

Child: An Agent of Reform in Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novel *Oleander Girl* (2013) touches not just on the issues plaguing the modern world but tries to reflect, through a child's voice, the need for acceptance and solidarity amongst different communities. This paper points to the fact that children, though often taken to be ignorant, are far more mature and understanding when it comes to maintaining relations. Their innocence, purity, simplicity and virtuousness know no boundaries of caste, class, race or community. This novel projects the relationship of Pia-Missy, the young sister of Rajat, and her relationship and bond with the Muslim chauffeur Asif Ali who treats her like her younger sister as an example of Tagore's words "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" (*Gitanjali*, v. 35). This paper brings to light the way children surpass the narrow mentality and are agents of reform in a world marred by distrust and disloyalty.

KEYWORDS

Child; compassion; survival; self; reform.

Introduction

A child's voice colours this multilingual and multicultural world with purity, and innocence, and depoliticises the notions of 'nation' and 'world'. Children help to break the long standing issues of religious narrow mindedness and social stereotypes, to present a different world view from their own perspective. The bizarreness of this world can be confronted through the simplicity of children. A sense of empathy comes from listening with the heart and children not just lend their ears but also voice to their feelings in an uninhibited manner. The voice of the child therefore cannot be dismissed as being naïve.

The Context

Depiction of children in literature has progressed from being romantic to medical/psychological perspectives to

childhood in the 18th century, to the child being seen as important in the mid nineteenth century, where their perspective gains importance through first person narration. With research in the role of evolutionary psychology in child development by Barrett, Dunbar and Lycet (2002), "the child" (95) came to be seen as a visual signifier of the destructiveness of war and famine.

Writers like Alice Walker, for instance, in *The Color Purple* (1982) have through the epistolary form charted a history of slavery and the condition of Afro-Americans. It was in 1911 that Francis Hodgson Burnett in *The Secret Garden* (1911) tried to prove through a child character that the children were capable of transforming their own lives while inspiring others. Writers like Dickens, Edgeworth, Hodgson, Burnett, Lewis and Tolkein have never

underestimated childhood. 'Contemporary humanism' permeates in these works and the writers have shown that "...children live up to their potential and try to find out their own philosophy of life rather than being inculcated with one or merely mastering behavioral codes" (Knuth, 184).

Diaspora writers have often penned the thoughts of children to give a voice to pain, anguish and suffering. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as one such author, has in her novels projected children and their innermost feelings. If in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), she shows Jagjit suffering from homesickness, and getting transformed into a stubborn boy 'Jaguar' because of his need to assert his identity in a new land - America, in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) she shows the childhood of Draupadi who resents the difference meted to her in relation to her brother. She objects to Dhai Ma's propositions and feels that there should be no difference between a boy and a girl. Jonaki, the daughter of Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* (2004), unites her parents through her selflessness. The character of Lily in *One Amazing Thing* (2009) shows that children, when given an opportunity, strive to do better and they too have a sense of responsibility. In *Oleander Girl* (2012), the character of Pia-Missy has the added purpose of conveying a social message. This novel talks about the Godhra riots of 2002, the Agni Missile and the growing tension between India and Pakistan. Against this backdrop is the pure relation between Pia and Asif, which crosses all boundaries of caste, creed and religion.

The child, from being perceived as a tabula rasa by John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), to Rousseau's concept of the innate innocence of the child, the subject of morality and children has been looked at in various ways in history. Rahman states that

"[c]hildren and young people are a major resource for progress and the prime movers of innovation. Their

imagination, idealism and collective energies form the creative impulse for the future of any nation" (Rahman, 265).

Alan Prout views childhood as a "construct" with "social and cultural ramifications" (Prout, 25) and Davies claims that "[c]hildren being themselves 'new' are in the process of discovering the world" (Davies, 17).

This paper uses these lenses on childhood to explore the role of the child in the literary work of South Asian diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013), in the context of a world marred by terrorism and violence, and where there is a need for compassion and understanding to rise above the discrimination of class, caste, religion, gender and nationality. This paper brings to light the relationship of Pia-Missy, the teenage sister of Rajat (the fiancé of Korobi, the protagonist), and her bond with the Muslim chauffeur Asif Ali who treats her like his younger sister. This paper indicates the way children surpass narrow mentalities and are agents of reform in a world marred by distrust and disloyalty and then establishes Tagore's vision.

