

## Contesting Gender Stereotypes and Finding New Possibilities: The Making of the 'New Indian Girl Child' in Recent Novels by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with Special Reference to *Sister of My Heart* and *Oleander Girl*

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**Abstract:** The identity of a person is subjected to social expectations. The demand of society and the need to follow the ways of society towards the creation of gender stereotypes is one of the core issues discussed in many novels in recent times. The texts dealing with the new Indian girl in a way introduce a new version of girls in India who are more capable and acceptable members of the society contesting the roles and capacities attributed to them. Based on new trends of girl power seen in recent novels it can be said that the *Oleander girl*, *Korobi* is a version of New Indian girl child who explore and extend the possibilities of life for girls in India. The girls *Anjali* and *Basudha* in the novel *Sister of My heart* too explore the possibilities of new livelihood for girls. The new role seem be the result of blending up the traditional and modern values in a more practical way rather than rejecting the old and introducing the new. *Sister of My Heart* and *Oleander girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are such attempts to introduce the new version of Indian girlhood reinventing the ways to contest roles within the socio cultural power codes.

**Keywords:** Indian girl, girl child, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, *Oleander Girl*, Gender, girl, child, Indian fiction.

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### I. Introduction

The status of girl children in India is a much debated and discussed topic within and outside India in recent times. Gender stereotypes and its impact on the life of girl children is a topic of interest to recent Indian English novelists. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the notable contributors who have attempted to imagine a better status for girl children in India. The recent novels of Divakaruni like *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *Oleander Girl* (2014) reflect the attempts by girls at contesting gender stereotypes which need to be seen as part of the effort at improving their status in the society itself. The inferior position and status of girl children in the socio cultural power codes in India has made the Indian girl child to accept the inferior position and to be content with the subordinate status bestowed on them from childhood. The status of women in India largely seems to be an outcome of the suppressed and uncared childhood, which denied them opportunities in life. The Indian English writers of the recent times have chosen these subjects in their novels where, contrary to tradition, girl children are given a significant role to play and their cries are heard. The attempts of the novelist to give pivotal position to girl child protagonists have put these once ignored and unwanted creatures in the limelight. It can also be seen as an attempt at finding new ways for a better life for Indian girl children.

Indian girls are always left between the binaries of choices. Krishnaswami states that there are always two ways for a girl to act and to choose between. He says that “...she is torn between tradition and modernity, between Indian and western values and ways of living, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother, between marrying for love and marrying for family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance.” (Krishnaswami 99). The priorities of Indian girls are highly influenced by adult interference and the preferences of adults rather than her own free will. The question of life choices are subjected to social influences, the influence of adult community and cultural or religious groups. Through these novels Divakaruni states that these influences may have adverse effects on them if they don't learn to trust their abilities and to prioritise their choices. Like many Indian women writers Divakaruni too has attempted to project female protagonists who are torn between the crucial choices of their lives. Through female child characters like *Anjali* alias *Anju*, *Basudha* alias *Sudha* and *Korobi*, Divakaruni has unveiled the significance of girl children in Indian society and their value as part of the social system. They are intelligent, smart and tactful when it comes to the most crucial situations in their lives. The novels are impressive in the sense that they have proved the

worth of girls as intelligent, tactful and capable. These girls find out that life is a challenge when it comes to establish their individual worth. They may sometimes bypass all the social logic and traditional system, in their attempts to dissociate themselves from the definitions set for being a girl in Indian cultural system.

The protagonist Korobi in the novel *Oleander Girl* is an orphaned girl who lives with her grandparents after the demise of her parents. She lives her life according to the tradition of her family and decides to marry a man of her choice after the acceptance of the relationship by her grandfather. In the novel *Sister of My Heart* we witness the entangled life of two sisters. The novel is about their childhood and adulthood, and their grief of being fatherless as the event of the deaths rule their identity and choices of life from their childhood. Basudha believes that her father is the real culprit who kills Anjali's father for the precious ruby which they found during a thoughtless adventurous journey. She sacrifices her life taking responsibility of her father's foolish act till she realises the truth and the real worth and identity of her own self. Divakaruni's efforts through the novels seem to present girl children who live their life according to their priorities and choices even if they follow the tradition or the advises of elders in family. The choices need not be always a conflicting one. Girls need not always move against the regular current of social life. But these girls prefer to be on their own on all their choices of life. Angela Mc Robbie finds these changes in the attitude of young girls in the twenty first century. With all the choices that they have in life they "reinhabit tradition... by rediscovering with delight, rituals and customs...lavish white weddings, and the adoption of the male surname on marriage" (9) Mc Robbie's assumption is that "all these cultural practices is the boldness of the activity, and the strong sense of female consent and participation, the idea that these are all personal choices"(9). It is a typical way found in Indian girl children in recent novels, who go for an entirely different practice for the better life for girls in India.

