CHAPTER - III

DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES: A JOURNEY INTO SELF

[W]omen travelers are often presented as having been somehow able to break free of the constraints of contemporary society, realizing their potential once outside their boundaries of a restrictive social order…. [W]omen who chafed at the constraints of domesticity could find escape through travel. (Susan Bassnett, 2002: 233)

Life is a constant journey in search of the self. The fluidity of boundaries is realized by the very fact that it can be physically crossed. Along with it the baggage of identity is carried only to transform them as and when needed, so as to adapt to the ever changing cultural climate of the world. Izabella stresses on the word “ethnoscape” coined by Arjun Appadurai which means “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and persons” (100). The imaginings take the shape of a new beginning where the idea of environmental ideology is shifted from local or native to global or planetary. The question is whether to redraw the boundaries or erase them altogether to find a solution to mutually protect environment and all the other life forms, subjected to conflicts as an act to protect the sentiments attached to a specific geographical location, a movement which requires active participation by one and all.

The way out is only by exploring the “other” which are demarcated according to a set of cultural, social, political and economic factors through perceived experiences of different psyches. As there is always different angles to truth, and the fact that history is distorted for the convenience of few in power, calls for a fresh investigation to rewrite such histories to alter the age old prejudices, which has stalled the progress of human minds in looking beyond their egos.

In the novel Oleander Girl Divakaruni’s protagonist Korobi undertakes such a journey to a land totally unfamiliar to her with an open mind. Being a woman, her journey becomes more of a challenge as she has to walk through the traditional constraints of a patriarchal society where movement of women, all by herself is
objected in the guise of safeguarding her physically and morally. Izabella explains the concept of travel through the words of Sidonie Smith:

"defining arena of agency….affirm their masculinity through purposes, activities, behaviors, dispositions, perspectives and bodily movements displayed on the road” . The term “sessility” is used to denote the male domain of travel. “To be ‘sessile’, in botanical terms is to be permanently planted, tenaciously fixed, utterly immobile. It is in a sense, to remain ‘always at home’ which has been the traditional locale assigned to women”. (97)

_Oleander Girl_, Divakaruni’s latest offering is a tale of a brave girl’s journey to the post 9/11 America in search of her past where the clues to the questions that has remained unanswered since her birth lies. She was informed by her grandparents that her father died few months before her birth and her mother subsequently while delivering her. Her grandparents made sure that she received the best education and traditional values that would help her lead a happy and prosperous life. She loved her grandparents dearly, but the curiosity to know about her parents grew with her as no one in the household talked about it.

Her precious treasure that she discovered as a child and hid it all the while in a book of poetry was an unfinished love note that her mother had written to her father. At the age of seventeen, she gets engaged to Rajat, a handsome young man from an affluent business family. Korobi’s grandfather’s demise due to a heart attack on the night of the engagement party leaves her shattered along with the knowledge of financial crunch and personal secrets that he left behind. Korobi’s decision to take charge of her life and to save her ancestral home from ruins, and to discover the truth about her parentage leads to discovering her “self.”

Her journey to America juxtaposes the journey of life, signifying the eternal movement from birth to death, where various discoveries relating to self and the world around are made. Human imaginations, expectations are based on the core values that are imbibed from one’s roots. Humans often believe in the concept of being a victim of destiny and attribute all faults, failures, fortunes and misfortunes to a mysterious force that guides. Unless proven, this belief remains the truth, and the knowledge about the interconnectedness between everything in the universe,
responsible for sustaining life and the causes that triggers hierarchical domination resulting in misery would help in understanding the root cause for a large number of problems which stems from such disharmony.

The myriad flavours of life both pleasant and unpleasant in the era of globalization that includes class, caste, gender, racism, terrorism, environmental degradation are all dealt with in the novel. The similarities between issues in India and America like the post Godhra conflicts and the 9/11 in the US is reminiscent of the clash between traditional and global lifestyles, similar to the cultural conflicts that still exists between the East and the West. The ever growing class conflicts due to unequal distribution of wealth, the byproduct of post industrialization which is present both in India and the US are all themes explored by Divakaruni in the novel Oleander Girl.

Divakaruni’s protagonist’s name, Korobi which means Oleander has an underlying significance in the story. Just like the flower “Oleander” she is a personification of beauty with strength, like the mystery that surrounds her birth and life and the bitter memories that haunt her, causing immense pain to her loved ones, is compared to the real toxic nature of the flower. “why did she name me Korobi?” “Because she loved oleanders so much, shona.” “But they’re poisonous! You told me so. Why would she name me after something so dangerous?” (8). Oleander is a very popular shrub, a native of India and the Mediterranean. The flowers are very attractive and fragrant and are mostly grown in gardens, parks and public spaces as it can withstand harsh climatic conditions, and requires less water. Its toxicity keeps pest, and animals away from it. In Hindu tradition, the oleander flower is used as offering to god and is thus considered a sacred flower. As Emerson points out that:

Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to jus the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for
knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope. (28)

Nature is felt, seen and heard through human sense organs and is given a philosophical meaning by articulating it through language. Korobi’s naming by her mother, as explained by her grandmother that “Oleander” was Anu’s favorite flower, the answer does not complete in itself. The other knowledge that “oleander is poisonous” stretches the real mystery of naming her thus. It adds to the initial suspense of the story, surrounding Korobi’s birth as not so an ordinary event. Did Anu name her as she was the result of a forbidden relationship, or due to the mental agony that she went through? Korobi’s birth signifies the complexities of the world that do not allow someone to choose a life of their choice due to irrelevant reasons which often overpowers a strong natural emotion like “love.”

The hierarchical way of life, created out of human reason, has evolved to such an extent as to destroy individual happiness. Such an illogical division has separated human from nature, as nature is considered passive. Similarly, women too are considered passive and marginalized. Culture is a major factor that manipulates oppression. The myth of women being the torch bearers of tradition is rather a position thrust upon them by the act of dominance. The hypocritical stand of using women as symbols to promote a materialistic urge towards everything is an indirect resonance of producing the image of women as products that are controlled.

The relation between humans and nature should be analyzed in parallel to the woman- nature relation. If women define culture so can nature be defined by women by linking the innate qualities of women, thus can understand if personalities are created by nature or culture. “That evening when Korobi returned from the ride, Sarojini said, “you’re lucky to get him for a husband. He cares about history and tradition, about spending time with an old lady” (9). The stereotypical societal norms that liberate men from being aloof of tradition, history, culture reinforces that women are indeed powerful as they hold the foundation of life but they are restricted by the notion that owing to their soft physical features they are indeed less powerful. Such an underestimation needs to be shattered by equally involving men in embracing history and tradition as there is no gender attached to these elements. Rajat, according to
Sarojini fits into this frame and she is greatly hopeful that only equality can bring happiness in a marriage.

Mutual respect among creations can harness peace and make the concept of supremacy invalid. The assumption that women are in general adhered to the position of domesticity assigned by a traditional society is untrue. The reason for such an assumption could be women’s affinity to nature with regard to the biological connection as the privilege of giving birth, has instilled a strong spiritual sense about the importance of life and the emotional gratification that is brought about by nurturing and caring for life. Thus the connection between feminism and environmental movement cannot be ignored as they can find answers to a whole lot of other social, political, economic problems. Patriarchy is associated with all crises around the world. It begins on an individual level, spreading like a contagious disease, affecting the delicate balance of survival by inflicting symptoms that leads to oppression. To quote Plumwood:

But this approach should not be confused with the critique of the way human identity has been treated in particular influential cultures such as Western culture. According to the way of understanding the critique developed here, it is the development in certain cultures, especially and originally western culture, of a particular concept and practice of human identity and relationship to nature which is the problem, not the state of being human as such. The difference might be compared to the difference between ways of understanding patriarchal domination which sees males (biology) as the problem, and accounts of the problem in terms of particular understandings and practice of masculine identity in particular social and cultural contexts (gender). There has been much confusion on this point, which has led to charges that critiques which question human domination are ‘anti-human’, treat being human as a disease; and so on (Bookchin 1998). The critique of human domination must be part of the familiar and healthy practice of self-critical reflection, not an acultural and ahistorical expression of self-hatred and collective human-species guilt. (12)
Plumwood suggest Bookchin’s view that human liberation and nature’s liberation should be treated as two different issues, out of which the former needs to be addressed first. If we need “to achieve a truly rational, ecological society,” we must first eliminate all forms of human hierarchy” (15). The ever increasing class divide is directly linked to ecological destruction. The time won’t be far, when basic resources like water will have to be purchased, and slowly it will be dominated by the elite who would be able to buy them, just like how food has already become the resource of the privileged.