The Story in Brief

Oleander Girl (2013) is the story of Korobi Roy who is brought up by her grandparents, and on the day of her engagement, gets to know that her father is alive. She decides to go to the USA in search of her father against all opposition and discovers that her father was an Afro-American and that her parents never married. The truth that she is an illegitimate child breaks her but she returns to India. Finally, the novel ends with her marriage to Rajat. Pia-Missy, the child in the story, is Rajat's eleven year old sister, who is escorted to school and other places by her chauffeur Asif Ali. Asif Ali loves Pia-Missy because she reminds him of his sister who had been married at an early age and who died of pneumonia.

Though Pia-Missy is from an upper class, she regards all human beings as equal. Divakaruni's writing suggests a path of this kind, led by a child, where it is important to break narrow boundaries with an expansive humanistic vision.

Humanistic Touch in Simple Incidents

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, through the portrayal of simple day to day incidents, conveys the need for a humane approach to life. Through this child, she puts the principle of humanism to practice. "Humanism is a progressive life stance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater degree of humanity" (Green, 214). Pia-Missy, an eleven year old girl, touches hearts with her simplicity, straightforwardness, and with her minimalist approach, pushes people to think beyond their limits. Pia rises above narrow conventions. For her, the only religion is the religion of humanity. She is introduced as an energetic, fashionable, music loving, adventurous girl who loves speed and technology. At the engagement ceremony, it is Pia who with her excitement brings the family together, pushes her grandparents to hold hands and is proud to take such a picture with everyone huddled in. Though she is just eleven she understands the goodness in people. At one point she tells Asif, "A. A., I think Korobi-didi is a good person. Her face has a shine to it" (Oleander, 47).

Asif Ali is the chauffeur who drives her to school daily. Even when Sheikh Rehman tries to lure him with a higher salary, he refuses because he "...thought of the way Pia-Missy would look if she found out he was leaving..." (Oleander, 11). Pia lovingly calls him A.A. and involves him in her interests. She likes American music and though it mystifies him, he pretends to like it. When they are in the car, she sings and screams, while he hums along. Thus, in each other's company, he forgets his

sorrow, while she is able to get around her restrictions. Asif relives his happy moments spent with his sister and Pia is able to be herself. It is this engaging and loving company of togetherness in their relationship that the novel focuses on. Writing about Divakaruni's meta-fiction, Christina Bacchilega observes:

Divakaruni's...is not a naturalized hybridity of the imagination, the bubbling criss-crossing of currents or traditions, where vividly colored streams produce the white overflow of story; rather her 'modern fable', as she calls it, seeks to dissolve boundaries. (187)

The sub-plot narrating the story of Pia and Asif tends to dissolve boundaries, breaks the class borders and colours the family with a bond of togetherness that, with her goodness and kindness, radiates with passion.

For instance, Pia's exuberance at getting a new Kodak digital camera, dressing up in a sari and formally extending a word of gratitude towards her driver is an expression of her respect for human dignity. She shares her excitement with Asif by taking his picture and he in turn reciprocates it. His words that no one had ever thought to take a photograph of him shows how he is touched by a little gesture from a girl. He blesses her and prays, "Allah...don't let her fall." (Oleander, 13) Asif likes Pia because she listens to him, cares for his opinions and pays complete attention to what he says. He wishes he could solve all her problems. When he comes to know from Pia that Sonia had been stalking her, his anger knows no bounds: "Allah help him, if the woman tried to hurt Pia, he'd - he'd ram the Benz into her little car until it was a junk heap with her in it." (Oleander, 88)

Despite her age, Pia displays a deep insight into the events around her. While returning from dropping Korobi at the airport, Pia's words reveal her

understanding of adult relationships. She is able to comprehend that something has gone wrong between Korobi and her brother, Rajat. She feels her brother's sadness, but she also knows that no one would tell her anything. Her simple straight question poses a big question mark, "Is this what love is, A.A.? People are crazy for each other, then it's gone, and you're left feeling terrible? I don't think I want it to ever happen to me" (Oleander, 87).

