CLUTCHES OR CARE: WOMEN UNDER FAMILIAL LOVE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI’S OLEANDER GIRL

Mamta¹

Abstract
The present paper attempts to study the influence of familial love and relations on the existence and shaping up of the women personalities in Indian-Bengali families through Oleander Girl, the latest novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Like other feminist writers, she holds the cause of feminism through her works in literature as well as social work. Feminism has been dealing with different reasons for marginalization of women in the patriarchal social structure, but to discuss the condition of women in the smallest unit of society that is family would throw light on the role of the families in the development, transformation and making of the personalities of the women. Since the novel has a background of Indian-Bengali family, the research paper essentially highlights the personalities of Bengali.

Keywords: Bengali-women, Family, Feminism, marginalization, patriarchy.

¹ Research Scholar, M.B.P.G. Govt. College, Haldwani, Nainital, Uttarakhand
Family in social sciences has got many appropriate definitions but no universal definition. Many theories have surfaced according to the different history, culture and situation that tried to define a family so, it became difficult for the social scientist to settle down to one theory. But on keeping the technicality aside the term family brings out the picture of one’s close blood relatives, the smallest unit of a society. In India, the term family does not just limit to the reference of one’s close blood relatives rather it is a sense that keeps them emotionally tied to their essential responsibilities, duties and their complete existence as a person. Anyone who is a part of the family is supposed to live according to the family norms through living up to its expectations and fulfilling the preconceived notions and demands. It is not taken as a burden but in fact a kind of deep satisfying ecstasy is there in doing all this presumed chores for one’s family. However with the set up of patriarchy in the society, the work areas for males and females have been assigned in a family in such a way that women live in a false ideology of an ideal women for their families. The males are responsible for earning money, but on the other hand women have been endowed with endless duties to perform. These endless duties which were decided by the social order, had kept the women secluded from the outer world and slowly in a male dominated society the household became synonymous for women as a being. Esha Dey ponders on the roles of males and females in the Indian family in her research paper as; “The male is the official head of the family, who is provider of food, shelter and clothing and also the defender against the attack from other males. The female is the bearer of children and nourishes all members of household.” (145) The vicious circle of female oppression got strengthened from such assumed roles of males and females along with other reasons of patriarchy.
Family has always been the most sacrosanct traditional handout in Indian society since the dawn of civilization. It has been considered above any single individual but with the importance of every single member. Although with the passage of time, patriarchy established the males as the head of the family. Since man became the protector and provider of the family, all resources and decisions came in his hand. Women in this due course of time were left only with two images either the bearer or the destroyer of the family. A well defined male perspective had always marked definitions of women’s roles in India. Traditional Hindu law codes and legends as collected by Manu in Manusmriti, defined a woman’s purpose in life as the bearing of children and emphasized the need for male control over her at all stages of her life. Legends and religious texts offered images of goddess Durga or Kali, who were either a compliant wife and indulgent mothers or a destroyer. The woman of the house is expected to shoulder the complete responsibility of keeping the family thread intact and united together. Dasgupta and Lal write in the introduction of their book “The survey shows that the imaginary ideal of an Indian family requires the wife to be eagerly glad to sacrifice personal aspirations for the larger “good”……..”(13)

The existing paradigm of social structure of that time made the male superior in every respect and turned the female as the other. They maintained their position by erasing and suppressing the female’s independent identity. This continuous subversion of females triggered feminism in the west and numerous movements for the cause of women brought the changes in women existence. Having been inspired by the social upliftment in the west, women in the third world countries also raised voice for the improvement in their conditions. The autonomous identity of a woman of her own in India, has become a new phenomenal reality and a drift from the medieval past since a few decades. Earlier, woman was always a part of her family, but never an independent
whole. This question of identity never arose earlier because all the discrimination and subjugation were accepted normal by everyone, by the oppressor as well as the oppressed due to the false consciousness among women which is obviously passed on to them by their mothers and sisters within the patriarchal society, which never let them think of a world where they are equal to their male counterparts. Instead they were brought up in such a way that they took their house as their world, more than that was the male arena where women were outlaws. The decided roles for men and women by patriarchy made men supreme and confined women to the household.

