



Left Out in the Cold: Abandonment, Secrets, and Displacement in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

¹Roshini A, ²Dr G. Rajesh Kumar

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, India.

²Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor of English Director of Distance Education, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, India.

Abstract: This paper explores how abandonment, secrets and displacement occur to shape Karobi's thrust of anxiety and her identity. She experiences a primal sense of abandonment that her attachments turn into anxiety and distrust. The revelation of secrets from her grandfather and grandmother shook her sense of home, which led her to travel to America to find her identity and biological father. Secrets act as both wound and catalyst. Displacement played a vital role in Karobi's fragmented identities. Karobi, the protagonist, doesn't choose recovery by staying at home; instead, she chooses displacement. In this novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni beautifully conveys the experience of a woman archetypal protagonist's quest for Identity through her core desire, beset by challenges, to rebuild who she is, where we can feel the depth of her pain at a young age and her emergence as a proud identity. She also shows how a resilient individual turned into an independent one.

Keywords: Abandonment, Secrets, Displacement, Identity, Anxiety, *Oleander Girl*.

Introduction

Literature plays a vital role in everyone's life as it connects the personal to the universal as it travels across time, countries and languages because of human interpretation. Everyone needs to belong to the fundamental drives in literature and life. A sense of belonging can be connected through three deep intertwined experiences: secrets, abandonment and displacement. This paper examines how the secret, intimate rupture and abandonment became a strong reconstruction change in protagonist Karobi's life.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most prominent Indian-American writers who is an award-winning author, activist, professor, speaker and author of 21 books in contemporary literature. Her works mostly focus on giving voice to the unsung female Indian emigrants to those nameless, faceless Indian women who ended up living in the United States either through marriage or to pursue their education and find their identity. She is distinctive in her writing style and focuses on the emotional landscape of migration. Her writings speak about the culture and identity where women carry the heritage of different family backgrounds and practises. This paper employs Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's voice to amplify unknown voices through her literary contribution. Her work has been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories* and the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, which have been translated into 30 languages. Her work has been made into films, plays, dance dramas and performed as operas. Her awards include an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles Award, a Premio Scanno and a Light of India Award. She has been an activist in the fields of education and domestic violence.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does abandonment shape Karobi's independence and search for belonging?
2. How do secrets function as both wound and catalyst in Karobi's life?
3. How does displacement represent the state of being homeless in *Oleander Girl*?

4. How does Divakaruni portray women's independence in the novel?
5. Why does Divakaruni use the motif of the word Oleander Girl?

Literature Review

Antara Das's *A Cinderella Story* talks about how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni spun the formula of the quest and thirst of Karobi in the novel. He also shows the detailed version of Karobi's cultural grandparents and her fiancée's background, which made her search for her own identity. Archana Srinath's *Oleander Girl- A Beauty in Toughness* talks about how Karobi's life connects the disasters in the outside world with the turmoil in the inner psyche of humans. Raminderpal Kaur's *Female Quest by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with special reference to Oleander Girl*, talks about the domination, discrimination, and independence of women. He also talks about the shackles of oppression and suppression faced by women by men. Muniyaraj and Ajmal Khan's "Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*" talks about Karobi's experience and circumstances in finding her identity. It also talks about how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents her female protagonist in the novel in search of identity or independence from their sufferings. Kanagaselvam and Geetha's "Diasporic Consciousness of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*" talks about the diasporic experience of women and how those cultures are different, and how Chitra Banerjee has delicately shown the protagonists who explore the diasporic consciousness in *Oleander Girl*. They also discussed the feminine characters' strength across the generation gap at its peak. Here, my paper explores Karobi's left-out-in-the-cold situation in a unique way of finding. How Karobi experienced the *Oleander* toughness through abandonment, secrets, and displacement to find her Identity.

Thematic Framework

This article works on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* through a thematic theoretical framework: abandonment, secrets and displacement. All these become the space for reconstruction. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her novel *Oleander Girl*, represents the diaspora not as migration but as a psychological trauma of hidden family truths. The author shows the protagonist's movement across the sea to embody her internal movement from a place of inbuilt silence and dependence toward her. These three themes function together to depict how Karobi reclaim her identity by confronting the secrets that abandonment and displacement define them.

Research Methodology

This paper works on qualitative research using primary methods and text analysis. The main objective of the article is to interpret Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* through all three thematic concepts of abandonment, secret and displacement.

Literary Analysis

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows the identity of the women in her novels, and how they are suffering from alienation, and to find their identity. This novel represents a first-person perspective and subjective experience where the readers can experience the same amount of shock and pain while reading. Abandonment, secrets and displacement are the major themes discussed in the article. This paper analyses how an abandoned woman survived her wounds and how she came forward to get her identity.

Left Out in the Cold

Oleander Girl (2012) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was a contemporary fiction and a diasporic novel whose setting is in Kolkata, India and the United States of America. Karobi Roy, a 19-year-old girl, is the protagonist of the novel from a respectable Bengali family. She was an orphan and raised by her grandparents, who lived with the pain of losing their daughter. She is a pious manifestation of her mother Anu and father Rob's love. Karobi thought she had fallen into a fairytale as she was going to get engaged to Rajat. Her late mother appears in her dreams and points towards the ocean, hinting that Karobi should go in search of something beyond the ocean.



On the evening of her engagement, she came to know about a devastating secret from her grandmother after her grandfather passed away: that she is adopted and her biological father is still alive. From that moment, she couldn't believe that she didn't belong to them and that they had been keeping the secret for so many years, which pulled her to the depths of pain and sorrow. She couldn't show her anger to her grandparents because her grandmother, Sarojini, kept a promise from her husband, Bimal Roy, until he was alive. After the death of Bimal, Karobi's grandmother reveals to her the secret they have been keeping for years. Karobi accepted the truth over the secret like acceptance over dejection.