In the name of civilization, nature has been ignored as primitive and a hindrance for progress. Thus, nature was forcefully dragged to become a part of human civilization by merely being a “raw material.” Western civilization has always been the benchmark of human progress from olden times, which paved the way for colonization. This pushed the entire “other” world population into feeling inferior, a comparison that can be drawn to explain collective consciousness of human race’s insatiable greed for never ending progress.

This myth can be deconstructed with the help of the primitive urge inside every individual to bond with nature and melt in her presence, and realize that nature alone can provide solace and not the umpteen number of products designed to make life easy for humans by exploiting nature. Since the frenzy of progress cannot be stopped altogether, natural resources can be managed intelligently by picking up nuances from traditions that will curb the fast paced advent of globalization in to human lives in terms of creating a society, which is based on consumerism, rather an invasion of globalization. The attitude of humans could be changed gradually and thus enable to break barriers by understanding one another’s differences and to develop mutual respect and also cultivate a unified sentiment for the environment.

Plumwood points out Fox’s view that “excessive personal attachment” reflects selfishness which is apparently “psychological egoism” and the result is “possessiveness, greed, exploitation, war and ecological destruction” (17). A description of Rajat’s flat brings under the scrutiny, how a privileged few are able to get more than what is required, when a majority is deprived of their basic needs. Can
individual success be credited to their potential, or is it the power that enables them to gather more at the cost of others powerlessness.

The flat is still in its early stages, but I’ve seen the sales model. It looks like a set in a movie. In its media room, the TV screen takes up an entire wall. Bidets gleam in every bathroom. Could anything be further from this dear old house with its water-stained plaster walls, the banyan saplings growing between cracks in the terrace bricks? When Rajat drives me from the crooked alleys of North Kolkata to check on the progress of the flat, I feel disoriented, like a time traveler. (19)

Divakaruni’s protagonist Korobi is introduced as a girl far untouched by the existing cosmopolitanism that has seeped into the minds of young as well as the older generation. She and her grandparents are portrayed as simpletons who believe in virtue and values that are dwindling day by day. Korobi’s sense of self has been developed deeply by the attachment that she has with her home, its surroundings, and then her loved ones. The fact that her mother whom she has never seen, her presence is always felt by her in the similar place, she transfers these attachments to the things that was once used by her mother, for instance the bed where her mother used to sleep, her ornaments, clothes etc all connects Korobi to the very “being” that is her.

Every personal memory is directly connected to the environment around. A person, who has cherished such memorable moments since childhood in a particular place, would not bear the thought of changes that can befall it, no matter what luxury comes with change. Memories are the only site where nature can remain immortal. Nature also is on a constant journey; from wilderness to cultivated areas, to parks and then to pots as silent miniature visions of beauty to please human eyes. What is mostly forgotten is that nature is also subjected to change along with the way mankind changes.

Korobi’s feeling of being disoriented at the back and forth shifting of her gaze from her much beloved old mansion to the plush flat which Rajat is contemplating to move in with Korobi after their marriage, reaffirms that not all are awed by the magic that material change and progress can bring about in their lives. They are rather content with their good old place where their fond memories linger. The link between
nature and memories need to be contemplated as external and internal at the same time. It is the memory of places, that set as stages of events that happens in human lives, which makes one visit, elope and revisit sometimes once, or many times to entangle the mysterious web called life.

Are you kidding! Rajat says later when I ask him this. The way you’ve grown up, orphaned at birth, hidden away in some mountain valley, and now guarded in that ancient, beautiful mansion by your ogre of a grandfather—why, just listening to you was like entering a fairy tale! (17)

Rajat curiosity about Korobi as he found her quite different from other girls he had met in the past, “there was something about the way you held yourself that set you apart from all those gyrating girl. Like you belonged to an earlier era” (17). The human instinct to connect something to the past, in the case of Korobi, it’s the traditional vision of an Indian girl which has settled in the mind of Rajat, something he felt he has not seen among the other girls he knew, escalates his curiosity about Korobi. When he mentions her belonging to an “earlier era,” it’s not something Rajat has witnessed, but the imagination is unknowingly built in his mind. Man’s quest for progress and his desire to return back to a time which he imagines to be more wonderful is a constant battle between modernity and tradition.

The realization perhaps comes too late that, all that can be done is regret the folly of human mind which is insatiable and the result is destruction of nature on the way which has now been realized as irreversible. Idealization of the past, similar to the visualization of Adam and Eve in heavenly bliss before their fall can be said to be the starting point of human memory of the world from a spiritual perspective. Similarly the book *Roots of Environmental Consciousness: Popular Tradition and Personal Experience* cites Brazilian Anthropologist Marcos Santili as having discovered “an isolated forest group as living in self–sufficiency, without power or oppression, free of madness and sexual conflict, and living in ’co-existence with wood, adaptation to nature, co-operation, spiritual evolution’: truly a last utopia of last wild people” (9).
Generations apart, it is the story of transformation from wild, peasant, civil and at present to an urban market community where the role of nature too has changed with time. Ownership of nature was a privilege to people who were lucky enough to be stable in one place, but in the case of people who had to leave behind their land owing to many reasons, the memory is conjoined with the dual factors of time and place. They recollect nuances from their past by associating it with a particular place. Though distance has been eased in the new technological era, there are people who can still judge time and seasons by identifying the various moods of nature. This is often the result of the intimacy shared between humans and nature.

In the case of city dwellers, the longing for pristine, pure nature is often associated with anything they see as matching to the past culture. Rajat’s attraction for Korobi begins on such a note. Their many contrasts like modern v/s tradition, class, beliefs etc escalates Rajat’s interest in Korobi and her life seems like a “fairytale” to him which amuses Korobi, contrary to the perception that she has about herself. The creation of subalternity in everyday lives within the familiar space with differences not really noticeable, but enough to create a curiosity in the mind is caused by minor differences like the place one lives, the food culture practiced, and the behaviour that are all indicators of differences. The preconceived ideologies formed in the human mind set apart “others” based on these differences.

The real concept of environment as the place lived and where one goes about doing their daily chores need to be given more importance as this can distinguish the romanticizing of nature which is assumed to be the forte of intellectuals, activists, environmentalists and artists. This will make seem the act of protecting environment is far out of reach for ordinary people because an impact in the minds of ordinary people can have far reaching effects on nature.

Reading a text from two different traditional perspectives; an Indian and American which was made possible because of the immigrant status of the writer can indeed stretch the extent of environmentalism in assimilating the world from two diagonally different cultures. In the text *Post Colonial Ecocriticism* co-authored by Graham and Helen cites Pablo Mukherjee’s opinion that “we might say that the sustained focus that both eco- and post colonial criticism has trained on the ‘social’
has already prepared them for a thorough reengagement with materialistic concepts. Eco and postcolonial criticism have been discovering how to cross fertilize each other through an ongoing dialogue, and a stronger materialist re-articulation of their positions should make this exchange about culture and society more fruitful” (73).

The vision of a feminist utopia in the words of Plumwood is as described below:

The story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias. This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth, or at least that part of it controlled by women. For usually this state is seen as a beleaauquered one, surviving against the hostile intent of men, who control a world of power and inequality, of military and screaming poverty, where power is the game and power means domination of both nature and people. Feminist vision often draws the contrasts starkly. It is life versus death. Gaia versus Mars, mysterious forest versus technological desert, women versus men. (7)

The battle of powers starts at a domestic level in a society and this is often camouflaged by adding flavors of love, commitment and traditional hierarchies that has preset roles for individuals to be played out. Breaking such norms goes against age old traditions and silent acceptance is the way of life. The concept of “social ecology” equates social problems that are a result of human-human domination to environmental problems that is caused by human- nature conflicts. By studying the basis for gender disparity, the structures of nature domination can be simultaneously understood. To begin with, the representation of women through the words of some theorists, activists and authors as quoted by plumwood can get a general idea of how the society perceives the identity of women:

Women is a violent and uncontrolled animal’ (Cato 1989: 193) ‘A woman is but an animal and an animal not of the highest order’ (Burke 1989:187); ‘I cannot conceive of you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey’ (Swift 1989: 191); ‘Howe’er man rules in the science
and in art / The sphere of women’s glories is the heart’ (Moore 1989:166);
‘Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of
civilization has become more and more men’s business’ (Freud 1989:80);
‘Women are certainly capable of learning, but they are not made for the higher
forms of science, such as philosophy and certain types of creative activity;
these require a universal ingredient’ (Hegel 1989:62); ‘A necessary object,
woman, who is needed to preserve the species or to provide food and drink
(Aquinas 1989:183). (19)