In Bengal, with the penetration of western school of thought the rational thinking in education and broadmindedness spread among the males, and their views towards their women changed tremendously. The need to bring women out of the four walls of their house for social activities paved the way for the edification of women. But the education of women did not start just with the thought of emancipation of womenfolk rather it was for the social image of their husbands, who wanted to flaunt an educated and sophisticated life partner among their friends in the British circle. Judith Walsh also points out the same in her research paper; ‘Increasingly during the last half of the nineteenth century Western educated Indian boys resisted the idea of marriage to illiterate girls who knew nothing of the culture of the western world in which their husbands would live and earn’. (4) And the in the same way education provided by the parents was more for finding a better alliance for their daughters. On the whole there was no thought to make the women independent and strong enough to have control on their own lives. Even in twenty-first century women are conditioned and nurtured in such a way that they become the centre of the familial structure. The whole responsibility of keeping a family happily joined together is put on her shoulder that too without any power of decision making and resources.
Chitra Banerji Divakaruni is an American writer of Indian origin and her understanding of the conditions of Indian women is unparallel. She is an Indian-Bengali by origin and has a first-hand experience of the Bengali society and family. Her latest novel Oleander Girl is also weaved on a Bengali backdrop and has Bengali-families in the center. It is a tale of a young girl Koroby Roy, who was orphaned at her birth and raised by her maternal grandparents. The novel begins on the eve of her engagement to her love Rajat, son of a high-profile family. But all the happiness turns into a chaotic and drastic change with the demise of her grandfather Mr. Bimal Roy as it reveals all the financial problems of Roy family and the devastating secret of Korobi’s life. This secret sets her on a quest for her identity which further puts her in difficult situations. Though the story is about Korobi’s search for her roots but it also best exemplifies the family impression on the female characters of the work. The protagonist of Oleander Girl, Korobi which meant oleander, was named by her mother so, as she wanted her daughter to have the toughness of an oleander as she lacked that quality. The four female characters in the family frame in the novel complete the picture of a Bengali woman.

Anu, the protagonist’s mother was an extremely intelligent and talented, but lost her love, her life just because she could not shook off her guilt of crossing the limits her father had set. She was swinging in nowhere as she could neither be with her parents nor with her love completely due to her traditional guilt ridden mindset because of her upbringing of ‘family first’ and the promise she had given to her father. She had dared to choose and decide a person as husband for her life without her father’s concern which was like a crime for a girl who had always done what her father had decided and dictated to her. She was a woman intelligent enough to have bagged a scholarship to study abroad, but this achievement was of no importance for her lawyer father who had already decided her fate by fixing her marriage of his choice. In fact good education for
girls meant good alliance in marriage market in all societies of India as writes Vrinda Nabar on new trend of education for girls in India:

Middle-class girls are educated largely as a concession to a superficial social change. Given the new executive culture, a personable wife has become a necessary appendage. Matrimonial advertisement frequently mention at least a BA degree as one of the necessary assets of a would-be bride. Large numbers of girl-women are now enrolling for degrees as a result, though many leave halfway if a “good match” is procured. (68)

Anu accepted that alliance without even seeing that man because she had always agreed to her father’s choice, for her his happiness was foremost. But her wish to study abroad brought her to a far away land where she was happy and independent doing things of her choice, to enjoy her life as she had then taken control of her life. “In America she grew adventurous. She would tell us in her letters about folk dance lessons and plays she had seen in San Francisco. She visited the giant redwood and saw migrating whales.”(58) But the upbringing is always a part of one’s personality and perceptions; she could not take the disapproval of her father over her decision of having a man of her choice. She could not get it through to bear that harshness shown by her father and in order to seek permission from her father she came to India but could never return back to her love and life.