Similarly, Pia comprehends the nuances of what would otherwise be considered adult affairs. Her maturity is evident when the Bose family goes through a financial crisis. Pia voluntarily refuses to go on a trip to Darjeeling for summer holidays because she knows that her family doesn't have money. It is through the headmistress that Mrs Bose comes to know that Pia has refused to go on the trip. When Mrs Bose inquires about it to Pia, she merely hugs her and says, "It doesn't matter, Mama" (Oleander, 189). She feels the pain of elders and tells Sarojini, "It must be hard for you, alone at home with Grandfather gone and Korobi-didi so far away" (Oleander, 141). Her instinct tells her that Sonia is not the right person for her brother Rajat. She is the one who tells Asif that he should not hold any grudges for her mother: "Maman's really anxious right now, with Papa gone to America and the problems in the warehouse, you mustn't hold it against her" (Oleander, 235).

The most painful moment comes in their life when Asif and Pia get separated because of Mrs Jayshree Bose, Rajat's mother. Mrs. Bose thinks that Asif might harm her daughter because of a fight that breaks out in Rajat's office with a Hindu man making a remark about Muslims. Pia however is confident of Asif's loyalty, even though everyone doubts him. "It's not like Asif to behave that way. You know it. He's been with us since I was in class four. I have to find out what happened... This is our Asif! He would never hurt me" (Oleander,

234). Though Asif Ali does not want to leave Pia, he is forced to do so when he takes up a job with Rehman Shaikh. "But Pia - how he'll miss her smile, her small, sweet demands, her confidences, her innocent faith in his intelligence" (Oleander, 222). He wishes to tell her but being unable to, he merely blesses her. Even after quitting the job, Asif is unable to forget Pia. He becomes nostalgic for the moments spent together and her words, "Come on, A.A.! I know you can go faster than this!" (Oleander, 228) reverberate in his ears. He continues to play the songs loved by Pia.

While Asif worked for Pia, every year he would give a gift to Pia like a CD, chocolates or a book and every year she would save a piece of cake and send it to Asif. However, when she sees Asif the year he leaves them, she insists Rajat let her meet him. Her words convey a lot with regard to her values, "He may be a servant, but he's a person first. A good person. Better than a lot of society people I know... I don't care about class. He's my friend. I'll give him a pastry if I want. I'll give him ten pastries" (Oleander, 236). She stands up for righteousness and when Rajat rebukes her for staying long with Asif, she retorts, "You didn't have to be so rude like that. Half a minute to let him complete his sentence wouldn't have hurt" (Oleander, 236).

When Rajat is attacked, it is Asif who saves him and Pia. After her recovery, she wishes to see Asif and Rajat first and narrates the heroics of Asif to Sarojini Roy in her unique way: "Then A. A. came out of nowhere just like a super hero... If A. A. hadn't scared them off, I bet those men would have hurt us much worse" (Oleander, 249). She requests Sarojini to convince her mother to let her meet Asif. It is because of this incident that Mrs Bose realizes her mistake and calls Asif back, confessing ashamedly that "...some bonds were stronger even than religion" (Oleander, 282). Pia's father tells Mrs Bose "Joyu, you can't keep Pia away from him.

What he did, risking his life - I have a feeling he did it for her. She needs to see him, and it'll do him good to see her" (Oleander, 257). Pia visits Asif in the hospital and when Rehman Sheikh shouts at Asif, she offers to request her parents to pay the price for his damaged car. Rehman Sheikh's comment on Pia signposts her innate strength, "You are quite an outspoken young woman and persuasive as well as stubborn" (Oleander, 263).

Pia's love is selfless. She fondles, caresses and pampers Sarojini Roy like her own grandmother. She offers to teach the video game 'Zelda' to Sarojini Roy. Seeing her, Sarojini comments, "Taking care of me like she's a grandmother herself!" (Oleander, 142) but Mrs Bose is wary of her sweetness and hopes "...this sweetness will not cause her daughter too much heartache as she grows into adulthood" (Oleander, 141). It is Pia who draws Rajat's attention to his getting 'raccoon eyes' and tries to suggest to him that he should take care of himself.

Her generosity, kindness and warmth are a kind of a solution which Oleander seems to be offering to the world with a message. Finally, Asif Ali becomes a part of their family again and the removed cast on which Pia had written Asif as her friend in purple becomes a symbol of their long lasting selfless friendship which he preserves as a precious gift. She becomes the sole reason for Asif coming back to the Bose family.

Conclusion

Through the simplicity, innocence and honesty of the child character, Divakaruni voices the most emphatic message with fluidity and hints at the complexities of the modern world of social stratification. The future of the nation lies in its children and by fashioning and imagining a child with a modern world view, Divakaruni hints at the dynamics of an evolving society which is witnessing change and needs to change by breaking down the Tagorian narrow domestic walls.

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