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The Ripple Effect of Terror: Escalating the Rules of Patriarchal Conformity upon the Psyche of Women in *The Oleander Girl*

By Chitra Susan Thampy¹ and Pauline V N²

Abstract

Women continue to be deprived of their right to live independently and within acceptable boundaries. Indian women frequently take up the responsibilities of preservers of culture and tradition. They are constrained by an excessive number of laws and regulations, most of which are justified in the name of customs and religion. The patriarchal power that is inherent in Indian society shapes how they experience the Indian value system. In the case of the lives of women in the diaspora, due to their struggles with the financial and psychological uncertainties of exile, the responsibilities of family and career, and the claims of both the old and new patriarchies, they find themselves doubly disadvantaged. Additionally, these women must fight against pervasive racial prejudice in nearly every sphere of their lives. The works of Indian American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, touch on a variety of diasporic topics as well as the experiences of female immigrants in their adoptive homes. *The Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays the double impact of war and the ripple effect of terror on women that transcends national boundaries. The terror attack of 9/11 impacted the lives of both citizens and the diaspora communities in the USA. Terror creates an environment of unease that further constrains the liberties of individuals, particularly women. Women were expected to be peaceful, comply with their gender-specific roles, and dissociate themselves from violence. The novel shows the struggles of Bengali-American Karobi, who travels to a post-9/11 America, with a burning desire to uncover her family's secrets. Though a life of freedom is present at her fingertips, she ultimately chooses to return to her homeland as she has promises to keep and duties to fulfill. This sacrifice of her individual choice in favour of family expectations reveals the encompassing power of love that she feels towards her grandparents, a love that diminishes the negative effects of war-induced terror on a family. The objective of the paper is to analyse the power imbalances caused by war-induced terror on a family that causes Indian women to be relegated to a confining set of stereotypical roles.

Keywords: Terror, Gender Stereotypes, Diaspora, Memory, Post-9/11 United States

Introduction

Ten years later, I believe we still face some of the problems and tensions that erupted after 9/11.

--Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni ("Remembering 9/11")

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Terrorism and war are two of the most common causes of global disruption and carnage, and both have had a tremendous impact on ordinary people's lives. A terror attack anywhere in the world has a universal impact and causes a global tremor. As a response to the violence and terror in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, various nations have responded in the form of literary works and research, including Latin America, France, India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Divakaruni is not an exception as she has quoted this incident in many of her works. This study aims to explore the cause-and-effect relationship of a terror-torn society on the status of women in India as portrayed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *Oleander Girl*. This attack imposed a threat not only to the ordinary New Yorker's daily life, but the extended effects of it also challenged women's dreams of independence, marriage, peace, harmony, and security in India.

Oleander Girl depicts the collective anguish of women in a terror-torn society, the yearning for normal life and peace in history, the determination to survive one's terror-torn fate, and the steadfast confidence in perseverance and tolerance as shown in the central character Karobi. In the aftermath of a terror attack, the existing stringent constraints on a woman in an orthodox family in India get intensified. Traditional duties in the reproductive domain and fulfillment of familial duties are retained for women within patriarchal religious and cultural frameworks. Women are expected to comply with rules that are laid out by the family to ensure some order in a chaotic world. Katrina Lee-Koo (2007) in her article "War on terror/war on women: Critical feminist perspectives" argues that both war and the war on terror are synonymous with a war on women because their rights and dignity are exploited (42). As a result, women are doubly discriminated against, and they become victims of psychological traumas that live on in their dreams. This shows the war on the psyche of a woman in a society that breeds terror and propagates ideals of stereotypical oppressive gender roles. Women's experiences during war and conflict are predominantly silenced and the patriarchy's entire mechanism is designed to keep women silent and subservient.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Voice of the Voiceless

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-) was born in Calcutta and received her PhD from the University of California at Berkeley, USA, in 1978. She lived and taught in the Bay Area (near San Francisco, in California) for several years and is currently working as a creative writing professor at the University of Houston. In the 1990s she became a founding member of *Maitri*—a South Asian women's service establishment against domestic abuse in Houston which has grown into one of the most highly regarded helplines for Asian-American women in the country. She is a prolific writer whose writings have been translated into 29 languages. In her interview in the *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, she talks about her inspiration to start writing:

I think that in some ways being an expatriate made me want to write because it is such a powerful and poignant experience when you live away from your original culture and this becomes home, but never quiet, and then you can't go back and be quite at home there either, so you become a kind of outsider to both cultures. Which is hard, but very good for writers, I think, to be in a position of looking in from the outside observing (Smith 7).

