear grandfather lied to you- and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive.” (Divakaruni 52). The words hit her hard, but she is strong enough to recover to begin her search for her father who is thought to be dead long before!

Nina Sankovitch, in her article, *Oleander Girl: Coming of Age*, has said that,

“Korobi starts out young and sure of herself, but it is the confidence of youth and not of experience. Once she commits herself to finding out who her father was, experience come fast and furious and Korobi is forced to grow up”.

### **Change of Place, New Experience – Vulnerable, Gaining Boldness and Independence**

Once in America, experiences get flooded on her way; when Korobi lands in America alone with none but Mitra to receive her, her spirited self turns into an observant one. Her first challenge in America is to be with the schemer, Mitra. Korobi gets a whiff of Mitra's intention of maligning her in-laws and from then onwards she takes extra caution, so that Mitra cannot get to know the reason of her being in America.

While going to meet Desai , the private detective who is going to help her find her father, Mitra accompanies her, not to protect her in this unknown part of the world, but to collect some news which can be instrumental in blackmailing the Boses.

When a man, possibly a tramp, with shaven head and tattoos approaches her with hands outstretched, Mitra let her stand alone, vulnerable to the situation! But Korobi is not the type of girl to act like a damsel in danger; instead she yells, “Go away! Stop harassing me!” (Divakaruni 114). To reinforce her voice she claps her hands and it works! The man stops advancing, and, Korobi's frightened self gets a boost when she notices an appraising look in Mitra's face –“I am happy to have disappointed him.” (Divakaruni 114).

This little victory is powerful enough to make Korobi learn how to stand on her own, fearless and confident. Korobi disappoints Mitra twice; she can't be beguiled into exposing her family matters to any stranger, particularly if the stranger is someone like Mitra. When Desai was

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about to blurt out the details of his investigation in front of Mitra, who is “peering with far too much interest at the computer screen” (Divakaruni 115), Korobi declares that privacy should be restored, and this is enough to infuriate Mitra, who is close enough to find out the secret with which he has planned to blackmail the Boses.

### **Transformation of Korobi**

Apart from Mitra, there are other characters in the novel who have been instrumental in transforming Korobi into a stronger person. Even the failures and disappointments, that she faces while searching her father, twist and turn her and change her to be a brave and strong Korobi, ready to take life in her stride. Her first failure comes when Rob Evanston doesn’t turn out to be her father! The valuable short period of time in America, along with the meagre money she is left with, and above all her heart-felt desire and hope to meet her father make her failure sting her bitterly –“Failure has carved a pit in my stomach; I can’t gauge how deep it goes”. (Divakaruni 154)

### **Finding Friends**

During this time of distress, she finds a little solace in Vic, Desai’s nephew and associate. Vic’s easygoing manner, contradictory to that of Korobi, manages to keep the sunshine in Korobi’s gloomy days in America. But soon she is torn between her attraction for Vic and her vow of faithfulness to Rajat. When Vic holds before her the prospective of a new life in America with him, Korobi gets excited about the possibility of a new life –“Here I could become a new Korobi. Vic – easygoing, good-humored – wouldn’t try to mould me into his concept of sweetheart or wife.” (Divakaruni 218)

### **Emerging Adventurous Characteristic**

When Korobi broods over such thoughts, the readers get the hint that the adventurous part of Korobi is getting hold over her usual self. She doesn’t prefer the cushioned life of Kolkata anymore; staying protected under the overbearing shelter of the male members of the family. We can’t stop wondering that if Sarojini didn’t break the news of Rajat and Pia’s accident to Korobi, would Korobi have chosen her predestined life in Kolkata or would she have gone for the alluring free life in America.

### **Probable Fathers and African American Heredity**

Korobi's meeting with her probable father, Rob Mariner, turns out to be a disaster, but it doesn't go without teaching her a lesson. The way she protects herself from Mariner's predatory advances, catches him off-guard, and he has to accept his defeat. But Mariner is not such a person to accept defeat so easily; he destroys Korobi's chances to talk to her next probable father who happens to be a writer. When she has lost all hope to meet her real father, Rob Lacey comes in her life and along with that come two shocking facts that make her see life in a new light. The truth about her Afro-American heredity doesn't hurt her much, but the fact about the illegitimacy of her existence shakes her entire being. She was shattered; but soon she gathers herself, as she can't afford to spoil those treasured two days that she has planned to spend with her father. In an anguished outburst, Korobi throws her mobile away; but Vic is there on time to restore her mental stability. Soon, she goes back to the motel to continue her meeting with her father. She is so much happy to meet her father and to taste paternal care, that she forgets everything. Korobi can give almost everything away to know that man whom her mother used to love so dearly. Moreover, she can also get to know many details about her mother whom she can never meet in her lifetime. Korobi is not melo-dramatic; she only needs love, respect & trust. Any girl of her age must have cried her heart out; and Korobi also does the same thing, but she gathered herself very quickly, though not without a vent - "I'm furious with everyone – my mother, my father, my grand-father" (Divakaruni 246)

### **“New, Shameful Me” and Soon a Girl of Mettle**

Initially, she finds it difficult to come to terms “with this new, shameful me” (Divakaruni 245). But, after having an emotional reconciliation, with apologies on both sides, Korobi comes closer to her father. She knows very well that after the secrets get divulged, there will be no wedding in India. The way Korobi takes the reality in her stride highlights her to be a girl of mettle. Soon the day comes when Korobi is ready to leave America; she is accompanied by her father who has come to see her off. When they are about to depart to their own ways, Korobi asks him, the question that has plagued her all her life – why she has been named Korobi. She gets to know that her mother wanted her to have the qualities of the oleanders - beautiful, yet tough enough to protect itself from predators. “Anu wanted that toughness for you because; she didn't have enough of it herself”. (Divakaruni 253)

## A New Person in India

Korobi returns to India as a better person who knows what's right for her, who knows how to resist temptations. When she arrives at Kolkata Airport, Bahadur is unable to recognise her for her short hair; she cut her hair short to sell them to get some money for her sustenance in America. When the long mass of hair was snipped away from her head, she felt light-headed and "untethered" and this new avatar gave Korobi a modern and slightly dangerous look. When she reaches India, her first concern was to inform Rajat about the two secrets of her life. But, before she can reveal them to him, the beans are already spilled by Mitra, who tries to blackmail the Boses for money. Though she is not welcome at the place of the Boses, she has the guts to face Rajat and Maman as she has no malice or duplicity in her mind. When she sees that even Rajat has no faith in her, she breaks off the engagement and returns the engagement ring with dignity.

## A Balanced Person – A Perfect Oleander Girl

Korobi's broken engagement with Rajat or her newly found identity fails to curb Korobi's spirit for a new beginning. She is happy with Sarojini, her grandmother, in their old house; she starts her college again to keep herself busy. Now, she is a different Korobi who understands the nuances of every relationship and can handle them better than before. On the day of her wedding, she is a fully blown oleander - beautiful but tough, ready to take challenges. Thus at the end of the novel, we find that Korobi has grown into a balanced person - a perfect Oleander girl.

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Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., B.Ed., NET, SET  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Tripura University (A Central University)  
Suryamaninagar, 799022  
Tripura (West)  
[suvizimu@gmail.com](mailto:suvizimu@gmail.com)

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