

THE STATUS OF WOMEN BETWEEN 'TRADITION' AND 'MODERNITY' IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
OLEANDER GIRL

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Abstract

*Tradition and modernity are generally viewed as two opposite poles that do not meet. Society has been changing in contemporary India and women's status along with it. India is one of the countries that has met the challenges of globalisation becoming a significant economic power. Under such circumstances, the status of women could not remain unaffected despite traditional patriarchal norms that still demarcate women's movement and space of activity. The public and private spheres have been altered as well, with more women being able and willing to perform in the public sphere. Where does 'tradition' then dwell? How is it still linked to the concept of 'woman' - its (imposed) bearer and perpetuator for centuries? How does patriarchal society negotiate the new changes brought upon the status of women? These questions are asked in the context outlined by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *Oleander Girl*, along with a few issues that need to be analysed: the limits or crossings over the limits of the public and the private spheres in contemporary (West) Bengal; taboo-breaking realities such as inter-racial relationships and babies born out of wedlock; border-crossing as a necessity for (re)definition of identity associated with the uncertainty of return.*

Keywords: tradition, modernity, Indian women, taboo, myth

1. Introduction

A diasporic writer who has lived in America for many years now, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni constantly returns to her home country, especially to Calcutta. In her writing, the author brings female characters back and forth, from and to India, exploring the rich variety of Indian women's identities within India and abroad. The author who turned the (Indian) spices into the power device of her female protagonist in another of her novels (*The Mistress of Spices* 1997), Divakaruni is also a lover - as well as challenger - of myths.

In spite of being interspersed with elements and episodes that belong to our modern contemporary world, *Oleander Girl* (2013) equally approaches myth thus creating a harmonious mix between tradition (read 'myth') and modernity. Indian

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mythology develops around a number of gods and goddesses whose deeds are interpreted as model behavior for humans. One of these stories is the story of the Ramayan, usually interpreted as one that focuses on (the Indian) woman's virtues or better yet on the consequences that may occur from her carelessness. The story, because of its reliance on female behaviour, also represents a moral lesson on boundaries and their meanings, which is the focus of this analysis.

1.1 Mythology and the symbol of boundaries

In the Indian mythology, the *Lakshman Rekha* is known as the line that Lakshmana has drawn around the dwelling that he shares with his brother Rama and Rama's wife, Sita. According to the story, king Rama has gone to chase a golden deer (the Rakshasa Maricha in disguise). As Rama has been away for a longer time than expected, a concerned and grieving Sita starts crying, begging her brother-in-law Lakshmana to go and fetch Rama back. Lakshmana eventually agrees, but only on condition that Sita does not cross the line that he has drawn while he is away looking for his brother². After Lakshmana's departure, Sita is comfortably and safely waiting *within* the circle for Rama and his brother to return. Meanwhile, disguised as a mendicant, the villain of the story, the Rakshasa king Ravana (who wants to kidnap Sita)³ comes and asks her for alms. In order to honour the Indian tradition of Atithi Devo Bhava⁴, Sita is tricked into crossing the line drawn by her

² References to the interpretation of the *Lakshman Rekha* can be found in various sources such as: Leena Abraham's 'Redrawing the *Lakshman Rekha*. Gender Differences and Cultural Constructions in Youth Sexuality in Urban India', in *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia*, Sanjay Srivastava (ed.), series editor Howard Brasted. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2004: 209-241; Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999: 209-210; Archita Vajpayayee and Matthias Semmler's 'Kali's daughters: the tantric conception of the divine feminine as an emancipatory role model for Hindu women', in *Exploring Alterity in a Globalised World*, by Christoph Wulf (ed.). London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016: 37-58.

³ Ravana, king of Lanka, or the 'demon of demons' begs Sita to give him some food and water (see Deepa S. Reddy's 'Kousi Oda Ponnu (Kousi's Daughter)'; in James Faubion (ed.), *The Ethics of Kinship: Ethnographic Inquiries*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001: 125-152).

⁴ Given in Taittiriya Upanishad (1.20), this dictum (translated as 'May the Atithi [guest] be a God unto you') represents the Indian way of welcoming guests. In effect, 'Atithi' (or '*a-tithi*') means 'without a date' or 'one who comes without a date'. For this reason, a guest (whether close to the family or not) does not need an invitation for the visit as s/he is (treated like) a god (see more in 'Atithi Devo Bhava – the Indian Way of Welcoming Guests', in *Living Imprints of Indian Culture. Some Glimpses of the Indian Cultural Practices*, by Vedanta Kesari. Mylapore, Chennai: Adhyakshna Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2014).

brother-in-law in order to offer Ravana the alms. The tradition says that there must be no barrier between the donor and the receiver of the gift as it would be against the principle of free will of the donor, therefore Sita crosses the *Lakshman Rekha*.

