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Glimpses of Violence in Chitra Banerjee's *Oleander Girl*

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Abstract:

In the present age of globalization and interdependence, the national and international dimension of violence is gradually escalating. Almost every country across the globe is grappling with the interminable menace of violence. Born in Bengal and immigrated to the United States, Chitra Banerjee is a diasporic writer who shares up the experiences of immigrants on the foreign land in her writings. '*Oleander Girl*' which is partly set in India and partly in America, captures the experiences of Korobi in both the countries. America and India are countries with so distinct identities still the similarities in context with the emotions, problems and challenges make them alike. Violence being one of the dominant universal problems has been portrayed in literature since time immemorial. The paper intends to probe into the novel '*Oleander Girl*' by Chitra Banerjee and highlights the portrayal of violence in the same.

Keywords: Globalization, Universal, Similarities, Violence.

Introduction:

In today's scenario, the mobility across the globe is effortless and the vibrations of violence can be noticed worldwide. Violence poses a great threat not only to human life but to the very existence of a civilization. The everlasting perturbation caused by day today incidents of brutality in the present scenario shatters an individual's faith on fellow beings. Violence is not restricted to physical assault only but any act which causes psychological harm is also termed as an act of violence. We often come across a wide variety of violent acts such as gender- based violence, physical and psychological violence, communal and terrorist violence, youth violence and road rage etc.

Violence is defined by the World Health Organisation as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community,

which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation", although the group acknowledges that the inclusion of "the use of power" in its definition expands on the conventional understanding of the word.(Violence)

'*Oleander Girl*' which is one of the recent works of Chitra Banerjee gives an opportunity to the reader to experience violence through various characters and incidents. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian- American author and poet known for her Indian diasporic writings. The exile or displacement of a character to other place exhibiting different experiences gives birth to diasporic literature. The migrants have a strong attachment to their values and tradition yet they get an opportunity to get exposed to the people and culture of another country. Initially fearful about the strange land, when the characters get an opportunity to interact with the people of different origin they find a similarity of emotion among them.

The term universality means relation or applicability to all. The concept of universality can be defined as something that is applicable to all irrespective of cultural differences or geographical location. It is a generalization about human being, their nature and other concerns. The concept can better be understood when two different geographical locations are portrayed and a comparison can be made. Juxtaposition of two locations that are poles apart in cultural background makes the -reader to vacillate between the happenings of the two countries. Such vacillation helps in better understanding of the concept of universality. The concept has been portrayed in the writings of diasporic Indian writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Tharoor, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee etc. The characters in diasporic writings are compelled to lead a life in another country, thus the reader gets an opportunity to get acquainted with a variety of characters with different cultural and geographical background.

The theme of universality is regarded as the hallmark of great literature. Literary works are judged on the extent to which they depict the 'universal human condition'. Students of literature are told that to be located in a particular time, place and person and yet be able to represent millions, for all times, places and ages is what makes a literary work valuable. What makes Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe great writers is because they represent the 'universal human condition', by combining the universal with the particular.

(Waseem).

'*Oleander Girl*' is a tale of an orphan girl named Korobi who is compelled to move to America in search of her unknown father. Korobi, leading a peaceful life in the cozy embrace of her grandparents is shocked to notice her dead mother's ghost one early morning. The ghost is trying to convey something to her but despite of all the efforts she is not able to draw any conclusion. On Korobi's interrogation from her grandmother, the secret of her parentage is revealed to her. Her grandmother Sarojini discloses the fact that Korobi's grandfather had lied about her father's existence. Korobi was told that both her parents died in a road accident but the truth is that her father is alive. In extreme circumstances Sarojini shares that Korobi's mother, Anu was in love

with an American during the tenure of her studies in America. She was strongly opposed by her father, Bimal Roy and was threatened abandonment, if she would marry the person in America. Deeply in love with the person Anu decides to stay with her love. Sarojini missed her daughter desperately but she could never muster courage to go against the wish of her husband.

“Every day when your grandfather was at work, I wept, certain that I would never see Anu again. But I said nothing to him. That was the way I had been brought up. If he noticed my swollen eyes when he came home, he said nothing either. Perhaps that was the way he had been brought up (Divakaruni59).

During Anu’s pregnancy she seeks her father’s permission and comes to India to live with her mother as she was missing her desperately. Anu’s father gives the permission but put some conditions to which Anu agrees. One being never to reveal the identity of Anu’s beloved to anyone. While Anu was enjoying her stay in the love and care of her mother, Bimal Roy compels her to stay with them forever with her baby and leave her beloved. During a hot argument with her father she falls from the stairs and dies after giving birth to her premature child, Korobi. Korobi’s maternal grandfather, Bimal Roy takes Sarojini to their family temple and asks her to take a vow never to disclose the secret to anyone. He sends Sarojini and the newborn, Korobi to their ancestral place for some time so that the matter is settled. Therefore, the secret of Korobi’s parentage was buried deep inside as the reality was only known to Bimal Roy. When Korobi’s father comes to India, Bimal Roy produces a fake death certificate and informs that Anu and her child are no more. Even Sarojini was unaware of the identity of Korobi’s father. Only thing she knew was that he is an American. Despite of many requests on the part of Sarojini, Bimal Roy was adamant of not revealing the identity. Every time Sarojini wanted to reveal the secret to Korobi, she is reminded of her vow. When Bimal Roy dies due to heart attack, Korobi makes herself responsible for the same. At this point Sarojini narrates the whole story of Bimal Roy’s adamancy to Korobi.