The emergence of various female voices in Indian diaspora writing after the 1980s was a significant development. The homeland is the focus for diaspora writers, who compare their motherland to the immigrant land frequently. The diaspora's geographical absence from the native land leads to a dilemma of whether to adapt to the new alien culture or be accustomed to the old natal culture. Immigration was a powerful experience for Chitra Divakaruni that

changed her outlook on life and influenced her to write novels addressing the American life for immigrants and the relationships of Indian Americans with their homeland (Narkhede, 2015).

By seeking to bring out of obscurity women's experiences in all facets of life, women's narratives have been releasing women's writing from its unjustified isolation and suppression under patriarchal notions and male-designed canons. These views enrich world literature by highlighting women's thoughts on a variety of topics. By capturing women's sentiments, goals, joys, and worries, diverse experiences of women have come to the forefront. Jasbir Jain observes in her essay "Gender and Narrative Strategy" that "Women writers while evolving narrative techniques are faced with a double problem: how to step out of the framework defined by men and patriarchal values; and how to identify and create a tradition of their own" (Jain 2002, 4).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings stand out among Indian English novels of the Indian diaspora as a strong voice addressing the issues of an average Indian woman immigrant in the United States. This writer's narrative style has been described as diverse, ranging from symbolism to myth and fable. Writers like Divakaruni have been powerful advocates for women dealing with a wide range of issues, particularly women living in foreign countries and situations. As Madhavi notes: "The internal monologues of her characters provide an understanding of the struggles of women as they try to acclimatize themselves to a new environment. Their contradictory responses to new spheres of life are depicted with a realistic portrayal of life lived by characters who come alive in the stories of Divakaruni" (Madhavi 2018, 175). Several writers have attempted to describe the experience of those caught in the upheaval of adapting to a new culture, new territory, and new surroundings in today's globalized society, with borders between countries becoming increasingly blurred. Divakaruni's women are shown as strong women who have been tested by the difficulties of trying to make an unfamiliar land their own.

Divakaruni is a modernist writer capable of employing language to illustrate the ambiguous condition of women through modern emotional responses, dealing with contemporary concerns and a wide range of topics such as multiculturalism, marital strife, alienation, and individualization. The characters in her stories are at a crossroads in their life that must be confronted and resolved. Divakaruni prefers to tell her experiences in a way that allows her to give a first-hand description of her views and reactions to situations. This provides the reader with the impression of being taken into the persona's confidence.

The novel *Oleander Girl* weaves an interesting story of an Indian family laying greater emphasis on the second-generation Karobi, who is being raised by her grandparents. It also brings alive the memory and interpretation of the 9/11 attack and how it emerges solely as an additional disaster to Karobi when she reaches America in search of her father. There are several perspectives about fear and anticipation presented here which include personal, political, racial, and diasporic issues creating a tragically humanistic query on terror voiced from the female narrator's viewpoint. In an interview, Divakaruni notes that to write *Oleander Girl*, she did a lot of research on the Godhra riots³ as well as the tragedy of 9/11 in New York: "I wanted to explore the importance of religious tolerance and what happens when we don't practice it" (qtd. in Narkhede, 2015). Through her meticulous and erudite description, Divakaruni gives a vivid picture of the contemporary Indian scenario and has focused on the problems an individual experiences, struggling to get a firm footing in the future. She shows how terror and violence exacerbate the preexisting problems they have in life.

***Oleander Girl*: A Woman's Resistance to Psychic Terror**

The novel is set against the backdrop of Calcutta and America highlighting eastern as well as western values. Karobi, the 18-year-old protagonist, is quite accustomed to her traditional family and acquiesces to their wish to get her married into a wealthy family who

differs only in their traditional outlook. She is unaware of her family's dark secret and is completely steeped in the Indian traditional values and cultures. She is a typical Indian woman forced to live by the stringent rules laid down by her grandfather. Her fiancé Rajat treats her like a princess waiting to be saved by a prince charming: "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!" (Divakaruni 2013, 17).