The line obviously signifies a limit, a boundary supposedly meant to offer protection to the woman left alone behind. Its shape (a circle) reminds one of the bubble metaphors that another diasporic writer, Bharati Mukherjee, uses in her novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002): the bubble – which the author makes reference to frequently – is like a living entity endowed with two quasi-opposite functions. On the one hand, when the protagonist's family is in danger, the metaphor signifies protection from intruders and even criminals. On the other hand, since one knows that beyond the line, there is another world ready to be explored, the same boundary can be interpreted as a challenge: crossing the line and seeing what lies beyond it. The shape of the line, a circle, is not a shape chosen at random: the circle has no beginning nor ending. It is made of an infinite number of dots that leave no gap for entry or for exit. The space within a circle (viewed in space) is impenetrable. One cannot go out or come in except by piercing through it, an act that presupposes a sort of violence. In the same manner, so does the circle.

On a higher level, one can think of the circle as the line that divides the world (also read 'globe' due to its shape reminding of the bubble metaphor) in different hemispheres: the Western/Eastern hemisphere; the Northern/Southern hemisphere – which are both epistemologically and politically rich in meaning. By looking beyond the story of the *Lakshman Rekha*, one may apply it onto other contexts: 1) the modern Indian socio-cultural context of which women are part; 2) the one that involves migration and identities that cross material and non-material borders. The *Lakshman Rekha* is an allegory for traditional norms meant to keep members of a society – namely its women in this case – within the boundaries that ensure a certain 'normality' according to which that society is known to function. Those women (the female protagonist and other important female characters in the novel) cross the *Lakshman Rekha* both within the Indian society and abroad. The writer focuses on the female characters who are characterized – as it will be seen later in the analysis – either by tradition or by modernity or by a mixture of both.

2. Impacts of globalisation and of modernisation on marriage types and family roles in India and short summary of the plot

The writer starts by presenting the main (female) character, Korobi, whose personality is similar to that of the plant ('oleander') that her name signifies: strong, stubborn, struggling to survive against all odds, the oleander is a common plant in India as if the Indian soil is secretly protecting and feeding it. Before Korobi was even born, her mother, daughter of the Roys, an old 'traditional' Brahmin Hindu family (note all the signifiers – 'traditional', 'Brahmin Hindu' – that come to define the woman's identity) travels to the US in order to complete

her studies. There she falls in love with an African American man and gets pregnant. She returns to India in order to ask for her parents' blessings and spend some time with them before returning to America and getting married there. Having broken her community societal norms (the *Lakshman Rekha*) regarding marital alliances (her future husband is not a Brahmin Hindu, and – worse – is black), she has a fight with her father, falls off the stairs and dies. Though prematurely born, the little baby girl survives. The grandparents raise the child like their own daughter but never tell her the truth about her parentage until she discovers it for herself when she is an adult. Korobi is now about to get married to Rajat, the son of the Boses, a cosmopolitan Westernised Hindu family that owns several businesses but who are now facing important financial problems. Before the marriage actually takes place, the writer has put several challenges for the young couple to surpass. These usually come from the Western world (Rajat is constantly followed by Sonia, his former ultra-Westernised and rich girlfriend; Korobi finds a very handsome and easy-going suitor in America, Vic) in order to put the strength of their feelings to the test, thus making it a love-cum-arranged marriage (Uberoi 1993, Mody 2002, Grover 2012) in which the protagonists are in love with each other but also obtain their families' blessings.