Time has proved all the above statements wrong with women having
established themselves in all spheres of life lest considered to be men’s domain. But
the tragedy being, society is still adept in turning a blind eye to the achievements of
women, because of the fear of losing control on them. Women hold the status of a
background akin to nature. They are confined to traditional roles where “care” is the
main duty. Be it at home or outside. They are categorized as housewives, nurses, care
givers etc. She becomes the “environment” which helps the male thrive to establish
themselves, but she is never given the status as the achiever. Such interdependency is
ignored; the same way nature is ignored and exploited. In works of fiction “nature” is
used as a trope that intercepts with the other factors that jointly tell the story. The
good and the evil become a metaphor for love and hatred for nature. Emerson opines
that:

The virtuous man, the seeker of truth, finds brother-hood and countenance in
so far forth in the stars, the trees, and the waters. All nature cries to him, All
Hail! The bad man finds opposition, aversion, death in them all. All mankind
oppose him. No whisper from secret beauty or grandeur cheers him. The world
is silent: the heaven frowns. What is that star to him whose beam called out a
sentiment of love in the hero? A white point. And being not in the current of
things, but an outlaw, a stoppage, the wheels of god must grind him to powder
in their very mission of charity. (81)

Emerson considers a person who does not awe at the many wonders of nature
as someone without a soul, an epitome of evil. “later, Mimi said that he must have
been thinking of Sonia, who never liked the outdoors, not even in good weather, and
could you blame her? The outdoors was infested with spiders and wasps and snakes, everyone knew that” (34). Sonia’s hatred for the outdoors roots from her disrespect for other creatures that she is contemptuous and regards have no right to be around. The stark differences between Korobi and Sonia’s characters are deeply embedded in their identities.

Korobi’s upbringing by her grandparents, instilled in her values of respect for everything around her, while for Sonia, she was spoilt, arrogant and selfish without a concern for anything else. Like and dislike for outdoors by Korobi and Sonia juxtaposes the presence and absence of true love. Henson explains that with the help of seasons, landscapes create different moods as “a flowery spring meadow, a sultry midsummer cornfield, a richly fruitful autumn orchard” trigger images of eroticism of which the readers are equally aware. Corresponding landscape, weather, season and plot events, also known as “pathetic fallacy” is common in literature. For instance, in the novel *Wuthering Heights* the stormy heath represents “sublime suffering and passion” of Heathcliff, whereas Edgor Linton is associated with a valley “tamed and prosperous.” He further adds that such correspondences, can also be reversed such as “despair may be intensified if the characters misery is out of key with the happy season” (5).

Rajat had been in a pensive mood that evening, perhaps because of the rain falling around us, misty, silken. We were walking in the Victoria Memorial gardens among the white roses, almost alone because of the weather. “I shouldn’t have brought you here,” he said. “look at your clothes, your hair-soaked.” I told him I didn’t mind. “That’s what I love about you. You’re so easygoing.” Then he kissed me. (34)

The setting, which comprises of a beautiful garden, white roses and rain, intensifies the emotion of love that has already erupted in Rajat and Korobi’s mind and heart. The presence of a beautiful landscape enables a mutual transfer of these emotions, which is pure and can equate the pristine nature to a human mind untouched by the external conflicts that arise out of ignorance. As nature is perceived as feminine, Korobi is more confident as she is in the midst of nature to part with her constraints of a traditional women in giving her man the luxury of physical intimacy.
which in an another setting would have been difficult for her. The tug of war between
culture and nature plays a major role in defining the emotions of humans associating it
to the time and place that marks their presence.

Such an analysis clarifies, why urbanization has created more chaos and unrest
among various life forms. Henson quotes Edmund Burke “whatever is fitted in any
sort terrible…is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest
emotion which the mind is capable of feelings. It fill [s] the mind with that sort of
delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime” (12).
Henson says though the typical elements of “sublime landscapes are vastness– great
extent, height or depth. Wilderness, extreme weather conditions suggesting danger,
such as storms or avalanches” (13).

As beauty is associated with the serenity of nature and fine climate then
sublime to a destructive image of nature which can be compared to the post industrial
cityscapes engulfed in pollution. A vicious circle which can destroy everything
around it, when feelings for sublime is unanimous, then a gendered take on beauty, or
the need to preserve anything beautiful as the sole responsibility of women is
questionable. There is always a distance between nature and humans, a superficial
distance which stretches beyond and at times very near. In the case of relation
between humans, the same distance is felt. The barriers created by class are the reason
for this distance and conflicts. The class consciousness of the society at large is dealt
in Divakaruni’s novel in a subtle manner by focusing on the emotional relationships
between the so called “master” and “servant.”

Rajat’s driver Asif describes Sonia as “Expensive. Too thin, though those
people think that’s glamorous. Foreign-bought clothes, showing legs and all. Eye
makeup that makes her look like a witch-but one of those enchantress witches” (47).
The perception of gender is parallel to the perception of class. For Asif and Bahadur
Sonia represents the idea of a bourgeois, a hollow person who is measured with the
amount of material possessions, but lacks empathy and virtue, the natural qualities of
being human. The radical changes that were brought out in the class consciousness
with the advent of Marxism thrust upon the dignity of labor. There was a widespread
awareness about human rights, the working class refused to be treated shabbily and
demanded respect and fair pay. But the social stigma attached to people working for others as lower in class was responsible for breeding inferiority and at times contempt for their masters. Obedience and submission had to be a part of identity among these classes of people.

In literature, many classic works have explored the master servant relation. For instance Nelly Dean in Wuthering Height, the loyal butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day to name a few. Through these loyal servants, the character of their masters is revealed from a different perspective, as these servants are at the same time an insider and an outsider. They observe the rich household and interpret their way of life according to their standards and thus become representatives of both the worlds. They can record the shifting boundaries of economic disparity by scrutinizing their status in these households. Servants often are portrayed as the passive voice of their masters. In Oleander Girl Asif becomes the narrator at times. Secrets of the household are kept safe because of his loyalty. He defends and protects the Bose’s when the need arises. His religious background at times puts him on the pedestal of doubts which questions his so called loyalty.

The rapport shared between the servant and the master is very delicate as he is caught between the dual role of expected preset behavior and his own individual liberty. The birth of a servant is often believed to be the consequences of the lavish lifestyles led by few aristocrats. The concept of ownership began with land, which paved way for feudalism. Though this was overthrown by the radical movements led by socialism, it still continues in the guise of individualism where ownership is still the criteria that designate an individual’s position in a social hierarchy. This new found system does not ease the burden of class disparity, rather has intensified class tensions both in private and public lives. To quote Lawrence Stone:

The manifold causes of this slump in prestige…include the decline in the wealth of the peers relative to that of the gentry; the shrinkage of their territorial possessions, in both absolute and relative terms; the decay of their military power in men, arms, castles, and will to resist; the granting of titles of honor for cash not merit, in too great numbers and not to too unworthy persons; the change in their attitude towards the tenantry from suppliers of
manpower to suppliers of rent; the undermining of their electoral influence
due to the rise of deeply felt political and religious issues; the increasing
preference for extravagant living in the city instead of hospitable living in the
countryside; the spread throughout the propertied classes of a bookish
education, acquired at school and university, and the demand by the state for
an administrative 
\textit{elite} of proved competence, irrespective of the claims of
rank; the pervasive influence of the rise of individualism, the Calvinist belief
in the spiritual hierarchy of the Elect, and the Puritan exaltation of the private
conscience, which affected attitudes towards hierarchy and obedience in
secular society; and finally the growing psychological breech between Court
and Country in attitudes, real or supposed, towards constitutional theory,
methods and scale of taxation, forms of worship, aesthetic tastes, financial
probity, and sexual morality. (748-9)

Moreover physical appearance and mannerisms ought to reveal the economic
status of an individual. Asif’s comment on Sonia’s attire with contempt shows the
fixation of dress codes in the minds of people, associating it with their social status
and character. So what has created class? History states that this notion has risen in
the intelligent faculty of man which has manipulated the environment around him to
enable the growth of civilized individuals, creating nobility to guide and lead others,
leaving behind the ones who are not able to fit into their idea of progress. Man has
come a long way by distancing the savage, which existed as a separate entity or was
the supposed identity of man in the beginning. So the purity of any race, gender or
class is rather a fictitious account of history. The servant master relationship exposes
the identity struggle that an individual has to face in a dynamic world where old
differences are narrowed down to form new ones.

