

Roots in the Concrete and the Soil: Spatial Geographies, Cultural Resilience, and the Transnational Bildungsroman in *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2013) follows Korobi Roy from the ancestral certainties of a Kolkata mansion to the disorienting geography of post-9/11 America, where she searches for the African American father her family's silence had erased. This essay argues that Divakaruni uses two contrasting spatial registers—the ancestral “soil” of 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road and the alienating “concrete” of New York and California—to stage a transnational bildungsroman in which maturity is not assimilation into either world but a synthesis of both. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's account of the house as a repository of memory, Henri Lefebvre's theory of socially produced space, and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybrid “third space,” the essay first reads the Roy mansion's literal decay as the physical correlate of Bimal Roy's concealment of his daughter's history, then turns to the racialized, exploitative geography Korobi encounters in America, from an airport profiling scene to a predatory lawyer's locked penthouse. It examines how the discovery of her own illegitimacy forces Korobi to hold two incompatible cultural framings of the same fact at once, and closes by tracing the titular oleander metaphor—a flower Divakaruni's characters call “beautiful—but also tough”—as the novel's figure for a resilience that is portable rather than rooted in a single place. Korobi's return to Kolkata, changed but not assimilated, ultimately proposes that diasporic identity is less a fixed location than a resilience carried within.

Keywords: diaspora; transnational bildungsroman; spatial theory; post-9/11 racial profiling; hybridity; third space; cultural resilience

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* opens as a family saga and a mystery of parentage, but it develops into something more spatially ambitious: a study of what it costs, and what it gives back, to move between two ancestral geographies that cannot be reconciled from within either one alone. Its protagonist, seventeen-year-old Korobi Roy, has grown up sheltered inside 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road, her family's crumbling Kolkata mansion, believing herself the orphaned daughter of two dead parents. The death of her grandfather, Bimal Roy, shatters this idealized childhood; in going through his papers, Korobi discovers that her mother did not die in a car accident as she was told, that her father is alive, African American, and that she herself is the product of a relationship her grandfather worked for years to erase from the family record.

The novel's second half tracks Korobi's search for her father, Rob Lacey, across a post-9/11 America that is as spatially unfamiliar to her as Kolkata would be to him: an airport security line that singles out brown-

skinned travelers, a cramped, insect-ridden immigrant apartment in Jackson Heights, and the locked, glittering penthouse of a predatory lawyer who may or may not be the man she is looking for. This essay argues that Divakaruni uses the contrasting spatial geographies of Kolkata's ancestral soil and America's post-9/11 concrete to chart a transnational bildungsroman, one whose thesis is that cultural resilience for the diasporic subject does not require choosing between the roots of the past and the realities of the present. Instead, the novel proposes a synthesis of both, embodied in its title by the oleander: a flower that is, as Korobi eventually learns, both beautiful and fiercely toxic, capable of taking root in almost any terrain.

The Ancestral Soil: 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road as a Space of Memory and Confinement

The Roy family home is the novel's first and most detailed setting, and Divakaruni treats its physical condition as inseparable from the emotional condition of the family living inside it. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* famously argues that the house functions as a crucible of memory and intimacy, its rooms and corners holding the emotional residue of everything that happened inside them (Bachelard). Divakaruni's mansion holds this residue literally as well as figuratively: midway through the novel, a burst pipe sends water pouring down a bedroom wall, ruining a Turkish carpet that has been in the family since before Sarojini's marriage, and the plumber's diagnosis reveals that "large segments of pipe—not just the broken one—have corroded," requiring several walls to be opened up. The house's hidden rot, discovered only when it floods a room Sarojini can no longer keep presentable, mirrors precisely the family's other buried structural failure: Bimal Roy's decades-long forgery of the story of his daughter Anu's death, a lie load-bearing enough that its collapse, once it comes, threatens to take the whole family down with it. Bimal's control of the house's physical space doubles as an attempt to control his granddaughter's narrative. When Rob Lacey traveled to India years earlier and asked permission simply to see the room where Anu grew up, Bimal's answer was absolute: "You'll enter my house over my dead body." Korobi, hearing this secondhand from her father decades later, feels an unexpected wave of sympathy alongside her anger, recognizing that her grandfather's cruelty and his desperate love for his dead daughter were, in this instance, the same impulse. Henri Lefebvre's argument that social space is never a neutral container but is actively produced by relations of power is useful here (Lefebvre): the house's threshold, in Bimal's hands, becomes a boundary that enforces not just family privacy but a particular, sanitized version of Anu's history, one with no room in it for Rob Lacey or for the daughter he fathered. Keeping Korobi inside this house, ignorant of her mixed-race parentage, was never simply protective; it was also, structurally, a form of confinement, a gilded space whose beauty depended on what it kept out.