One day, she is petrified by a dream of her dead mother with her mouth sealed pointing across the river. She immediately realizes that her mother wants to convey a secret that can be revealed only if she crosses the river. Like the ghost scene in *Hamlet*, this dream shatters the innocence of her existence and exposes Karobi to the horrible secret of her family. The supernatural appearance of her mother's ghost in the dream adds an extra dimension of mystery and fear to the novel. The mystery that the ghost conveys not only drives Karobi into a whirlwind of emotions but also indicates that something is amiss behind the conservative Banerjee family's pleasant and successful façade. Karobi muses, "Has she come, like ghosts in tales, to warn me of an impending disaster? She points over the ocean, leaning toward it with such sad longing that sorrow twists my heart. I understand" (4). Just as the ghost in *Hamlet* reminds the protagonist of revenge, the mother's frightful gaze across the river and her inability to voice herself shows the immediate requirement on the part of Karobi to break out of her comfortable bubble and go in search of truth and identity.

Much to her surprise and horror, after the sudden demise of her grandfather, her grandmother discloses the secret of the family that Karobi's parents hadn't died in a car crash and that her father is an American who was convinced about her death, "Your dead grandfather lied to you—and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive. His name is Rob. Yes, Rob. He lives in America" (52). This destroys the trust that Karobi had in her grandparents who had hidden the truth, thinking that the truth would deprive them of the presence of their beloved granddaughter. She gathers from Sarojini, her grandmother, that her mother had always learned to live a double life, "...assertive and competitive at school and college, compliant and voiceless everywhere else" (57). The betrayal leaves Karobi shattered, and she plans on leaving India to face the truth about her family and to meet her father who lives in America. Her sense of self is crushed by this dark secret, which forces her to go against her fiancé and his family's wishes. She moves to America away from her safe Calcutta life into a brave and troubled search, in the company of a handsome stranger, across post-9/11 America, a country she finds perilous, ungracious, and captivating at the same time.

Once she goes to America, the western culture influences her and she is no longer the same woman who was once subservient. Karobi sells her hair to collect money to track the whereabouts of her father. She remembers that the length of her hair was due to the insistence of her grandparents and she defiantly reaffirms her independence: "It is my hair... That hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée, to Papa and Maman Bose's daughter-in-law-to-be" (178). She gains courage and independence to lead her own life. As Dakkumalla argues, "For women in the diaspora the dilemma faced is even more significant as the host nations (England and America) open the 'doors' of freedom from the patriarchal oppression persistent in the homeland. The migrated land is constructed as a haven where women can seek freedom, individuality, and self-dignity" (Dakkumalla 2018, 216, 217). The ensuing story set in America shows the struggles of Karobi and the many people who help her in the process of tracking the whereabouts of her father as she is aware of only her father's name. The uncertainties embedded in Karobi's journey in search of her father and her identity reflect the fragmented society of the US trying to recover from the shock of a terrorist attack. Both the character and the land are recovering from a trauma of terror and disbelief.

Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* describes how the diasporic community in the United

States changed after the Islamic terrorist attack in America on September 11, 2001. Due to the US security regulations, the assault not only broke American individuals but also harmed the diasporic community. Rajat's art gallery in New York was vandalized which resulted in a huge loss, "Our gallery in New York was vandalized soon after September eleventh last year, and some very expensive paintings were destroyed" (Divakaruni 2013, 77). Divakaruni portrays the miserable state of the people belonging to the Indian diaspora who had to shut down their businesses due to the issues of mistrust for expatriates in the US. This was because all eastern things were associated in people's minds with 9/11 (185). Divakaruni writes, "Many South Asian businesses were boycotted, especially those with Muslim names. Others were attacked. The Mitras had arrived at the Mumtaz one morning to find the plate glass cracked, paintings slashed, the floor filthy with urine and feces, threats scrawled over the walls in terrifying red letters" (101). Chitra Divakaruni shares her reminiscences in an interview with Sandip Roy:

Ten years later, I believe we still face some of the problems and tensions that erupted after 9/11. The sense of invincibility and immunity that America once felt is gone. Even now, airport security remains a problem for people who look like us and has led to a new ironic expression being coined, "flying while brown." Even this year there was some nervousness about terrorist attacks happening again on that day. ("Remembering 9/11")