Globalization comes with a new challenge of class distinction where education
accompanied with technological know-how is creating a disparity among people who
are privileged or unprivileged in these new platforms with regard to their literacy and
access. Class distinctions often lead to an urge to switch identity, only in the case of
the oppressed that otherwise would have been happy earning his daily food, and
leading a life amidst nature as he believes that power is the reward of being rich. This
power which is very superficial alters his simple life into a constant race trying to
please the privileged for his survival. Ossowski echoes Aristotle's view on class consciousness as:

Aristotle associated the different functions of master and slave with a difference in their natures. He considered that although the master’s power worked primarily to the advantage of the master, the interests of the master and slave were nevertheless concurrent. The master needed the slave’s physical strength while the slave needed somebody who could give him orders. (90)

Over the time such distinctions of power and authority created a collective behaviour or attitude in people who belonged to a certain category. The economic aspects were judged by character and vice versa. The genuine nature of a person was overshadowed by his position in the society. Education, knowledge, manners and etiquettes were monopolized by the wealthy. Lack of which was considered to be a disadvantage for the poor. Thus the main criteria for becoming elite were indeed measured by wealth. Asif and Bahadur’s loyalty is paradoxical as they have succumbed to the fact about the permanence of their social class. When Sonia lures him with money to pass on a letter to Rajat privately, she is indeed sure that Asif will definitely take up the task for the few extra bucks. Moreover his mind does wander for a moment, wondering how much more money she would be having in her purse, and hallucinates about stealing the money and her fancy car by knocking her down. He wishes the possibility of starting a new life somewhere far where no one would discover him for sure.

…it’s almost a month’s salary. Does so much money mean nothing to people such as Sonia? How much more did she have in that purse of hers? A fantasy unspools with dizzying velocity through his brain. A lonely stretch of road—maybe near the river. He leans over and flings open her door. Grabs the purse and pushes her from the car. Maneuvers himself into the driver’s seat. Ah, the feel of that hard, gleaming steering wheel under his fingers. The acceleration smooth as butter. It was a big country. He could go far away, sell the car, start a new life. There were people who bought things like that. He was confident he could find them. Meanwhile he’d use the money in the purse, change his
name, dye his hair, lie low like a wild animal. He’d never work for another rich bastard again. (100)

The psychological aspect of class is very evident. Deep inside Asif is not happy about his social status, and feels ridiculed and inferior. He feels wealth is the only way through which he can change his fate. He exhibits the mental trauma that people in the lower strata experiences often and feels helpless. For them future is dull at the very thought of remaining in the same stature designated by fate or destiny as they call it. Not all people possess the grit and determination to come out of the label of a “servant”. In such a scenario the need to rethink and answer the question which Karl Marx asked “what constitutes class” becomes all the more important. By widening the gap between the rich and poor, the peaceful coexistence of people is at risk as a healthy society can only thrive if there is equal opportunity for everyone.

When Korobi suggests the place Digha for honeymoon, Rajat dismisses it as a “low- class” place, which mortifies Korobi. What essentials can adorn a place with class structures? Is it the presence of poor people that makes a place low class? Is economic status the only criteria for identifying people? How can the attitudes of people transport to something like nature? Henson echoes Ruskin’s words that “response to a landscape can ‘distinguish weaker men from stronger men.’ Since strong men are governed by reason, and concerned with action, ‘and yet in these weaker men [the passion] may be of some notable use. Ruskin goes onto concede that a passionate response to nature displaces lower emotions like ‘spite, anger, covetousness, discomfort, every other hateful passion, while it is deeply associated with ‘just and noble sorrow, joy or affection’” (18).

In this novel, Divakaruni tries to explore the class conflicts through the relations between the servants of the Bose and Roy household. Both the families give due respect to the people who are working for them. This is evident with the long duration of association the servants have worked for the respective households. Pia’s friendship with Asif is very strong and Pia reminds Asif of his sister whom he loved so much and lost to pneumonia. Similarly, Korobi’s grandmother shares an equal affection to her cook, who has been there in the house since years. In both the cases, the servants are very much attached and loyal to their employers and treat their
problems, happiness as their own. Despite all these, there are moments of doubts, which question the loyalty and love of such relations. For instance, Maman suspects if Asif is involved with the factory workers, who is trying to threaten their family over communal issues that erupted in their workplace, and are demanding justice. Asif was able to prove his loyalty, only when he saved Rajat and Pia from a car accident by putting his life in danger and was hurt seriously.

The dichotomies of class differences are found in history in the form of religious narratives that established the hierarchies as the law of God and nature. The base for this belief was rooted in land ownership. The book *Class Structure in the Social consciousness* authored by Ossowoski, Stanislaw, Patterson and Sheila explains this point with the help of the Biblical story of Ham and the Hindu myth of the four castes. The biblical story of Ham whose off springs were “condemned to eternal bondage” by the enraged Noah ‘in the service of the descendants of Ham’s worthy brethren’ for Ham’s sins was cited by St. Augustine to justify slavery, though forbidden to human nature as a way to seek forgiveness for man’s sins. Similarly the people who defended serfdom in the Middle Ages and the “American ministers of religion who in the first half of the nineteenth century” apprehended the abolitionists who fought to liberate the Negro slaves.

The Indian *Veda* scriptures use the myth of the *Varna* or the caste system believed to be designed by God, to explain the purpose of class distinction. An “anatomical description” that Brahmins came from the “lips of Brahma,” “Kshatriya from his shoulders,” “vaishyas from his thighs” and finally “shudra from his feet.” The strength of religious belief and the fear of God have retained this age old practice of hierarchy till date. In the Koran, it is believed that “Allah’s will” has ordained “social stratification” for the believers to follow (20). From a historical perspective all these substrata of religion, myth has created class differences for political and economic potency which defines the term “power” which in turn has created a society of “oppressors and oppressed” (21). The text further argues:

The metaphor of spatial polar division (between the top and the bottom) symbolizes a vision which, if we discard the metaphor, can be interpreted and formulated in various ways. Amongst these different formulations we find
three basic aspects of that dichotomy, corresponding to the three categories of
privileges enjoyed by the upper stratum: (1) the rulers and the ruled (or, to put
it in a way closer to the sentiments of the ruled, those who give orders and
those who must obey); (2) the rich and the poor; (3) those for whom others
work and those who work. (23)

These dichotomies explain that such an illogical classification led to
concentration of power in the upper strata, using which they were able to accumulate
wealth, which increased their power manifold. This process kept intensifying with
time, leaving people in the lower strata to be pushed more downwards remaining
powerless and oppressed forever. Thus an unfair allocation of status to people under
the pretext of religion, false historical traditions have increased the potential for the
growth of a capitalist society. Exploitation of human labor, which involves a
monotonous trend of working for a fixed time without having the right to demand
desired economic benefits have far reaching effects on both the mental and emotional
health of an individual. Adding to these woes, the laborers face other discriminations
in terms of their religious, gender or national identity.

The politics that takes place between the producers or owners and the workers
or consumers is a very delicate issue that needs to be dealt with utmost care and
patience. The general notion of owners exploiting the laborers to lead a luxury life
makes the workers rebel without a cause, even if the owners give them their due share
of profit. In Oleander Girl, these general assumptions are proved wrong and the
readers definitely empathize with the Bose’s as they are not tyrants and they are
shown as people who are extremely considerate of the well being of their employees,
though certain misunderstandings, sparked due to communal tensions within the
company crops up. Emerson’s point of view helps in understanding these class
dichotomies:

The theory of politics which has possessed the mind of men, and which they
have expressed the best they could in their laws and in their revolutions,
considers persons and property as the two objects for whose protection
government exists. Of persons, all have equal rights, in virtue of being
identical in nature. This interest of course with its whole power demands a
democracy. Whilst the rights of all as persons are equal, in virtue of their access to reason, their rights in property are very unequal. One man owns his clothes, and another owns a county. This accident, depending primarily on the skill and virtue of the parties, of which there is every degree, and secondarily on patrimony, falls unequally, and its rights of course are unequal. Personal rights, universally the same, demand a government framed on the ratio of the census; property demands a government framed on the ratio of owners and of owning…. (255)

Social justice and environmental justice are interconnected. Gender, class and race are the sub concerns which are part of a larger system called nature. Culture is only a byproduct of nature which came with the flourishing of civilization. Culture has become the substitute for nature, erasing its importance. Social justice can only be brought about, if nature claims its supremacy over culture. The human intervention which has exploited nature’s resources for more than what they really require to survive has resulted in nature’s destruction. It is very important to strike a balance between the two. But it is an urgent call that has to be taken to save the environment, as the Marxist ecologist believed that environmental destruction was the direct result of capitalization which encouraged freedom to international capital. The outcome was the immersion of mankind in materiality.

The intervention of science redefined history and the idea of time. Man began to hover over past and future, by forgetting that the essence of life is in the present. Guthrie quotes Thoreau from a journal entry on June 7, 1851 in the book Above Time: Emerson’s and Thoreau’s Temporal Revolutions:

We believe that the possibility of the future far exceeds the accomplishments of the past. We review the past with the commonsense but we anticipate the future with transcendental senses. In our sanest moments we find ourselves naturally expecting far greater changes than any which we have experienced within the period of distinct memory- only to be paralleled by experiences which are forgotten- perchance there are revolutions which create an interval impassable to the memory.
With reference to the near past we all occupy the region of common sense, but in the prospect of the future we are, by instinct, transcendentalists.