Marriages in India, as in other South Asian countries, have mostly been arranged as it is still the norm. Nonetheless, along with the changes brought about by globalisation, industrialisation, and the modernisation of the Indian state especially after 1990, the access to more information and to (job) opportunities for women, marriage types in India have also diversified. Additionally, education, especially for girls, has opened up opportunities for them when it comes to marriage. Those of lower middle or middle class families are allowed or even encouraged by parents to take up jobs as the income of the family, who still lives together under the same roof, will significantly rise. Having done research for several years in India, it can be stated that, as some communities and families are asking for dowry from the girl's family, her salary represents a good contribution to that purpose taking some burden off the parents' shoulders. Girls/women of the higher classes however do not need to work, therefore the taking up of jobs occurs only if these girls/women see themselves as modern women who do not want to spend their time at home. Empirical studies have also shown that work for contemporary Indian women and girls involves socialising, encountering men outside their families, having the same hobbies and lifestyles. All these changes in the Indian society have altered the way in which relationships among (some) youths develop.⁵

⁵ For more on the varieties of marriages in contemporary India, as well as on the socio-economic changes and other factors (such as caste or religion) that have contributed to the current situation here, one mentions the works of Uberoi (1993), Bansal (2013), Medora (2003), Jaiswal (2014), Fernandes (2006), Gupta (1976), Vir and Mahajan (1996).

The new India presented here offers a context that is comfortable for the modern women - those who work in the public space, who interact outside their community/neighbourhood, who socialise with people with whom they share elements other than caste, community, language (they can communicate in English). Thus, although still not the norm, more couples now marry out of love while obtaining their families' support. Usually called 'love-cum-arranged marriage' (Mody 2002) is an ideal type of liaison combining the 'traditional' with the modern.

3. Modern Indian Women between 'tradition' and 'modernity'

In the Indian socio-cultural discourse, the boundary between tradition and modernity has become more and more blurred. While some still insist on maintaining traditional norms (Beck 1995, Beck-Gernsheim 2001, Upadhyya and Vasavi 2006) as a protection of the pure and of the purifying private space against the polluting public one (Grover 2012), others are convinced that they can transgress it back and forth without damaging either of them (Puri 1999, Grover 2012). The 'traditional' woman is assumed to be the bearer and perpetuator of culture; she is given the responsibility to take care of the private space, making sure that the unit that she is protecting, namely the family, is not affected by the polluting influences of the public space. Man, also traditionally known as the bread winner, is compelled to go out there, in the public space and fetch the needful for the family. The encounter with the public is, according to such beliefs, inherently impure, but man is strong enough to resist it and has the opportunity to clean all impurity when he returns in the pure and purifying space safeguarded by woman (Grover 2012).

The target of this paper is to challenge understandings of (Hindu) women of Indian origin between concepts such as 'tradition' (and 'traditional'), imposed on them either by Indian nationalists or by Western ideologies, and 'modern' (and 'modernity'). I insist on the fact that the two concepts have been imposed on these women who are now experiencing the dilemma of living within and recently in-between fixed categories. As the society is a mixture of tradition and modernity, so women (the new Indian woman) is expected to be both traditional and modern, in other words her modern side is not to be 'too modern' (that is not to become 'Western') but be modern enough as to keep up with the changes in society. The binaries old/new, traditional/modern, Indian/Western have not only become blurred but also put pressure on women who find it difficult to identify the boundaries that must/should not be transgressed.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri summarizes the woman issue in India as follows:

- 1) The status of women is interpreted between 'tradition' and 'modernity' but the questions of 'tradition' and what actually constitutes 'tradition' remain unresolved (288);
- 2) 'tradition' has been contested with the concept being re-invented and valorized in the 19th century;
- 3) Due to the fact that India is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society, it is still difficult to establish whose tradition and whose culture we are talking about;
- 4) The impact on the model of the Indian traditional woman of the modern bourgeois domesticated woman

A significant differentiation (usually made by Western feminists) between women of the Western world and those of the East (two binaries used here only as generic terms) is a preconceived idea that the latter do not have or cannot express their free will (as understood in the West) either due to their subjugation by an assumed oppressive culture or to their (equally assumed) meekness.⁶

According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "'free will' is the conventional name of a topic that is best discussed without reference to the will. Its central questions are 'What is it to act (or choose) freely?', and 'What is it to be morally responsible for one's actions (or choices)?' These two questions are closely connected, for freedom of action is necessary for moral responsibility, even if it is not sufficient."⁷

Apart from 'choosing freely', it may refer to the concept of 'individuality' promoted by Western feminists, as opposed to the assumed lack of individuality of Indian women. The concept of free will, nonetheless, comes initially from religion. In the Bible, there are many verses that include this concept, whereas the concept of God and of free will in India is different from the way in which Western religions and discourses envisage them. In Rāmānuja⁸'s *Vedārthasaṅgraha* God appears as the one who performs what humans (not specifically women) have desired or thought but they themselves do not have/possess free will.