Indian girlhood in many ways is influenced by the patriarchal power relations that structure family and society. In these novels the girl protagonists show their anger and frustration to project the difficulties that they face in maintaining the boundaries of the social space where only a limited growth is possible for them. The girls who appear in these novels try to remain in the social system, at the same time they scrutinise its irrational nature through their strength and power. Any attempt at exploring the possibilities of the world and to live their life outside the norms of society may label them rude or wicked rather than heroic or crazy. In the novel *Sister of My Heart* it becomes very evident that the improper behaviour of girls leads to the destruction of the family itself. The family honour is closely linked to the behaviour of the girl children and any violation of the expected norms by the girls would damage the reputation of the family itself. Sudha's mother asks, "Do they care that they have smeared blackest kali on your faces? Of course not. Do they care that in this one afternoon they have undone everything we have been trying to build up for years." (79). The response from Nalini, the mother of Sudha, is notable when she comes to know that her daughter Sudha went out to watch a movie with her cousin Anju. The unlucky incidence of a man sitting near these girls leads to a very damaging situation as it is not allowed for girls to have any connection with any man before their marriage. And if anybody finds them sitting beside a man or talking to a man it is considered to be a matter of shame. It is expected that a girl should not have any association with any man or she should not try boys' tricks of watching movies or going to town without the escort of parents. The social system asserts a proper code of conduct for its family members which later get transferred to the young ones in the family. Thus the adult world is the key to the younger ones towards the value systems and rules of the society. Family name, as people believe, depends on the behaviour of the family members. When it comes to girls, things become complicated because their movement is restricted so that no damage is caused to the good name of the family. A girl is not allowed to move around freely in public. It becomes an offence to go out without the escort of family members, because the family considers it unlikely for girls to go out and participate in such entertainments, as it may stain the virtue of homely girls. Michelle Superle, analysing the recent Indian English novels states that:

Duty is a central concept in novels, and one which extends beyond girls. This could be due to the fact that Hindu society was traditionally structured around the idea of *dharma*, which required each person to do her or his duty; learning to do one's duty was an important component of the *niti* taught in the *Panchatantra*. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that literary critics identify a pattern by which girls find a balance between not only tradition and modernity, but also self and duty. These are also crucial tasks for the new Indian girls [...] (50)

But the labels attributed are easily handled by them as they no longer consider themselves inferior and ready to compete and risk their lives. Anju defends her act by telling the mothers that "We just went to the cinema. You're making it sound as if we went and got pregnant." (79) The girls don't find their act bad and even when they are accused they try to defend it. But Korobi's life is bit different from the Chatterjee girls. The girl already has a reputation of a daredevil in the family. She is an adventurous girl who lives her life according to her own inclinations. The girls in the novels show an enormous amount of confidence in their body, mind and intelligence, and are portrayed as exercising power in their lives through their own abilities and their unique identities.