We affirm that all things are possible but only these things have been to our knowledge. I do not even infer the future from what I know of the past. I’m hardly better acquainted with the past than with the future. What is new to the individual may be familiar to the experience of his race. It must be rare indeed that the experience of the individual transcends that of his race. It will be perceived that there are two kinds of change- that of the race & that of the individual within the limits of the former. (4)

The little knowledge that Korobi has gained in bits and pieces from her grandmother about her identity sets her on an ardent task of finding herself completely. She sets the starting pointing at her past as she believes she can decipher her journey in to the future with the knowledge of her past. The irony that Korobi’s grandfather was not able to hold on to the secret forever as guilt is a big burden that one do not want to carry beyond life, events that followed after his death was some sort of a spiritual intervention that helped Korobi untangle the mystery of her parentage. Nature has passed on certain laws to humans like the history of lineage that supports identity. It is indeed very important to understand that memory corresponds roots nevertheless the meaning of life will be adjourned. Personal history helps to relate with history of a nation, race, humans and finally environment.

While some believe in the concept of past, present and future, there are others who believe living in the present is the best way. Both ways are encompassed by a larger concept of time. Though by living in the present, the nature around is noticed, slowly such a concentration somewhat leads to the assumption that the future is predictable. Guthrie observes Thoreau’s concept of time from “Thursday” chapter of The Week:

The life of a wise man is most of all extemporeanous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time. The cunning mind travels further back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation. The utmost thrift and industry of thinking give no man any stock in life; his credit with the inner world is no better, his capital no larger. He must
try his fortune again today as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself. (248)

Though at this juncture, scientifically many mysteries have been solved or rather assumed to be solved with regard to the universe, but still the curiosity about the relationship between humans and the external forces of nature still remains a puzzle. The question as to whether is man the supreme intellect? Or is it just the way interpreted by self or does other life forms consider themselves the same way? Is nature itself the supreme divinity who governs the entire life on earth? Is it the vastness and depth of the so called “nature” that made man assign the role of deity in the form of semi human figures, that they began worshipping in order to be guided in the maze of life. If so- has that led over the years in ignoring the real presence of nature, resulting in the careless human attitude towards nature?

The above questions raise doubts about the integrity of the meaning of “worship” which has become a complex tradition involving confused notions of “religion,” “spirituality” and whole lot of other things which has plagued human minds with more of contempt, chaos ultimately blurring the real purpose of living in harmony, and letting nature guide through the journey called life.

In Oleander Girl, the prominent site where all major events happen like, Korobi’s engagement, wedding, Anu’s promise to her father Tarak Roy; never to marry without her parents’ permission, and finally Bhattacharya’s involvement in solving the financial difficulties of the Roy’s and Bose’s household happen in Korobi’s family temple. The temple is part of Korobi’s Bungalow and the presence of the deity of goddess Durga assumed to be the protector of the family’s prosperity and wellness becomes a silent witness to all the happenings in the family.

…In the Durga mandir, the family temple established over a hundred years ago, old Bahadur yells threats at the gardener boy until the cracked marble floor is mopped to his satisfaction. There Sarojini hurries to arrange lamps, camphor holders, incense, sandalwood powder, marigolds, large copper platters, fruit, milk sweets, rice grains, gold coins, and multicolored pictures depicting a pantheon of gods. Is she forgetting anything? She loves the temple,
but it also makes her nervous. Too many memories lurk in its sooty alcoves.

(6)

Bhattacharya shakes his head forcefully “it just won’t be the same! Part of the charm of the temple is the grounds- those big, hundred-year-old tamarind trees, the old house in the background, the gates that shut out the twenty-first century. We can’t let this happen! I’ll help you with the repairs, for both the house and the temple.” (192)

The antiquity of the temple is the prominent factor which cherishes it as the symbol of tradition. The term tradition encompasses a ritualistic meaning of following something piously for generations and this is characteristic of a disciplined living. Though at times traditions become rigid and hinder the act of progression, nevertheless they sustain the inherent identity of being part of nature. Preserving the Deity of goddess Durga for over 100 years, as a focal point of the family’s trust and belief gives a feeling of permanence which is indeed required to understand the role of each organism in this ever dynamic world. If you had to reverse the above sequence of worship, it can be said that a tranquility felt in a particular place, was transformed into the need of preserving that spot for future and led to the idea of building a structure and later to bring in more clarity placing an object with which to identify the value of worshipping life, to be named as “temple” and “goddess” helping to retain its sanctity forever.

Over the years this reverse mode of real worship was forgotten establishing what is now called religion. What was built for understanding the real meaning of life and the importance of nature around has deviated into a notorious alley where wars are waged to prove the supremacy of one religion over the other destroying many lives and causing harm to nature in all possible ways. Being aware of the uncertainties of life, the human mind finds solace in a permanent fixation which is calculated with the help of “time.” The anticipation of general longevity of humans is the touchstone method of analyzing the concept of time, and he applies this method to understand every organism or natural activities like seasons. Thus life is assumed to be something that can be planned to a certain extent. This whole phenomenon of interpretation can be defined as “experience” and it is experience that guides, shapes human attitudes
and mentalities and gives meaning to many aspects of life. It is also a deciding factor whether to trust science, reason or mere instincts, whether to be spiritual, rational or superstitious.

The cause and effect which results from experiences helps to reason out facts. For all religions across the world, the place of worship is a place believed to pour out innermost thoughts, worries, grief and happiness. All good things in life like birth, marriage and a whole lot of other ceremonies associated with different culture take place in these sacred vicinities. But what one needs to understand is, if these sacred boundaries could be extended and engulf the whole of nature, then the belief that there is nothing beyond nature would prove a positive outlook on humanity and encounter the religious tensions that is terrorizing the world at present.

Nature’s uniformity is evident with the certain law that is experienced like seasons, the topography of certain places and warning signs before catastrophes and so on. The abundance of nature with its immeasurable species of life juxtaposes the meaning of choice and freedom in human lives too. But the need to use this reason carefully while making choices is very important as one wrong move can imbalance a lot of other factors. This is rather a moral responsibility which many believe is attained by an attachment to the divine power. Only that it has many manifestations and is differently interpreted by different minds.

The two main antagonists in the novel Oleander Girl can be identified as Sonia and Mitra. Though all the characters were put through situations where they could have succumbed to the devilish desires that lurch inside everyone, they were successful in defeating their lure and settling down for happiness. Life is a constant battle between virtue and vice, values and detriment. So where does humans get these characteristics imbibed. Is it from nature or are humans alone responsible for passing on these to the external world? Or is it something mutually learned and what differentiates virtue from evil?

The taming of the inner turmoil is similar to the tiff between nature and humans. The way different landscapes are viewed, for instance some people prefer places where the weather is cold, some prefer rains. Though extreme climates are conceived as hostile, but with time and necessity people find ways to survive even in
such hostile environments. The will power to tame the environment or rather with the help of the environment lessons are imparted to adapt or adjust. It is evident that much before the advancement of sciences, the inherent quality of moral responsibility and ethics in humans were much there that the forefathers have adopted nature as their religion as they thought they are not separate and whatever they could do in their day to day lives were due to the presence of the external force called nature. Though it is just the physical distance that classifies humans and nature as “internal” and “external,” hitherto they are an entity connected by innumerable threads of cohabitation elements which no modern man could identify completely.

Bhattacharya’s remark that the hundred years old tamarind trees, the old house which is part of the ground that situates the temple are all equally precious to let go, echoes the sentiments of every man who is intertwined in the web of tradition, culture and nature. Though they are all different concepts in the globalized world, they are part and parcel of each life. This unique melting point of all the above said elements constitutes a satisfactory explanation about the mystery of life to a common man. Feelings and intellect are the two components that help humans to make judgments. The interpretation of values is based on these judgments. Crosby’s opinion about values from his work Religion of Nature explains that:

Values in nature are neither passively identified nor sheerly constructed. They are not merely in nature, nor are they merely in us. Recognition of specific values results from active interpretations of aspects of experience that contain implications for valuative judgments and commitments. A potential value is felt, contemplated, and responded to here, but as located there. We do the interpreting, but we are interpreting something that presents itself in experience as belonging to the world. The experience does not automatically sort itself out into types of value, nor does it judge by itself the relative importance of its various demands for valuational response. We do the judging and sorting but with the stimulation of and constant reference to what is experienced.
The valuative aspects of experience have a persistence and a compellingness that cry out for interpretive reactions. When those reactions are made, conceptual constructions are brought into play, and when we allow our continuing thought and ongoing experience to test and refine these constructions, we are in the process of making responsible judgments about values in nature. Thus reliable claims about values in nature emerge from interactions between the compulsions, and constraints of experience and imaginative conjectures about the world, just as reliable, factual, descriptive and explanatory claims about natural phenomena do. (74-5)

Crozby further explains that the major factor by which mankind has been able to preserve “values” is through the system of language. Language both written and oral has helped in communicating accurately the thoughts which enables conflict resolution, and better understanding among humans and recording these experiences of gains and failing for future generations to watch their actions and to have an idea about the expected consequences of alienating themselves from a culture which ought to be conducive for a healthy living.