The adverse effect of the terror attack did not die down soon; instead, it affected the psyche of people living in the US and it spread out across nations by affecting the businesses of the diaspora communities. The 9/11 attacks had a direct and profound influence on people's beliefs, leading to an increase in prejudiced attitudes towards immigrants as a group or specific minorities. Vic, a second-generation Indian in the US narrates to Karobi:

After the Towers fell, I remember how terrified and furious I felt right after. That's when my own restaurant business-which had been doing quite well-started going under. People just stopped coming. Nine-eleven injured the people of this city in so many ways- we still haven't been able to tally up the casualties...A friend of mine who was in construction was hired to clean up Ground Zero. Imagine finding bodies everywhere, pieces of people half-cooked by the heat...and the stench. He'd come home exhausted but couldn't sleep. Started drinking. His marriage broke up soon after. (150, 151)

Published a few years after the 9/11 tragedy, the novel depicts the growth of indiscriminate hatred which emanated in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks which causes an identity crisis as well as an existential crisis in Karobi. As an immigrant woman, this has a double effect, and the magnitude of the terror attack takes a toll on Karobi. Through the character Karobi, the author portrays the plight of America's second-generation immigrants: "My body longs to escape, in the only way known to it, from this country where I'm unloved" (121). Karobi goes through a phase of inner conflict to reconnect her soul to her Indian roots which becomes even more important due to the US government's strict security following the horrific attack.

Back home, communal tensions and fights arise between Muslims and Hindus that rupture the business of her fiancé, Rajat. There is constant pressure on Karobi to return to get married to Rajat as the financial strain of the company was affecting the family. The idea of settling down and bringing order within the family was of utmost importance for Karobi's in-laws. Eventually, the Muslim employees of his firm go on a "full-fledged strike." Rajat experiences a car accident that leaves his left hand fractured in two places, and Karobi is asked to return as soon as possible. Later it is revealed that the Muslim Naxalites had planned the

accident on Rajat. Karobi leaves the US and returns to India as her conscience troubles her and she wishes to fulfill her promises, “For better or worse, I’ve chosen it [Calcutta] over the cities of America. I’ve decided to fulfill the promises I have made here. Love rushes through me as I think this-and worry. I’m not sure the city will love me back. That it will accept the secrets I’m carrying” (270). She lets go of her dreams and chooses to fulfill her responsibilities and promises as a daughter and a wife, “My first responsibility is toward whoever among my loved ones needs me most. Today it’s Rajat. Tomorrow it might be Grandma. If at another time it’s my father...” (270).

Though America provides a lot of freedom for her thoughts and decisions, she is held down by the many expectations of her fiancé and her family back in India. Whenever her mind wanders to stay back in America, the words of Sarojini while kissing her forehead before her journey to the USA come to her mind, “It’ll be a great adventure. Look carefully at everything. Feel. Enjoy. Remember” (89). The role of a woman emphasized here is primarily to be a source of comfort, one who sacrifices her ambitions to maintain peace and order in the household. In a chaotic society torn apart by terror, the obligations of a woman, to her family, increase double fold as she is expected to portray characteristics of love, sympathy, understanding, and comfort. This affects the choices the women make as it adversely affects their psyche.

Conclusion

Oleander Girl very effectively depicts the ripple effect of terror and the more severe pressures of patriarchy on the psyche of a woman. Patriarchal society psychologically conditions women to adhere to the stereotypical roles assigned to women. This compliance, at the expense of their ambitions, is marked as love towards their family. In a period of uncertainty, love binds the family together, and the primary role is expected to be played by the woman of the household. The woman is therefore enshrined as both the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as ‘home’ and ‘family.’ A woman who sees herself as the custodian of her nationality and communal culture is unable to adapt to her new diasporic circumstances because she is constantly searching for the lost nation, home, and family. Women believe it is their responsibility to preserve and disseminate their nationality and tradition in the alien space because they are the primary creators of their communal identity. Their present is being reconstructed by their memories from the past. As Velmani notes, “The notion of home to them is simultaneously a geographical space, a location of memory and an emotional sensory space. They are lost in the dichotomies of traditional duties and a western lifestyle” (Velmani 2018, 246).

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