This contradiction—the house as both shelter and cage—runs through the novel's early chapters, which linger on Korobi's genuine, unforced affection for the mansion's tamarind-shaded driveway, its temple, its garden thick with the oleanders her mother loved. The soil of Kolkata is not, in this sense, purely oppressive; it ties Korobi to an identity, a language, a set of rituals she will draw on later, in America, when she needs them most. But it is also, as the novel makes clear once its secrets surface, a space whose comfort was purchased with her ignorance, and Korobi's eventual departure for the United States is less a rejection of the ancestral soil than a necessary step outside its walls, the only vantage from which she can finally see what those walls had been built to hide.

The Concrete Labyrinth: Post-9/11 New York and the Geography of Alienation

Korobi's arrival in America immediately relocates the novel's spatial politics from the private, domestic scale of the Roy mansion to the public, systemic scale of national security infrastructure. At the airport,

she and her travel companion Vic are pulled from the security line and searched at length despite having triggered no alarm; Korobi notices that “almost everyone waiting with us is brown-skinned,” and when she protests the unfairness of it, Vic’s response is a bitter shrug: “Welcome to flying while brown in post 9/11 America!” Charu Chandrasekhar’s contemporaneous legal analysis of exactly this phenomenon documents how, in the years immediately following September 11, 2001, South Asian travelers were disproportionately targeted for search and delay on the basis of appearance rather than any individualized suspicion, a pattern Chandrasekhar argues constituted a systemic civil rights violation rather than a series of isolated incidents (Chandrasekhar). Divakaruni’s airport scene, and Vic’s world-weary catchphrase, dramatizes precisely this systemic quality: the “concrete” Korobi encounters in America is not only physical infrastructure but an invisible architecture of suspicion built into the infrastructure itself.

The novel maps this concrete geography of alienation onto contrasting domestic interiors as well. The Jackson Heights apartment where Korobi first stays, shared by her cousin’s husband Mitra and his pregnant wife Seema, is small, roach-infested, and stacked with unopened cardboard boxes, a space that registers the precariousness of immigrant small business in the wake of 9/11’s economic fallout on South Asian communities. Its opposite is Rob Mariner’s penthouse: a locked, high-rise apartment with floor-length windows, thick carpet, and an expensive door that “swings shut with an expensive, hushed click” behind her. Mariner, a man Korobi hopes might be her father, instead attempts to assault her and then, when she tries to leave, refuses to unlock the door, threatening to have her arrested first if she calls the police: “Who do you think they’ll believe? A reputable lawyer who has lived in this city for twenty years—or you, a foreigner from nowhere?” Between the cramped apartment’s exposure to economic precarity and the penthouse’s exposure to unchecked predatory power, Divakaruni gives America’s concrete two faces, both of them shaped, as Lefebvre would predict, by who is understood to hold legitimate claim to the space and who is merely permitted inside it.

Korobi’s most striking negotiation with this concrete geography is bodily rather than architectural. Needing money to continue her search into California, she sells her long, traditionally kept hair to a wig shop, emerging “a stranger, glamorous and a little dangerous” to herself. Her friend Seema’s horrified reaction—“All your beautiful hair, gone! ... you won’t even look like a proper bride!”—registers exactly how much cultural weight that hair had been carrying: it belonged, as Korobi herself half-admits, “to Bimal and Sarojini’s granddaughter, to Rajat’s fiancée.” Cutting and selling it is a literal shedding of inherited soil in exchange for the capital the concrete demands, and the fact that Seema, inspired, resolves to do the same in order to fund her own escape from an increasingly controlling husband suggests that this transaction, however painful, can also be an act of self-authorship rather than simple loss.

The Transnational Bildungsroman: Mapping the Journey of Identity and Truth

Franco Moretti’s account of the classical European bildungsroman describes a genre in which the protagonist’s maturity is measured by successful integration into a single, coherent bourgeois society, however much friction that integration initially involves (Moretti). *Oleander Girl* borrows the form’s basic architecture—a young protagonist’s formative journey toward self-knowledge—while refusing this resolution. Korobi’s growth is not achieved by assimilating into America, nor by simply returning gratefully to Kolkata; it is achieved by learning to hold both geographies, and the historical gap between them, in the same understanding of herself.

The clearest test of this double framework comes in California’s Rose Garden, where Rob Lacey finally tells Korobi that he and her mother were never married. “I’m illegitimate?” she whispers, and then, more

starkly: “I’m a—bastard?” In the individualist terms of American culture, this revelation is primarily a private, emotional wound, a fact about two people’s choices decades ago. Read against the Bengali social world Korobi has grown up in, however, illegitimacy is a public, categorical stigma, one she immediately recognizes she does not “know a single person among all my friends, relatives, acquaintances, even servants” who shares. Divakaruni does not allow either framework to cancel the other out; Korobi’s coming-of-age requires her to metabolize both readings of the same fact simultaneously, a task the traditional, single-society bildungsroman never asks of its protagonists.