Though the accuracy was limited to minor and major groups owing to the similarities of a particular language developed within that group, humans have come a long way that at present people are open to learning other languages and the access provided through technology for communication on a larger platform and the monopoly of English language in the world, are the factors that contributes to the accuracy of effective communication. There are many a times that “language” has failed to the task that attributes its purpose and has complicated situations and gave way for misunderstandings also. But the potency of language can be increased by increasing human wisdom about the world. This definitely means updating knowledge in the right way.

The devotional sentiment with the central figure of God as established by the doctrine of religion across the world stands rigid in the minds of humans and this attitude can be altered by placing nature as important as God. Creating awareness about the importance of having a pious relationship with nature so as to guard and protect its interests is required. Though Bhattacharya talks and feels emotional about
the family deity of the Roy household and the kind of peace that he enjoys while on his visits to the temple, he equally acknowledges the fact that along with the temple, it is the surroundings or rather the place that is responsible for such a peaceful aura. By creating a central focal point in the form of the goddess, the place too is worshipped knowingly or unknowingly.

On the above thought, Crozby discusses in detail the complexities of religion and what factors can justify the candidature of nature for taking the place for religion. Firstly there is a need to understand what religion is and what its purpose is. He explains:

The role-functional categories are uniqueness, primacy, pervasiveness, rightness, permanence and hiddenness. Each is intended to identify an aspect of the distinctively religious function performed, or role played, by religious objects in the life of the religious person and in the cosmos as the religious person views it. Hence, each of the six categories has a personal and a cosmic side, and all six, along with their patterns of interrelatdness, interpret the nature of religion by portraying the putative common function of religious objects. It is important to note that these categories designate central aspects of the function of religious objects, not the attributes of such objects. Attributes of religious objects vary greatly from religious system to religious system, but, according to the theory of religion now under discussion, their function or role remains the same. This shared function demarcates them as objects of religious concern. (118-9)

A brief clarification about the role and the basis on how these roles are assigned to religion can take forward the suggestion of “nature” in substituting the faith factor of religion in human minds. As Crosby defined the purpose of religion is to attain “assurance,” “strength,” and “healing” which on a personal level is visibly experienced with being connected to nature above the aesthetic qualities with which nature is visualized. Each and every experience on earth is conveyed through the trajectory of nature. Everyday experience of nature is what balances the inner turmoil felt by people.
A breeze blows through the neem tree, bringing me its clean, therapeutic odor. A dragonfly made of shimmery gauze alights on a bramble. Two crows are building a nest in the crook of a branch, their movements an intricate, precise dance. (56)

When Korobi is shattered upon knowing the truth about her mother’s death from her grandmother, she is devastated. Her dilemmas about trust and faith nearly break her. Amidst her pain and confusion nature intervenes in the form of breeze, an innocent visual of a dragonfly, the crows, their stillness, it brings Korobi to the present and she feels calm enough to decide the next course of action, preparing herself to face all the uncertainties that’s in store for her. She decides to talk to her grandmother and find out all that she knows. The sense of being alive is brought out by the sights and signs of nature, which unlike human mind is devoid of past and future. They remain only in the present, which is the key to gladness, an energy which is positively transferred to us. To quote Crozby:

Sometimes, for humans, this natural process of healing, reorientation, and reinvigoration is greatly aided by simply being in the presence of nature, becoming acutely aware of clouds drifting across the blue vault of the sky, the caroling of birds, the scurrying of small animals, the crash of sea waves, the freshness of the morning dew, the rustle of wind in tall trees, or the quiet majesty of distant stars. There is a mood of serenity at such times, a feeling of rightness, a sense of belonging, an intimation of kinship with the earth and all of its living creatures. Experiences and times of awareness such as these have the power to restore our souls. Most, if not all, of us have encountered the healing force of nature in periods of pensiveness, sorrow, desperation, or need, and we continue to crave it in the depths of our being. (164) …this nature to which we intimately belong— a nature that sustains, renews, and inspires us in countless ways— can command our wholehearted religious commitment. We have no need of God, gods, animated spirits, or other sorts of putative religious objects, nor do we need to pine for another life in another realm beyond the wondrous home we find already in our natural world. Nature itself, when we rightly conceive of it and comprehend our role within it, can provide
ample context and support for finding purpose, value, and meaning in our lives. (170)

Korobi’s destined journey to the United States in search of her father, and to discover her mother through him, in order to come to terms with her real identity was begun with lot of apprehensions from her grandmother, Rajat and all her relations. They feared that she may not return to her homeland, by taking into consideration the popular mystique of America. Korobi’s grandparents assumed that they wouldn’t have lost their dear daughter Anu, if she had not stepped into the foreign land America where she intermittently lost her values and virtues and eventually lost her life as she dared to break free from her traditions. Despite her fears and apprehensions grandmother supports Korobi’s journey as she felt that lack of parental support led to Anu’s tragedy. In the heart of her heart she believed that her husband’s stubbornness to retain good old values and morals and by not giving Anu the freedom to live her life led to her heart break. As she was a submissive wife, she could not fight for her daughters rights too. So she decides to let Korobi explore her life and supports her in all ways she could.

Even as I said the words, I remembered a story grandmother had once told me about an enchanted land. When people went there, they forgot the loved ones they had left behind. They forgot themselves, too. No one returned from that country, although they weren’t unhappy there in their bewitchment. What if America turned out to be like that? (92)

America is notorious for its high end capitalistic society where the notion of progress is epitomic with economy. Science is the food and fuel that supports the ever growing demand for enhanced technology that day by day is reducing the physical strain of humanity by inventing machines that can replace every task of humans. This over loaded productions creates enormous waste, burdening nature with toxic components that is difficult to manage. America is synonymous with the modern world view that has man at its centre, the most important being of all who can at large manipulate and control nature, as he believes that technology can indeed fix problems in the natural world too. This rapid development of America is viewed by many in the traditional society, within and beyond the borders as aggressive, self centered and
without a care for the environment. This nonchalant attitude is at various levels of the society such as individuals, bureaucrats, government and so on. Though at large it is a rumored perception of America, there is a degree of truth attached to the world’s largest economy.

Crossing the borders is just not a physical act for Divakaruni’s protagonist as she is characterized as someone deeply rooted in Indian tradition which has laid down certain do’s and don’ts strictly to be followed, more gender biased. So for Korobi, her journey to a distant land devoid of morals and ethics as presumed by Indians at large back home is indeed a challenge. The fact that only when you are exposed to the myriad forms of culture, can you judge using your intellect as base to determine what is best for you, differentiate between good and bad, morals and ethics.

The benefit of travel that was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter explains that journeys undertaken leads humanity to a whole new world of revelation. Myths and stereotypes are shattered; new ideas are exchanged, enabling history to be rewritten for the new generations. Social patterns are rearranged due to the clarity brought out by enhanced inter cultural communications. Values changed for better and human evolution in terms of behavior continues. The ability to survive in a new land is a sort of revelation that place can be transformed into space if attitudes are changed. Cadman’s opinion is well quoted by Tony Walting in his text *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions: An Ethnographic Analysis*:

[T] he language that we used to describe our relationship with the land is made concrete with all that we build, in the way that we farm, and in the ways with which we care for the Earth. What we do is a function of what we think, and thought, captured in the beguiling snare of language, defines and can constrain, and even distort our reality. For language, laden as it is with implicit and explicit values, does more than describe, it governs…Thus an engineer, a banker and a poet will survey the same landscape and see it quite differently from each other. To one, it is configured according to its geological form; to another it is property and collateral; and to the third it calls forth memory and imagination. (163)
According to Korobi’s grandmother America is an enchanted land for which her daughter has succumbed and so her fear of losing Korobi is justified. The metamorphosis that humans are capable of in terms of behavior and attitudes is proven in the neo globalized scenario where everything under the sun comes for a price. Every culture has a set of values and inferring and understanding them needs an intellect closely associated with the liking for that particular place. Such an attitude points towards the prominence of nature in creating an identity which is unique, but at the same time socially viable and is subject to changes along with the change in its environment. Every new behavior will be an extension of the old one, a reminder of who you are and how far you can change yourselves to adjust to a new place. Thoughts are conditioned by experiences and are never stable as experiences involve the collective participation of various other elements mainly time and place. The above statement is justified in the words of Rue as quoted by Watling:

At the core of every cultural tradition there is a narrative, a myth, which integrates ideas about reality and value... [providing] a general orientation in nature and in history...the most fundamental expression of wisdom in a culture- it tells us what kind of a world we live in, what sorts of things are real and unreal, where we came from, what our true nature is, and how we fit into the larger scheme of things. These are all cosmological ideas, they inform us about the cosmos and our place in it... [and] ideas about morality... what is good for us and how we should construct ourselves in order to achieve our fulfillment... [functioning] as important resources for the construction of personal and social realities. (30)

In day to day lives, the major factors that define identity are ignored with reference to the larger realm called world, and this includes nationality, race and culture for the simple reason that by living in the midst of these, they are near and accessible. Whereas being taken far away from these in terms of distance, a place beyond where these similar symbols or signs are replaced by different ones, a sense of loss is felt. Thus becoming suddenly aware and passionate about what was left behind. Though human identity is created by the strong influence of culture, the inner paradigm of identity which constitutes the “self” has the power to alter the cultural moulds. Thus there is a mutual understanding between self and culture. Self is the
extension of culture or it can also be said that culture is the extension of the self. Sherman’s interesting discovery of one of the first definition of “culture” by Edward Tylor in 1851 in his book *Primitive Culture* explains “…that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (19).

If culture can be defined in such a sense, then it definitely calls for an interrogation whether can culture be bound to a place? Then if that’s the case then Sherman argues that the presence of Dutch churches, Chinese fishing nets, and ancient Synagogues found next to temples of Shiva and Vishnu in the South Indian port city of Cochin, that culture is beyond a stationed place, but an articulation of human minds to replicate experiences so as to transport them to any place, their journey takes them. This is an evidence to prove that “globalization” was part of human history and not a new found term or phenomenon which emphasis on Western influence. The precedence of nature before birth is proven by the fact that nature has been ever present for generations and that it is humans and other life forms that were born into it. Thus the potential to migrate can never station the so called “culture” to a particular place. It is just that the degree of influence of the various facets of culture determined by the “self” can export or import that particular culture in to a common sphere.

The emphasis given about Indian culture worldwide is the preference of “other” over “self,” limiting your desires (self control), less of indulgence and following traditions, whereas the Western definition of culture is about individuality, freedom and choice. The Indian society which is deeply rooted in patriarchy condemns the Western culture as “selfish” way of living. On the other hand there is another side to this story, in Sherman’s words:

To the average Indian, as they will readily tell you on the street time and again, and again, and again, America is a “very, very good place.” This positive vision of our great land is in large measure due to the Indian cultural background, which with its emphasis on universality, democracy, and its love of fried foods is inherently more amenable to the American way of life, combined with the sources of information available. In the case of India,
the media is free from state control, and tends, particularly since the 1990’s, to present a fairly positive view of America as a friend to India and sharing in common interests (aka killing Muslim terrorists) another piece that serves to influence the Indian perspective on America and Americans is that every single person you speak to in India seems to have an uncle, cousin, brother, friend, friend of a cousin, uncle of a room-mate, cricket team mate, pen pal or school mate from second grade living in or having just come back from living in the United States. The majority of the stories they hear are of opportunity, wealth, and a starbucks on every corner… collectively the cultural affinity, positive portrayal in news and educational sources, and somewhat embellished first-hand accounts almost make us seem like Zion that we (sometimes) know we are. (135 - 6)

So there are two different take on the identity of America and the Americans. For someone like korobi, who was safe guarded by her grandparents since childhood, the idea of stepping into such a land would be frightening, but her motive for the journey is itself to find her identity which she believes is partially in the mystery land of America where part of her lineage (her biological father) resides. Since she is bold and is not skeptical unlike her relations, she has an open mind and willingness to explore what’s in store for her. Her courage and fearlessness removes all deterrents that blocks her vision with images of a place heard and read as hostile. Crossing boundaries, especially for Indian women is assumed to be full of hurdles. The mythological tale of Ramayana is an evergreen reminiscent of gender prejudice that warns a woman about the consequences of crossing boundaries literally. Sita’s crossing of lakshmana rekha results in all chaos, and the ultimate war between Ravana and Rama and the final abandonment of Sita by Rama, as he suspects Sita’s chastity because she was in the confinement of Ravana for way too long. Indian women are taught from childhood to respect the rules laid down by the society and trying to explore anything beyond such confinements would mean putting the sense of security at risk.

Boarding to a place like America is often fraught with lewd imaginations of a liberal life, and the fear of sending young women abroad, is expected with such repercussions of loosing moral values. Such a fear is baseless, but the images of
Western culture promulgated through media, enforces stereotypical projection of western culture which easily influences the youth. Globalization has another meaning of establishing the dominant Western culture across the world and is a feared phenomenon at par or worse than terrorism. As mentioned earlier globalization is nothing new, as exchanges and influences was part of human history. The basic aim of every change is to broaden the understanding between humans and the environment. Sometimes this helps to change perceptions, to understand others by analyzing their point of view rather than being self assertive. Similarly in terms of culture, movement ahead can become progressive if the will to approach differences are inherent and natural and not a threat to wage battles for uniformity.

As discussed, different factors that contribute to indifferences and oppression in today’s world-class, gender, religion, race, nationality, and their turbulences have over the years grown into a massive volcano of violence in the form of global terrorism. When there are ecological issues to be battled the advent of terrorism has become a menace threatening the extinction of mankind. Environmental tragedies and terrorism are inadvertently inflicted mutually. The two major acts of violence described in *Oleander Girl* are the Godhra Riots in Gujarat, and the September 11 attack on the twin towers in America. Both acts were rooted in religious fanaticism.

At this juncture of crisis, there is a need to understand if a multidisciplinary study on the theoretical aspects of violence both ecological and cultural would help in understanding the root causes of such acts. After Korobi’s arrival in America, she could sense an attitude of prejudice from the Americans towards other ethnic communities. She is confronted by distrust and altogether there is an air of hostility post the 9/11 attack.

But in the early days, neither she nor Mr. Mitra considered America dangerous. They often exclaimed how much safer it was than India- no pocket-maars snatching your wallet, no burglars breaking into your apartment, no corrupt police who showed up to your store for monthly “tea money.” Then the Twin Towers fell, and everything changed. When Seema mentions the Towers, her face caves in like an old woman’s; her mouth moves as though
the words she needs have suddenly gone missing. The abrupt change startles me. (97)

The truth is that the sudden prominence about terrorism across the world was heightened after the twin tower attack of America, though terrorism was detected earlier in history but in various other forms. The gullibility of world’s most powerful nation exposed the fact that terrorism is not state or home bound, but a universal threat. So what exactly is terrorism? And can it be equivalent to various other crimes? Is having a criminal mind a prerequisite for such violent acts? Then how does one justify the collective strength of committing a crime with a purpose. The answer probably lies in the cultural, political and economic upheavals that are changing human behavior at large, creating large groups of people totally dissatisfied by the present functioning of the above factors.

Defining terrorism is a difficult task as violence has to do more with the attitude of right and wrong hence a terrorist for one country can also become a patriot for another country, based on the belief of right and wrong. This has a lot to do with how the world treats indifferences. This is where the urgency to learn few lessons from the non human agency, precisely nature comes to the forefront of education. Many catastrophes have emulated from the ill treatment of natural resources by humans, without really understanding the anatomy of nature. But there are a lot more disasters that have struck the land, causing grievous injuries to mankind and altering the form of land itself which has not been explained satisfactorily and one could say even the efficiency of scientific tools have been put to test. In the case of mass violence, the motives are many that it is only possible to wonder where it all began so that attempts at repairing could begin. In the book Contributions to Conflict Management, Peace, Economics and Development jointly authored by Caruso, Raul, Locatelli, Andrea explains the five ideal or typical goals as per Kydd and Walter’s analysis that triggers the phenomenon of terrorism:

Regime Change– Usually the most common goal, it consists in the use of terrorism by a group representing a faction of the society that aims to subvert the internal political order to remove a ruler. Needless to say, this is typical of
private perpetrators. Examples in this sense are Sendero Luminoso in Peru and al-Queda in Iraq.

Policy change– it is the attempt to affect policies of a given state (or group of states) by means of terrorism. This goal is shared by both private actors and state sponsored terrorism. As an example of the first kind, al-Queda aims to force the United States to withdraw from Arab soil. A case of the second kind is Iran sponsored Hezbollah and its ambitions in Lebanon.