⁶ Western feminist discourse has been constantly criticised by non-Western feminist theorists (and activists) for assuming a superior role as well as for putting forth a perspective they (the former) considered appropriate for *all* women, thus overlooking differences of race, class, religion and culture. Some of the 'Third' World feminists who denounced the assumed normative Western view are C. T. Mohanty (1991, 2003), Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon (1992), Urvashi Butalia (2012), and Kumkum Jaayawardena (1986).

⁷ <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/V014> . Viewed 27/02/2015.

⁸ Ramanuja is an eleven-century South Asian philosopher of the Orthodox Hindu philosophical school, Vedanta, author of the *Sri Bhasya* and *Vedārthasaṅgraha*.

Free will, understood as individuality and as one's opportunity/freedom to make choices for whom one is responsible is connected to the modern (female) subject rather than to the traditional one (that makes choices more in accordance with the well-being of the family and of the community). The female protagonist of Divakaruni's novel, a young girl named Korobi, is portrayed as a mixture between tradition and modernity, being able to shift back and forth quite easily from one instance to the other.

If one wants to connect the concept of 'free'/'free will' to that of the 'new Indian' (Chaudhuri 2001), one must identify the various aspects of the 'new Indian' today. Some of these aspects refer to being global and cosmopolitan. The new Indian is no longer Desi⁹, but ethnic (the no-oil-in-hair generation). And most importantly, the new Indian is free. Chaudhuri takes this idea and applies it to its representations in advertisements and in the media and discusses its consequences in society. I would like to utilize these ideas in this interpretation of Divakaruni's novel, adding that Chaudhuri's findings about 'what is new in the Indian woman' and 'what is old in the Indian woman' (id. 382) are very well illustrated in *Oleander Girl* in characters such as Korobi, Korobi's (dead) mother and Mrs. Bose.

The 'old' part of the new Indian woman's identification is that she is a 'family woman': the idea that the main role of a woman is to have and maintain a family. According to this traditional belief, the connection between the two concepts – 'woman' and 'family' – is unbreakable, one cannot exist without the other. As Chaudhuri remembers, Sushmita Sen (the first Indian woman to win the coveted Miss Universe title) told the world that 'The essence of a woman is motherhood and teaches a man to love and care' (id. 382-383). 'Family', as a 'traditional' concept, essentialises the very concept of 'woman'. The 'new' part of the Indian woman represents a sort of hybrid¹⁰ between 'traditional' and 'modern', as Chaudhuri asserts:

'Today's woman is old fashioned enough to care and new enough to tell him [man] what she likes. She has the standard suggestions for the overworked ambitious

⁹ 'Desi' (also written '*desi*') is a Sanskrit word that refers to all that is local, provincial. It is the opposite of *marga* or 'highway' (deriving from *mrg*, meaning to chase or hunt). If *desi* incorporates what is mundane, human and devious, *marga* is super-mundane, divine and direct (for more, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Nature of "Folklore" and "Popular Art"', in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1943: 130 – 143).

¹⁰ Apart from the mixture of 'old' and 'new', hybridity is also interpreted in this paper as a concept in postcolonial discourse. A consequence of colonial anxiety, the liminality of hybridity is the main topic addressed by Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994). The (post)colonial subject is situated in a space opened up by hybridity, a space that unsettles positions of domination. For more on hybridity, see works belonging to Stuart Hall (1995), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Robert Young (1995) and Paul Gilroy (1993) among others.

corporate executives. The male who is not these things is clearly a loser – a term alien to Indians even a few years ago' (id. 382).

Korobi is definitely a hybrid between the 'old' and the 'new' Indian woman. Her 'old' side is her lineage: she comes from an old traditional Brahmin Hindu family with strong values. Before her parentage from her father's side is revealed, she is viewed by all as the very heir of the old Hindu tradition: a gentle orphan girl raised by her grandparents, the most respected one in the town. The very old house in which she was born and raised is a symbol of the Hindu values' longevity. The garden next to it is well-known for an extremely old Durga temple, one that even the richest families would like to have. It is this very traditional background that imprints on Korobi a traditional 'old' side. But, as the society is changing, making room for a new market while chipping in the 'old' Hindu society, so is the old house of the Roys: the writer describes it falling apart little by little without any possibility of being repaired while Sarojini's beloved granddaughter (Korobi) is changing every day. She first postpones her marriage to Rajat, then flies to the United States (in order to find her father), she has her hair cut short and temporarily accepts Vic's courtship. All of these are sensed back in India as threats to the traditional Korobi that vanishes day by day. It is her grandmother, the very expression of tradition, who has faith in her.