Now that I was calmer, I could see how impossible it would have been for her to stand up against Grandfather. His will, which I had always thought of as protecting and supporting me, would in this case have been an avalanche, crushing everything in its path (69).

Korobi’s rage on her grandmother initially for not disclosing the secret of her parentage is converted into immense pity. After listening to the tale of her grandmother’s oppression Korobi could realize that his grandfather’s will and adamancy was so huge that it crushed everything which came in between.

In the story so far there is no physical harm done to the female characters but the mental trauma Sarojini and her daughter Anu goes through is pathetic. Bimal Roy not only dominates the life of his wife but is also responsible for the emotional violence Anu had gone through. The period of Anu’s pregnancy, when she deserved utmost care and love, is made hell because of her father’s adamancy. Ultimately, Anu meets ill fortune leaving her newborn child behind. A reflection of a

male dominated society can be seen in the text where the plight of women is the same as it was hundreds of years ago. The oppression of women by their male counter parts is not shocking tale in Indian writings in English. The list of such literature is long enough exhibiting the exploitation of women in diversified forms.

As the story moves further, Korobi's inquisitiveness to find out her true identity compels her to move to America in search of her father. She was fearful about the strange land as she was brought up in the shelter of her grandparents. With the help of her fiancé, Rajat she starts searching for her father in the unknown country. She resides at the place of Mr. Mitra, the manager of Rajat's gallery in America. At Mitra's place she meets her wife Seema and befriends her. She could sense Seema's plight as she was not happy with Mitra and wanted to go back to India.

He had grabbed her and shouted into her face, his features distorted until they seemed those of a stranger. The shock had caused pains in her stomach; she was terrified that she would lose the baby (195).

With the help of Desai, the detective in America and his assistant, Vic, Korobi makes a list of people bearing the name Rob (her father's name). She meets them one by one and had a trembling experience with one of them. Rob Mariner, an advocate by profession asks Korobi to come and meet him at his house. In the hope of finding her father she gives her consent. The moment she reaches the place, Rob attacks her, molests her and tries to rape her. She is shocked by the conspiracy she shrieks for help and somehow manages to escape with the help of Vic.

He lowers his mouth on mine, hard, bruising. I strike out with my fists; it doesn't seem to bother him. The thrust of his tongue makes me want to throw up. I pull away with all my might..Malice glitters in his smile (204).

Although the distance between the two countries is thousands of miles but the plight of women is almost the same. She is oppressed in multiple ways and treated like an object. Even after so many years of independence, India is still dominated by patriarchal society where males have a strong say. America is one of the most developed countries in the world but the females are still victims of many horrendous crimes like rape, murder, domestic abuse etc. Thus, the problem of gender based violence is universal in nature. As stated in a journal by Tasmia Persoob:

Violence against Women (VAW) is a global epidemic that kills, tortures, maims millions of women physically, psychologically, sexually and economically.

As harmony is a universal phenomenon same is with hatred and bloodshed. Day today incidents of destruction and butchery worldwide on trivial issues are a matter of concern. The novelist has mentioned the Godhra incident in the text that took place in Gujrat, India in 2002 and took life of hundreds of innocents. Thereafter, the repercussions of the incident have been shown which led

to a communal dispute among the workers of different religion at Rajat's factory leading to bloodshed and chaos.

A Muslim pushed a Hindu, who fell backward, cracking his head on the concrete. The sight of the blood drove the Hindus wild. Several of them pushed the Mussalman, punching and yelling, breaking his nose and throwing him down (118).

The workers who were working in complete harmony with each other till date are suddenly aroused due to a hot discussion on Godhra incident. Finding a Muslim worker guilty when Rajat expels him, the issue is raised as discrimination by the labor union. The workers go for a strike leading to further complications.

On the other hand, the havoc in America on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 has been witnessed by the readers from the eyes of characters. Seema narrates the incident to Korobi which leaves her numb and motionless. Deeply shocked Korobi dreams of the destruction that she herself didn't experience. In her dream the towers were collapsing one by one, shrieks all around, pain, misery and disaster. The horrible dream leaves a bitter taste of hatred for those who were responsible for the disaster. People in the country are not able to come out of the trauma for a long time. The massive destruction and the innumerable deaths caused by the incident can be verified from the statement below given by Vic.