"Worry pick me, and I swallowed my anger for the moment. I'll let him rest". (23)

"How could Grandfather, to whom I'd given my entire child's heart, who had taught me how important it was to be truthful, have perpetrated such an enormous, criminal lie?"

"How will I ever trust anyone again?"

Karobi couldn't experience the feeling of being abandoned when she was a baby, and again she was abandoned when she came to know the truth about her history. This made her trust issues and identity crisis. When a person undergoes deception or abandonment by their close ones, it may result in anxiety, grief and mistrust of everyone. She couldn't believe that her own grandfather, who taught her everything, had lied to her. Karobi could feel abandonment mentally and physically. Now Karobi feels like a stranger in her own home, culture and tradition. This made her find her biological father's background and identity.

In Karobi's life, displacement occurs when she does not yet belong where you are, and the question of identity becomes most urgent. No one could stop Karobi in her search for her identity. She planned to go to the US to find her biological father and details about her mother, Anu. Karobi's grandmother has accepted her thirst and the journey to find her identity. Karobi started feeling the in-betweenness that she couldn't feel at home in either place. This feeds her quest to pursue. She is physically and mentally alone without knowing her identity and has no support from anyone. This is also because of displacement and alienation.

"No one knows me, I know no one. This is my life now" (92)

This line is from Karobi after she left Kolkata to find her biological mother and father. These words came out of her pain, and she has cut off her contact after knowing the secret about her past. Now she is helpless with no friends or family and no clear identity. She doesn't know where to go and how to get help finding her identity. Out of loneliness and frustration, she accepted her life and started her journey alone in the US. No one knows about her, and even she doesn't know her own identity; this made her even more broken and forced her to make a foundation to bring her true identity back.

"It knew how to protect itself from predators. Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough of it herself" (253)

These lines were told by Karobi's mother, Anu. She mentions that the Oleander flower is beautiful, but it is poisonous, so predators don't eat it because it could hurt them. Her Anu is herself a dependent, quiet, obedient woman who wants her daughter to be a natural defender of her life. So she wanted her daughter to grow up tough as the Oleander flower. Anu also expressed that her father, Bimal Roy, is a strict patriarchal man who treated Anu as his son and expected her to excel in everything, but she led a double life like competitive at school and college but voiceless everywhere. Anu doesn't want her daughter to be in that circle; instead, she wants her daughter to be strong, independent, with toughness outside threats. Toughness also employs emotional resilience to Karobi.

"Oleander, capable of surviving drought and frost and the loss of love" (274-275)

This line was said by Karobi and made her survive on secrets, abandonment and displacement. Here, Oleander doesn't represent the flower; it represents Karobi. Oleander flowers can grow in any condition, even in extreme



water scarcity, cold conditions, and in any hostile environment, but the plant still survives because of its toughness. Karobi related her situation to the survival skills of Oleander flowers, as drought is the emotional scarcity where she doesn't know her own identity until her grandmother reveals the secret. Even after knowing the truth, she survived without anyone's concern. Loss of love represents the betrayal and abandonment by her own father. She felt betrayed by her grandparents' action in holding the secret until her grandfather's death. Frost represents the displacement that happened after knowing the truth, which led her to move to the US in search of her biological father and identity, where she experienced loneliness, alienation and cultural changes. Karobi survived all these struggles to find her identity just like the oleander flowers.

Conclusion

The study *Left Out in the Cold: Abandonment, Secrets, and Displacement* in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* depicts the journey of Karobi, who is fractured not only by alienation but by the emotional rupture of family secrets. This paper demonstrates the secret that changed her life at a turning point and served as an instrument of power, enabling her to control her identity and honour within Indian culture and family. Karobi lost her physical and mental stability and the foundation of trust because of abandonment, and she doesn't know where she belongs. Whether Kolkata or New Jersey. As she faced the alienation, she was forced to confront the silences individually. Displacement, which helped her to reconstruct herself by moving away from family and patriarchy to a totally different place.

Result

This article finds that Bimal Roy's decision to hide Karobi's secret history acted as a mechanism of patriarchal power which decides her family, education, and plans until her engagement day. The secret revelation made her completely collapse in identity, which shaped her to know about herself. Abandonment reflects the psychological state of being detached from everyone in present and the past. Displacement acts as a social surveillance where she experiences alienation, isolation, racism, and cultural differences. This made her decide to stay in New Jersey on her own terms. The article states that all these sufferings made Karobi not only destroy her mental peace caused by abandonment, secrets, and displacement but also made her find her true identity and reframe her power as a female.

Citation:

- [1] Divakaruni, Chitra. *Oleander Girl*. Viking. Penguin Books India. 2013.
- [2] Roshini, A., and G. Rajesh Kumar. "Spectrum of Self: Probing Expression and Identity Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion*." *Literary Musings* 1.2 (2023).
- [3] Das, Antara. "A Cinderella Story." Rev. of *Oleander Girl*. *Biblio: a review of book* 18.7 and 8(Jul-Aug 2013):14.
- [4] Kaur, Raminderpal. "Female Quest for Identity by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." *With special reference to Oleander Girl, Contemporary* 11.13 (2016).
- [5] Srinath, Archana. "Oleander Girl-A Beauty in Toughness," *The Criterion* 1 and 2 (2017): 55-64.
- [6] Muniyaraj, G., and A. Ajmal Khan. "Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*." *CHANGING PARADIGMS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LITERATURE*: 102.
- [7] Kanagaselvam, Mr R., and T. S. Geetha. "Diasporic Consciousness of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*."