Korobi's 'modernity' is not calculated in terms of the public space and of Westernisation, but it barges onto her at private level. Her double Otherness is triggered by a double border-crossing - an illegitimate child, of mixed parentage/blood. This is increased by the fact that, according to the religion she represents, all impurity, all mixtures, all blending, exogamy etc. are to be denied/avoided. When all would be revealed, her status as a woman about to be married would be at risk. She herself fears the reaction of her fiancé's family at the news that she is a half breed of an illegitimate relationship. Despite the shock that she has generated, she is finally accepted for who she is. Indian society, through the Boses, has crossed the limits of rigid tradition and has become looser, allowing changes to occur and taboos to be broken. At the same time, one understands that 'tradition' is not to be given up as in the end it is 'tradition' that saves us. 'Modern' women may be 'good' and hard-working women (Mrs. Bose) or 'bad', manipulating and deceiving (Sonia). There are also those women who can be 'modern' without rejecting 'tradition' (Korobi).

Mrs. Bose is a woman who married out of love to a man from a wealthier family than hers. '*A shopkeeper's scheming daughter*' (Divakaruni 30), as her father-in-law used to call her, she has toiled all her life to prove herself. Together with her husband, they have started up good businesses that gained them a good reputation. In time, Mrs. Bose has moved from being a simple girl of a simple family to a sophisticated woman, who handles a business and is encountered only by the rich and the powerful. She is a combination of an Indian wealthy woman with high

consideration for old family values and a Westernized high-class woman who would only be called 'Maman' (while Mr. Bose is 'Papa' and Korobi is 'Cara'). Mrs. Bose would have preferred Sonia as a daughter-in-law, her son's former girlfriend, for her sophistication and her family's connections which could have benefited her own business. However, that is where the writer intervenes: by pushing the modern, Westernised Sonia aside and by bringing to the front the 'unspoiled' Korobi/Cara who comes from one of the oldest and most traditional families in the city, Divakaruni challenges 'modernity' and the impact of globalisation on 'traditional' societies that have only recently developed in the Western economic direction. Here is what Mrs. Bose thinks of Korobi: '(...) she's a sweet girl, charmingly unspoiled. But it's as though she's been living in a different century. Mrs. Bose will have to invest significant energy in molding her to fit into their milieu' (id. 32).

Or it is exactly Korobi's belonging to tradition, to the old Hindu religion, that saves the Boses from financial collapse. The granddaughter of an old Brahmin family, having lived in an old house with an old Durga temple in its courtyard, Korobi is the chance for the Boses to attract an important investor, Mr. Bhattacharya, 'a candidate of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Party' (id. 26) and someone who wants 'to create alliances with the right kind of people' (id. 27), 'people who uphold our *sanaatan* Hindu traditions' (ibid.) such as the Roys (Korobi's grandparents).

The most 'modern' of all the female characters in the novel remains Korobi's mother. Characterised by courage and by what the Western discourse calls 'free will', she is a decision-maker in an era where tradition was still at its high. Defying one's father (and a Judge) was not that common and especially not regarding a matter like the one she had on her hands: being an unmarried Brahmin Hindu woman pregnant with a man of a different descent. Divakaruni chooses to 'kill' her character yet keeps her ghost 'alive' in order to find out the truth about her baby's father and to reconcile the latter with her past. Nonetheless, the reconnection father – daughter, though cordial, even heart-breaking, is not as strong as to make Korobi stay in the US, as her grandmother feared. The roots she grew in India – her grandparents, her fiancé – are stronger than her parentage. Therefore, the writer creates a 'modern' type of relationship between father and daughter, the latter becoming a transnational individual moving back and forth from Asia to America.

3.1 Crossing borders

One can find in *Oleander Girl* several instances of border-crossing:

- The crossing of the limits of reality or the interplay between reality and dream or phantasy: Korobi is repeatedly visited at night by her mother's ghost who tries to tell her the story of her birth;
- There are multiple crossings of material national borders and immaterial boundaries: Korobi's mother (and later Korobi) crosses back and forth the border to the US/India; as the mother passes away, the yet-to-be-born baby survives;
- The third instance of border-crossing is represented by the breaking of taboos by a Brahmin Hindu woman (Korobi's mother);
- Lastly, there is a line between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (used between inverted commas to emphasise the relativity of the two terms) in contemporary India that relies on either a separation ('border') or an interconnection (crossing borders) between the private and the public spheres.