Rob Lacey’s parting advice to his daughter, delivered at the airport security line just before she flies home, distills the novel’s transnational logic into a single sentence: “Never choose something because it’s easier. That’s what I did when Bimal Roy handed me those death certificates.” Lacey’s own great regret was accepting an easy, false story rather than staying to search for the harder truth, and Korobi spends the rest of the novel refusing to repeat his mistake. She declines Vic’s offer of an easy, assimilated life in California, just as she had already declined the easy, ignorant comfort of her old life at 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road. Her maturity, in transnational terms, consists precisely in refusing the shortcut each geography separately offers her.

The Oleander Metaphor: Cultural Resilience and the Synthesis of Spaces

The novel’s title metaphor receives its fullest explanation only in its final pages, when Lacey tells Korobi why her mother chose her name: “the oleander was beautiful—but also tough. It knew how to protect itself from predators. Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn’t have enough of it herself.” The oleander is, notoriously, both an ornamental garden flower and a plant whose every part is poisonous; Divakaruni’s characters have been surrounded by it since the novel’s first pages, growing along the Roy family’s driveway and filling the courtyard Korobi imagines for her future home. Homi Bhabha’s concept of a hybrid “third space,” a zone of cultural enunciation that exists in the interstices between two positions rather than as a simple blend of them, offers a precise vocabulary for what the oleander comes to represent (Bhabha). Korobi’s identity, by the novel’s end, is not a compromise struck evenly between Bengali tradition and American individualism; it is something new, generated in the gap between them, just as the oleander is not simply beautiful and simply dangerous but both at once, indivisibly.

Korobi’s return to Kolkata enacts this synthesis rather than a retreat from it. She comes back changed by the resilience America forced her to develop—the willingness to sell her hair, to confront a predator and escape him, to hear her father call her illegitimate without breaking—and she brings that resilience to bear on her negotiations with Rajat and the Bose family rather than reverting to the compliant granddaughter she had been. Recent scholarship on the novel supports this reading of Korobi’s arc as neither assimilation nor regression but active synthesis: Chitra Krishnan’s analysis of the novel’s crisscrossing geography argues that Divakaruni deliberately withholds a single resolved “home” for her protagonist, instead tracking how love and identity are reconstructed across, rather than within, national borders (Krishnan). Similarly, Bakyaraj and Pal’s study of diasporic identity in the novel emphasizes that Divakaruni moves beyond a purely colonial or postcolonial framework toward a model of plural, coexisting identities, refusing the notion that a diasporic subject must ultimately choose a single, singular self (Bakyaraj and Pal).

The novel’s closing image makes this synthesis visible rather than merely thematic. At Korobi’s wedding, the family gathers once more for a photograph on the same veranda where an earlier portrait was taken before Bimal’s death; this time, “next to Grandmother is a gap deep as a canyon. No one has mentioned

Grandfather, but each of us is thinking of him.” The photograph does not erase the absence at its center; it incorporates it. Korobi has not resolved her grandfather's lie by forgetting it, nor has she rejected the ancestral space of the veranda in favor of some purely American self-invention. She stands in the same physical spot her family has occupied for generations, holding a history that now includes an African American father, an unmarried mother, and a canyon-deep gap where a patriarch's certainties used to be.

Conclusion

Oleander Girl uses Korobi Roy's transnational journey to dismantle the binary between traditional roots and modern displacement that its early chapters seem, at first, to set up. The suffocating, beautiful soil of the Roy mansion and the alienating, occasionally liberating concrete of New York and California are not, in the end, opposing forces between which Korobi must choose; they are the two terrains across which her particular resilience is tested and confirmed. The painful maturation of her transnational bildungsroman—her discovery of illegitimacy, her confrontation with a predator, her decision to sell her hair rather than beg for help—produces not an assimilated American self or a restored traditional Bengali one, but the hybrid, third-space identity Bhabha's theory anticipates and the oleander's own botany literalizes.

Placed within the broader context of South Asian diasporic literature, alongside writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee whom critics frequently invoke in discussing Divakaruni's work, *Oleander Girl* makes a distinctive contribution: it refuses the well-worn plot in which a diasporic protagonist must eventually choose between the old country and the new one. Korobi's story proposes instead that for the modern, globalized subject, identity is not a fixed coordinate on a map but a portable resilience, one that can be carried from a crumbling Kolkata mansion to a Manhattan penthouse and back again without ever needing to leave either place fully behind. She carries the soil within her, which is precisely what allows her to bloom in the concrete.

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