The protagonist Korobi in the novel *Oleander Girl* starts her adventure to find her bicultural identity through her quest to find out her unknown father in an alien country. The whole story revolves around Korobi's quest for identity and her struggle to fix her identity in totally unacceptable social conditions. Her skin colour believes to be from the Roys. The texture of her hair still confuses her. She is torn between the essential Indianness and the inevitable western-ness. She has to handle the goodness of both cultures and should choose the right one for her. On the other had the Chatterjee girls in the novel *Sister of my Heart*, move within the traditional boundaries till they realise the power of sisterhood and power of individuality within themselves. Their mind, body and intelligence become the source of power which opens a new realm of life for them. Michelle Superle affirms the formation of power in girl characters and she calls it the essential new Indian girl. Superle claims the implication of power in girls. Contrary to the traditional roles the new Indian Girl's body is "validated as a source of power" (Superle 151). According to her studies Superle affirms that "... in many novels, particularly those by Indian women writers, girlhood is generally imagined as an empowered state. The source of power is both girl's bodies and their control over those bodies: fictional new Indian girls use their bodies, voices, and clothing to perform individual versions of Indian girlhood as a state of power". (151)

An episode in *Oleander Girl* is notable in this context in which Korobi shows us her power over her body and the power of her body. Korobi's journey to find her father makes her shed all the unwanted burdens she used to carry as part of her personality. Korobi's power is neither western nor modern, but it is her ability in fixing her status in her family and at home. She proves that she alone has the right over her body and her identity. When she needed money she decides to sell her hair. She finds a place where human hair is used for scientific instruments. She knows that her hair "belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée, to Papa and Maman Bos's daughter-in-law to be."(178) But she decides to sell it because she feels that she has the ultimate right on her body and herself. The selling of hair makes her more liberated and confident. "I feel light-headed, untethered. But once the money is in my hand I'm somewhat consoled. I now have enough for California, I have done it without having to beg anyone".(177) The people around her made comments and express their worries over her decision. Her friend Vic supports her act by commenting, "I like it. Makes you look modern and confident".(177) But her friend Seema is shocked to see her short hair. Seema, being brought up in traditional Indian culture knows that the value of women's body is entangled in the cultural system and its traditions. To fix herself as the acceptable member of the social system through her modest practices is the duty of a woman. But Korobi has done an outrageous act by deciding on her own something that belonged to the good old tradition of the whole family. "Oh my God! What have you done! All your beautiful hair, gone! Does your grandmother know? Did your in-laws give you permission?"(177) Listening to Seema's words she asserts her control over her body. She tells Seema, "Its my hair,"(177). According to Jasbir Jain "Indian women writers adopt the strategy of 'foregrounding the female body' as they try to handle the 'problems' of communicating a cultural inheritance and creating space for construction or recovery of a self"(Jain 139). Korobi's act can be taken as assertion of selfhood and individuality.

In the novel *Sister of My Heart* girl power is shown through the abilities of the girls. Anjali is presented as an average girl while Basudha is portrayed as the true beauty. Though the sisters are made to live their lives according to the family values and religious priorities they always think of outwitting the compulsory social order. The thought formed from the mind of the girl is also a key to challenge their life and face the challenges in life in a more direct fashion. Brought up by mothers and aunt, the girls are supposed to enjoy more freedom at home and society. But the undercurrent of patriarchy prevalent in the mindset of mothers declines the girls of any choice in life. The journey of the girls to find meaning in their lives ends in a revelation that, their true identity is in their abilities.

Throughout the novels the girls show their reluctance to accept the gender norms imposed on them. Korobi's grandmother Sarojini is always accused of spoiling her daughter Anu and her granddaughter Korobi. But Sarojini herself admits that the accuser, her husband, has a point; "girls have to be toughened so they can survive a world that presses harder on women..." (7). Here Sarojini too exercises the patriarchal power and values like Anjali and Basudha's mothers because of the ease its going to bring in the life of the girls. Bimal Prasad Roy is the head of the family and he takes the whole right to take decision on any other member of the family. Korobi's first and the last fight with her grandfather shows her reluctance to accept the patriarchal role of the adults on children. Bimal's decision about Korobi's marriage makes her upset. She screams at her grandfather, "It is always what you want that's important--- do you ever think of what might make other people happy? Like moving the wedding day forward--- did you even think to ask me before you made such big decision? I was going to beg you to reconsider. But now I'm actually glad. This way I can get away quicker from you!"(29). Though the words of Korobi makes her grandfather sad, she too feels hurt when her privacy and choices of life are violated. The same thing happens in the novel *Sister of My Heart* too "... I am supposed to belong to some man I haven't even met as soon as he puts a garland around my neck. Oh, why can't I just remain single? Why must I be yoked to a man like a cart to a buffalo? "(130). The words reveal that when an

intrusion into the personal choices of a girl is made, the girl acts and thinks beyond social structure and patriarchy.