A friend of mine who was in construction was hired to clean up Ground Zero. One night after a few beers, he started describing how it was. Imagine finding bodies everywhere, pieces of people half-cooked by the heat. Sometimes recognizing a friend. You didn't know when a patch of fire would flare up from below. And the stench. He'd come home exhausted but couldn't sleep (151).

Apart from the trauma of witnessing the stupendous disaster, the people have to face the severe aftereffects of the incident. The Muslims living in the country since ages have to bear the immeasurable hatred of the Americans post 9/11 attacks. The prevailing hatred causes a lot of turbulence in the lives of the people thereby ruining their peace of mind. The text highlights many incidents of such turbulence which comes as a jolt to the characters turning their lives upside down.

Afterward, Seema said, 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. The shock had almost caused Seema to have a miscarriage (101).

The characters namely Seema, Mitra and Vic are amongst the one who had to struggle hard and bear the discrimination on the foreign land. Mitra's arrest by the police of America transforms him into an eccentric. The business of Vic's restaurant named *Lazeez* is deeply affected.

The two major cataclysmic incidents leading to massive destruction that took place at different geographical locations corroborate the fact that violence is prevalent world over. Further, the immense hatred which is created after such massacre cannot be pacified by any means. Day by day this hatred is aggravating and seeking for the resolution is a very far way to go.

Apart from showcasing the universal aspect of violence, Banerjee succeeds in portraying a number of other violence. Korobi's father, Rob Lacey is an African American against whom Anu's father, Bimal Roy never hides his contempt. Bimal Roy's extreme reaction and complaining the Goddess for his daughter's choice of an African- American as her husband stirred him.

Sarojini wants to explain the complicated gradations of race prejudice in India, how deep its root reach back. Why, for so many people, having Korobi's father turn out to be black would be far more worse than if he were merely a foreigner (225).

Rob Lacey is compelled to lead a life without his beloved, Anu just because of the fact that he is black. A father is kept distant from his newborn child and a child is deprived of her father's love because of social prejudices. Mrs. Bose's suspicion on Asif for kidnapping Pia missy is another example that verifies the prevalence of social violence in the society. Asif had been serving the Boses since very long. Despite of so many good offers, Asif is not willing to leave his job as he was emotionally attached to Pia missy. He looks at her as his little sister. His masters, the Boses (Korobi's in laws) are otherwise nice to him. They are not among the typical masters who exploit and oppress their servants. But Asif too had to face the discrimination when Mrs. Bose suspects him for planning to kidnap Pia missy. Deeply hurt by this Asif leaves his job.

Psychological violence can be witnessed from the behavior of Mitra who becomes a victim of assault by the police in America post 9/11 attacks. Mitra who is the manager of Rajat's gallery in America complained to the police about the destruction done in the gallery as it was named in urdu '*Mumtaz*'. In place of doing any favor, the police took him for interrogation. After coming back from the police custody, Mitra was a changed man. He never shared anything with his wife, Seema and his behavior grew suspicious and aggressive day by day.

When he returned, haggard- eyed, Mitra refused to talk about it. Those two days had changed him, made him bitter and silent the way he'd never been (102).

The plight of victims of domestic violence (Sarojini, Anu and Seema) has been highlighted. Through the characters of Mitra and Seema, Banerjee tries to showcase the predicament of the immigrants who are forced to live on the foreign land despite of all the risks and dangers. After Mitra's horrible experience with the police, despite of his constant pleadings to the Boses, he was not allowed to leave America. Mitra and Seema didn't want to stay there due to the prevailing hatred of Americans, but unavailability of money compelled them to do so.

“And how about when I said I wanted to quit and return to India because of your depression?”

“She told you that we couldn’t leave now, because they’d have to close down the gallery”..and added that if I quit now, she’d make no one in Kolkata ever gave me another job again (104).

The perpetrators of domestic violence (Bimal Roy and Mitra) are treated with sympathy and pity by the novelist. The reason behind their behavior is their own insecurity. Korobi who was enraged at her grandfather in the beginning understands the fact that the reason behind his adamancy was his immense love towards his daughter.

I wait for rage at my grandfather to wash over me, but there is only sadness. What he did, it was because of love. Isn’t that why most people do? Out of their mistaken notions of love, their fear of its loss? (244).

Conclusion

Apart from portraying violence as a universal phenomenon, Chitra Banerjee endeavors to showcase diversified facets of wrath prevailing in the surroundings. Domestic/ gender based violence, social, emotional, psychological violence, terrorism, communal violence are the types Banerjee has tried to narrate in her captivating tale. The plight of the victims who are directly or indirectly affected has been narrated through the characters of Mitra, Seema, Sarojini, Anuand Vic. The novelist’s sympathy for the perpetrator (Bimal Roy) can be noticed from the fact that Korobi forgives her grandfather for his deeds.

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