Sarojini Roy, the oldest lady in the novel was an exact picture of a complete woman of a male’s expectations; dutiful, loving and complying in every sense and situation. She always obeyed her
husband, loved him more than her life. She did not complain even when her husband jeopardized her life for the sake of his family name which he feared would end up with him. He had her give birth to his child even when the doctor had warned them after three miscarriages. He reduced her role to just a feeding hand to their daughter and later to their granddaughter as everything else was decided by him for Anu and Korobi. He also made Sarojini to cut off from their only daughter Anu. When she protested he threatened to renounce her. “I will have nothing to do with a wife who does not stand beside me in a crisis,’ he said.”(59). He never told Sorjini the veracity of their daughter’s life and death. She was manipulated by him in all possible ways. Even after the death of Anu he made her swear on god to keep the truth of their grand-daughter a secret. He indulged her in his crime of secrecy and falsehood to a father and a daughter about each other’s existence. “All my life I’ve cared only about what he wanted. Obeyed even when my conscience cried out against it’. Dasgupta and Lal write about the condition of a married woman in an Indian family in the introduction of their book as “Woman within a family has been regarded as the outsider who is expected to conform to the regulations of the marital home, with very low or non-existent agency”. (18) But after his death she felt free from the shackles of her husband and disclosed the truth to her grand-daughter. She mustered the strength to speak up the truth, which could have made her loose her grand-daughter. As a mother and grand-mother she always showered love in fact her motherly gestures influenced even the extreme people like young Rajat and the smart politician Bhattacharya.

Divakaruni also portrays the potential of a woman, how she can manage both work and family together through Jayshree Bose, Korobi’s would be mother-in-law, a business-woman. Through her character the author puts her view that when love, freedom and support are given to a woman, she can produce the best of the results in all fronts of life. As, Divakaruni has often been
noted thanking her family for their support at home and in her work. She herself is an example in real life of such woman, who handled many fields and proved herself because of the love, trust and freedom given by the family. Jayashree is a woman from an affluent family, but this affluence is the result of her own hard work. She is a lady with strong will, who knows how to bring people to her bargain. She is a master in worldly affairs and handles most of her deals independently. She breaks the perception of people about working women that for them family becomes secondary. Instead her priority had always been her husband and children; she never kept her work before her family. The safety and happiness of her family always lingered in her mind. Divakaruni presented a twenty-first century mother-in-law through Jayashree, who is if not supporting is at least not an impediment in the life of her future daughter-in-law. This character even breaks the image of stereotype mothers-in-law in Indian context.

Korobi, the protagonist of the novel is a young girl brought up by her grand-parents. She was kept away from the busy and fashionable life of Kolkata by her grand-father. She did most of the things to please her grand-father, even her good grades were just for him. Her grand-father agreed to her choice for marriage at an early age due to his past experience of his daughter’s decision, who had chosen a black American as a life partner, which he could never accept. But as soon the greatest secret of her life was revealed to her, she went in search of her black American father. She risked her bright and prosperous future for her need of a complete family picture that proves again the importance of a family in a woman’s life. She did not want to hide any truth from her would be in-laws but her fiancé asked her to wait for the right time. She never wanted to betray any one even when she knew that her new identity was not very acceptable in a Bengali family but she showed the strength to go out in a totally new country in search of her father as she longed for her parents since her childhood. In the new country she faced different troubles
but did not give up the hope to find her father. She did all possible things to find her father and at last found him. But that meeting with her father came with a blow, when she came to know that her parents were never married. She became ashamed of her identity, which was completely unacceptable in an Indian Bengali society. Her quest for her family picture brought her to that complex situation. “Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame.”(246) But as her anger melted down, she understood the situation which her parents had undergone. She only sought his acceptance and blessings. Towards the end of the story one can also see the strength of Korobi, when she breaks off the engagement but did not plead to prove her truth, which is like saying no to the agnipariksha to prove the chastity that Sita had to face in Ramayana. She tried to get back to a normal life with her grandmother and let her fiancé to discover the truth and realize his mistake on his own.

**Conclusion:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni weaved many women characters of different shades in her novel. They always keep their family as their priority no matter what their age is. The oldest or the youngest woman in the family feel the same responsibility towards the family but their way of expression may be different. They are ready to sacrifice even their most loving thing in the name of family. When the family supports the woman she can reach the pinnacle of success in all fields be it personal front, be it public front as can be seen in Mrs Basu and Korobi. And when a woman is not supported by her family; she is doomed even if she is intelligent or educated. She is unable to go beyond the wishes of her family; she is burdened with the weight of responsibilities, obligations and family name which does not let the women stand for her choices and decisions like in case of Anu and Sarojini. So it should be for everyone in the family that they love and respect ideology, perceptions, ambitions and choices of each other and give
liberty to all (especially women who have been denied any individual identity for ages) so as to have their own life and individuality.

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