



QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF- FULFILLMENT IN CHITRA

BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *OLEANDER GIRL*

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* is a compelling narrative that explores the themes of identity formation and self-fulfillment through the journey of its protagonist, Korobi Roy. Raised in a conservative Bengali family, Korobi's sense of self is challenged when she uncovers hidden truths about her parentage. This revelation propels her on a transformative quest from India to the United States, where she must navigate cultural contrasts, personal dilemmas, and societal expectations. Her journey symbolizes the broader struggle of individuals seeking autonomy while reconciling their past with their aspirations. Through Korobi's experiences, the novel examines the complexities of heritage, gender roles, and self-discovery in a globalized world. By portraying Korobi's internal conflicts and external challenges, Divakaruni highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity, duty and desire, belonging and independence. The novel ultimately underscores the resilience required to break free from predefined identities and embrace an authentic sense of self. This paper critically analyzes Korobi's quest for identity and self-

fulfillment, demonstrating how her transformation embodies universal struggles of personal growth and empowerment. Additionally, it situates *Oleander Girl* within the broader discourse on immigrant experiences and the redefinition of cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world. By doing so, it sheds light on how literature serves as a medium for exploring the fluid nature of identity, offering insight into the resilience and adaptability required to forge one's own path amidst the tensions of tradition and change.

KEYWORDS : Identity formation, Self-fulfillment, Cultural identity, Personal growth, Gender roles, Heritage and tradition, Societal expectations, Diaspora and displacement, Coming-of-age, Resilience and empowerment.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl* is a compelling narrative about personal growth, self-discovery, and the challenges of navigating cultural identity. The protagonist, Korobi Roy, embarks on a transformative journey that forces her to redefine her understanding of herself, her heritage, and her place in the world. The novel explores the themes of identity and self-fulfillment, portraying how an individual's sense of self is often shaped by family, culture, and personal experiences. Through Korobi's journey—both physical and emotional—Divakaruni presents a nuanced exploration of identity as something that evolves through struggle, self-reflection, and personal agency.

Korobi's name itself, which means "oleander," a flower known for its beauty and resilience, foreshadows her journey of self-discovery. At the beginning of the novel, Korobi believes she understands who she is—a well-brought-up, traditional Bengali girl raised by her conservative grandparents in Kolkata. However, her perception of herself is shattered when she learns a shocking truth: her biological father is an American, and her mother had kept this a secret from everyone. This revelation sets her on a journey to uncover the truth about her origins, forcing her to question her identity in ways she never had before.

Growing up in an elite, old-world Bengali family, Korobi is taught to value tradition, respectability, and duty over personal desires. Her engagement to Rajat Bose, a wealthy and modern businessman, seems to solidify her future within the boundaries of this structured life. However, the discovery of her mixed heritage destabilizes everything she believed about herself and her place in society. Her identity crisis is not just personal but also deeply cultural—she must now reconcile the expectations of her Indian upbringing with the reality of her Western roots.

Korobi's journey to the United States is symbolic of her search for identity. America, a land of individualism and self-definition, presents a stark contrast to the collective and duty-bound culture she was raised in. In the U.S., she is forced to navigate unfamiliar landscapes, both literally and metaphorically. As she searches for her father, she also begins to construct a new sense of self—one that integrates both her Indian and Western heritage rather than being defined by one or the other.

As Korobi steps out of the protected world of her grandparents' home and into the chaos of the real world, she encounters numerous challenges that test her sense of self. One of the biggest struggles she faces is prejudice and rejection. In India, her engagement to Rajat becomes threatened by her newly discovered Western roots, as his family worries about the scandal and social consequences of this revelation. Rajat's mother, in particular, represents the rigid societal structures that reject any deviation from cultural expectations.

In America, she faces a different set of challenges. The country that she hoped would give

her answers about her father and herself proves to be an intimidating and sometimes harsh place. She experiences alienation, racism, and the difficulties of navigating an unfamiliar society. Yet, these challenges become opportunities for growth. In facing discrimination, betrayal, and disappointment, she builds resilience and self-reliance, qualities that had been overshadowed by her sheltered upbringing. A significant aspect of Korobi's struggle is her evolving understanding of love and relationships. Initially, she views love as something idealistic, bound by traditional roles and expectations. Her engagement to Rajat represents security and belonging, but as she grows throughout her journey, she realizes that love must be built on equality, understanding, and acceptance of one's true self. Her changing perception of love parallels her changing sense of identity—moving from a passive recipient of familial and societal expectations to an active agent in shaping her destiny. Korobi's journey is not just about uncovering the truth about her father but about finding fulfillment in her own right. The novel suggests that true self-fulfillment comes not from external validation but from self-acceptance and the courage to live authentically.

One of the most powerful aspects of Korobi's transformation is her increasing sense of agency. At the beginning of the novel, she is largely controlled by the expectations of others—her grandparents, her fiancé, and society at large. She has been raised to be obedient and respectful, following the path laid out for her without question. However, her journey forces her to take control of her own life. She makes difficult choices, stands up for herself, and ultimately determines her own future. By the end of the novel, Korobi is no longer just the dutiful granddaughter or the obedient fiancée. She is a woman who has made her own choices, faced her fears, and come to terms with her identity on her own terms. Even as she returns to India, she does so as a changed person—stronger, more independent, and ready to shape her own future rather than be shaped by tradition. Another key aspect of her self-fulfillment is her reconciliation of her dual identity. Instead of choosing between her Indian heritage and her American roots, Korobi learns to embrace both. She realizes that identity is not about fitting into a single mold but about integrating different influences to create a whole, authentic self. Her journey teaches her that self-fulfillment is about embracing complexity rather than seeking simple answers.

In *Oleander Girl*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni masterfully explores the themes of identity and self-fulfillment through Korobi's journey of self-discovery. The novel illustrates how identity is not something fixed but something fluid, shaped by experiences, choices, and personal growth. Korobi's transformation from a sheltered, obedient girl to a strong, independent woman highlights the importance of self-exploration and the courage to challenge societal norms. The novel also underscores the idea that true self-fulfillment comes from embracing one's complexity rather than conforming to external expectations. Korobi's quest for identity is ultimately a quest for self-acceptance, proving that real strength lies in understanding and owning who you are. Through her struggles, triumphs, and evolving self-awareness, Korobi emerges not just as a character but as a symbol of the universal human desire to understand oneself. Her story resonates with anyone who has ever questioned their place in the world, making *Oleander Girl* a powerful and deeply moving narrative about the search for identity and fulfillment.

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