In some contexts the new Indian girl children are nurtured through a number of elder women who make the younger ones more confident to face the hardships of life. There are a bunch of women instigating and helping each other to make the girls fight difficult situations in life. Korobi, Sudha and Anju get emotional support from them. In America Seema helps Korobi. From Korobi Seema learns the way she too could escape the trap she is in. Both of them find their flaws in life and try to gain freedom. For Korobi it is her false identity, and for Seema it is her dependency on her husband. Seema cooks good food for Korobi and she finds a trustworthy friend in her. Though Korobi has to plan and act alone, she gets the support of other women. Korobi's mother is an influential presence throughout the novel. Korobi trusts the apparition she sees in her dreams and she starts the quest for her life. Throughout the novel it can be seen that the power of women and the way they help each other and support each other. In the novel *Sister of My Heart* Sudha too tries to gain her confidence and power after coming back home from her in-law's house, the Sanyal family. When the mothers come to bless her she wishes for more power through their wishes.

Bless me that I might be like the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords,' .... 'Bless me that I might have the courage to go into battle when necessary, no matter how bleak the situation. Bless me that I may be able to fight for myself and my child, no matter where I am.'(270). The support of the elder women in family makes Sudha happy and confident. Basudha feels "How easy it seems! What power we women can have if we believe in ourselves! (271).

Girlhood is premised on the assumptions which are culturally constructed and are socially moulded during the evolution and growth of human beings. Brought up in the traditional family of the Roys, Korobi grows up tuning her wishes according to the wishes of the people around her. The Chatterjee household too bestows the weight of tradition on the girls Anjali and Basudha. Their looks and their behaviour make them perfect girls and perfect daughters in-law. The burden of the great tradition of the family also rests on all the characters. All these shackles limit their space and build false identity in them. Divakaruni here doesn't allow her protagonists to entrap themselves in the false identity created for them. Rather she gives the girl children new possibilities of life outside the tradition and social structure. In the novels Divakaruni loosens the ties one by one and the girls are made to act without any bias from family or society. Here the novelist comes with the real girls who represent the whole universe of human beings. Moving away from the traditional constrains the author never puts her heroines in circumstances which may project their identity as gendered objects. The girls here bypass their identities in relation to their parents and families. Divakaruni builds a special circumstance for the girls to represent the global youth identity and culture while living in traditional India.

Indian girlhood is always in one or other way besieged in the cultural constraints of gendered spaces which cater to specialised identity and role for girls. Here Chitra Banerji Divakaruni proposes a different approach to present her girl protagonists. Korobi's identity is entangled with the reputation of the family and the good old family name. Korobi is the granddaughter of Judge Tarak Prasad Roy "who had a street named after him" (26). Korobi is brought up with great affection and care by the old couple and that made her enjoy a free life in her childhood. But she finds herself worthless when she knows the true identity of her father and her racial inferiority, being the daughter of an African American man because she admired her status of being the granddaughter of the Roys and as the daughter of an unseen white American father and also being the fiancée of the most desired and the richest man of the town. Basudha's pride of being part of the Chatterjee family vanishes when she finds the true identity of her father. She realises her true identity as the daughter of an irrational and thoughtless man who is believed to be the killer of her bosom sister Anjali's father, her own uncle. Her priorities in life change and she makes unnecessary sacrifices for the sake of her sister.

The girls realise at a later stage in their lives that their real identity is beyond what the society, culture and religion have set for themselves. They find their true selves in their own power and abilities. Anju becomes more confident and capable after her short term work in a library. Basudha starts thinking of making her own designer clothes. Korobi on the other hand makes all the people around to accept her as she is, not as she has to be. Korobi says, "Today I was looking at myself in the mirror, my skin, my hair--- I'm seeing everything different now. Every detail has taken on new meaning".(226) Here the novelist has worked her magic formulae with the lives of Indian girl children. The transition towards the true identity and selfhood is what Divakaruni stresses through her works. The new outlook given to girl children is in fact a new way towards the exploration of selfhood and identity in Indian girl child.

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