There are multiple material crossings of national borders in this novel. First, Korobi's mother leaves India with the intention to temporarily stay in the US and then to return for good. However, her plans change and she returns to India merely out of duty and without any intention to stay back. Unpredictable events alter her route for good as she accidentally dies, crossing the limits of materiality and reality as we know it. Border-crossing, though material, contains immaterial symbolic elements to it: not only does the woman cross 'the circle' of our reality, but by liaising with the father of her baby, she steps into a socio-cultural space that changes something in her (the baby) and that has the power to trigger subsequent consequences (the baby is hybrid).

Apart from the crossing of national borders, the woman has also stepped over the *Lakshman Rekha* by breaking taboos: she becomes pregnant with a man outside her community, outside the limits of caste, and even outside her 'race'. What is more to it and an unconceivable taboo within Bengali *badralok* (gentle folk), she is pregnant but not married. By crossing back the border to India, to ask for her father's blessing, she also trespasses other material limits: she was carrying in her womb a hybrid and still illegitimate baby girl.

By analysing Korobi from the moment of her existence in her mother's womb until the present, one identifies several crossings of several circles. Being conceived in the US by a high-caste Indian mother and an African American (of a minority community, highly discriminated at that time – in the 1970s), then carried via her unmarried mother's womb to India (Calcutta), what country does she belong to? Even more than that: as a foetus, without identity, a name, and agency, that

particular Korobi of that particular time and space, is in an in-between condition, a hybrid neither person nor non-person. Her existence lies at the edge of the *Lakshman Rekha* - the line (an analogy of her mother's womb), getting ready to transgress it through birth. The baby girl soon leaves the space of the womb for the space of the outside world, *travelling* from one internal convex globe (her mother's womb) to an external convex one (outside the womb). The fact that Korobi, when she is a grown-up, travels back to the US in order to find her father, only complicates the routes described by her multiple and circular crossings (as she decides to return to India). Korobi is therefore a hybrid that creates a bridge between different spaces by crossing borders, not a hyphen that divides them. She is in-between while at the same time belonging to both countries (connecting one world represented by her grandmother, future husband and parents-in-law to another, represented by her father); in-between and belonging to both cultures, respecting 'tradition' while still being 'modern'; in-between and belonging to two races/ethnicities.

Another immaterial border-crossing is Korobi's half real, half dream connection with her mother's ghost. Divakaruni uses magic realism¹¹ (introduced by Salman Rushdie in postcolonial discourse in his novel, *Midnight's Children*, 1981) in order to present the reader the intrigue of the novel: Korobi's in-between yet-to-be defined identity. The girl's sleep is frequently disturbed by a ghost-like entity that proves to be her mother who wants Korobi to find out the truth about who she really is. This reality-crossing has a target: the ghost wants Korobi to travel to America to find her father and who, despite her late grandfather's sayings, is still alive. The travelling back and forth from reality/life to unreality/dream/death is connected by the matter-of-fact crossing of national borders which signals the fact that there is always more to it than mere movement of a person.

However, the novel is by no means made up only of phantasms and half-realities. On the contrary, a large part of it is based on the portrayal of a fast transforming India in a globalised world which triggers changing in the social dynamics as well as in the gender roles in the private and public spheres.

4. Conclusions

With *Oleander Girl*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflects on the importance of traditions and on the consequences of globalisation in India by relating them with the status of women. A diasporic writer who has written extensively about migrant women, she has turned her attention once again to women who live in India and prefer to live in India. 'Tradition' and 'modernity' have been and are even more

¹¹ A history of magic realism and of who it evolved until Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is found in Ursula Kluwick's *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction*, New York, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011.

nowadays unstable concepts. They are attached to the question of women who forces them to find the way to be accepted by society while defining their identity. The protagonist, although a hybrid that transgresses many boundaries/borders, is eventually transformed into an individual who complies with generally respected social norms. She symbolises the very essence of woman promoted by Sushmita Sen, very abruptly closing the opening that her mother had made before she was born: if Korobi's mother breaks taboos related to marriage in an age when changes were more difficult than when Korobi herself could, the protagonist chooses only to tackle such taboos, refuses NRI Vic's proposal and returns to India, to her Indian fiancé and her 'new' Indian woman status.

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