Territorial change– it is the goal of a group that fights for the independence of a community. The enemy is a government that is considered illegitimate or oppressive. According to Rapoport (2004), this was the main drive for terrorist movements in colonial era (the so-called second wave of terrorism). Nowadays relevant examples are the Irish IRA, Basque ETA and the Tamil Tigers. (13)

Since there is no apt definition for terrorism as the causes that triggers it is rooted in the prejudices of human community and the lack of empathy for fellow beings, the failure to recognize that differences are indeed the wonder of creation and it is the differences of varied life forms that sustain life on earth. For example trees bear fruits, so they become food for various life forms and they inturn are endowed with strength and intellect so as to protect and nourish these trees. The divine architecture has designed life in such a way that each one is assigned their duties and it is when you acknowledge and respect each other, there will be peace.

The mass extinction of life has been reported from biblical times, initially in the form of ecological destruction, then the advent of civilization started showing symptoms of unrest for assuming power by waging battles and wars, which gradually moved to the struggle over land ownership, then the scene shifted to cultural wars where elements of religion and various other traditional beliefs were at stake, and a strong quench to protect them by the major or minor groups of interest resulted in organized violence. Now in the present scenario, violence too has been globalised with the spread of terror irrespective of boundaries with the sole intention of eradicating all that which comes in the way of “wrong” in the eyes of the so-called perpetrators.
The ever predicted concluding effect of class distinction in widening the gap so as to have reached a summit where in half the population of the world comes under brutal poverty, eradicating human morals so as to step into a devastating mode of purifying evil riches, a byproduct of western capitalism. The September 11 attack of the twin towers have put worldwide alert on the detection of reasons that have ended in such a tragedy killing nearly 3000 people. The various security measures adopted by the United States pose a lot of discomfort to the other ethnic communities and in general civil liberties were restricted for all those living in America.

Each nation has its own political ways of responding in the aftermath of a crisis. America is a country with high economic status, strong democracy, high immigration levels and constitutes of a multi ethnic society, which in itself is a forbearance of world’s strongest democracy with high level of civilian liberty. An attack like Sep 11 instilled mass fear and anxiety among individuals and also to a nation which assumed that the only threat they would have to face must be in terms of the new cyber technology as they considered themselves to be immune to any threats owing to their powerful status in terms of a nation’s requisites. Rubin cites Frank Clemente and Michael Kleiman on the impact of a terrorist attack to be:

The cost of crime goes far beyond the economic and physical losses imposed by criminals. It extends to the forced alteration of daily living habits as well as to the negative psychological effects of living in a state of constant anxiety…most commentators has noted an important element of irrationality in the public’s fear of crime: fear of crime is far out of proportion to the objective probability of being victimized. (12)

Living everyday in the shadow of fear is a double fold agony in the case of immigrants who bears the brunt for a few radicals who is all out to condemn modernity in a violent way. The effort of globalization remains primarily at bringing people together under one umbrella to promote peace. In order to achieve this aim there is a need to get rid of the physical boundaries that have ever since historical times enslaved human minds with prejudice at the cost of establishing groups, communities or a society with sentiments ranging from caste, creed, color, race and nation. In Divakaruni’s novel Oleander Girl the life of Seema and Mitra are turned
upside-down after the terrorists’ attacks. Their shops are vandalized, business ruined and they have to settle down to a life of misery in a country which they hoped would change their fortunes. The intensity of restrictions is summarized in a report by the Transitional Records Access Clearing House of Syracuse University States as noted by Rubin:

The impact of the events of 09/11/01 on the United States is hard to exaggerate. Within months, for example, the largest single re-organisation of the federal government in more than forty years was underway as the Bush Administration and Congress began shaping the department of Homeland security. In the same period, the government and the airline industry agreed to a new program where federal agents would begin screening all passengers for weapons and certain kinds of explosives before they boarded their planes. And under then-secret orders from President Bush, the administration initiated or expanded new surveillance programs by the National Security Agency and the treasury department. Meanwhile congress began a long struggle to adopt a new body of law intended to profoundly alter the flow of legal and illegal migrants into the US. That struggle continues today. (92)

Being immigrants they are left in a lurch, having to face contempt from the local community. They are constantly watched with suspect for no fault of theirs. In such a scenario, the ideal of American Democracy is questioned. Rubin quotes David Cole from his book *Enemy Aliens*; “We all too often strike the balance between liberty and security by trading their liberty for our security by treating some- foreign nationals, and especially in the present crisis, Arabs and Muslims- as less deserving of liberty, less human than the rest of us” (90).

The saturation of modernity is not far, with eruptions of violence reported worldwide pitched in with the help of scientific innovations in the form of weapons ready to destroy the world. If the 9/11 attacks have garnered much attention and focus due to the political power of America over the rest of the world, there are many acts of barbarism reported in other parts too. If India is famous for its diversity, it is also notorious for its communal violence, mostly instigated for political gains by sowing grains of hatred in the minds of the much caste conscious Indians. What was once a
tradition to classify people based on their work, talent and culture termed as caste and religion respectively has become pot boilers for violence.

....one of the men on the floor, an older Hindu, had made a remark about Mussulmans always causing trouble, ever since partition. The man working next to him, a Muslim, had taken a strong objection and reminded him that the Hindus had torched Gulburg just a few weeks back. Voices had risen, tempers had overheated, words had been slung back and forth until a last incendiary one had come up: Godhra. With that, the men-some of whom had worked side by side for decades-had begun to shove and punch one another. 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 rushed the Mussulman, punching and yelling, breaking his nose and throwing him down, oblivious of the foremen, who were ordering them to stop. What happened next was not clear, but at some point one of the Muslims had taken a box cutter and slashed at a Hindu, slicing open his forearm. (118)

Individuals are no longer identified with their names, but are rather signifiers of the caste or religious community they belong. The tiff that begins in Rajat’s factory was sparked by such illogical differences bringing into foray, a nation’s ugly side. All these cases of violence reported across world, is an alert to humanity to wake up and see that the much acclaimed progress of mankind, has only been limited to a spree of inventions, both negative and positive, but when put together has only been successful in creating a material society but has failed enormously in sustaining the good old charm of the world where less meant more peace and satisfaction.

When Indians like Korobi, Seema and Vicky in America has to face the consequences of 9/11 attacks, back home in India, Rajat is equally battling the conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims in the factory. It was in India, that origin of Hinduism is traced, thus the majority of Indian population consists of Hindus. India’s partition in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Pakistan led to the creation of Muslims into the minority population, without leaders to fight for their rights. Thus lack of political participation of Muslims in nation building led to the removal of reserved seats in the final drafting of Indian constitution.
In the book *Contemporary India* co-authored by Katharine Adeney and Andrew Wyatt, notes that another reason for the minority status of Muslims in India is due to their low status pertaining to educational, economic and social arenas. Post the 1980’s, the politicalization of religion (a pretense of protecting a community just to garner more votes, to come into power by an individual and the party he or she represents) led to many incidents of violence, killing many people. One such incident which Divakaruni narrates in the novel is the Muslim riots in Gujarat in the year 2002 which created distrust among the Hindus and Muslims.

This incident led to much other minor and major violence across the country, and till date it continues, enhancing day by day, the stereotypical image of Muslims as propagandists of violence, and Islam as a rigid religion. The sad part is that majority of the population is ignorant of the political Vedanta that is behind such conflicts. Thus only when individuals seek religion as very private and something spiritual so as to understand the enigma of the world, and not as a weapon to complicate life more, will the true meaning of religion be achieved.

The complex web of conflicts have many known and unknown dimensions, so the term “disaster” is ever present, so whether its natural or man-made has no significance as the prime motive is to survive against all odds. Overall, in this new scenario there is an urgent need of crisis management for all sorts of attacks, which can be further classified as deliberate and non deliberate acts, whatsoever, the final consequences are a threat to the entire living world and the environment. A further analysis would show the connection between the deliberate (terrorism, communal violence, individual crimes etc) to the non deliberate acts (inflicted by nature in the form of ecological disasters) are interrelated.

They fall under the broader aspect of social problems like class, race, gender and nationality and should be watched at close proximity, and can prepare to deal with such disasters by changing policies. It is in the time of crisis, the co-operation between nations become explicit. For instance the text *Contemporary India* authored by Andrew Wyatt and Katharine claims that “The NDA government offered to assist the US after 9/11 and supported the war against Taliban in Afganistan. The US reciprocated by lifting sanctions imposed on India after the 1998 tests” (224). The
hidden vulnerability of private lives ensembled with myriad differences that are fragile, which is indeed responsible for the so-called disasters, is a time when the whole of humanity stands up in empathy. To quote Simon from his article titled “Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror” in the Journal CLC Volume 15, Issue 1 dated March 2013:

From Y2K to 9/11 to Katrina, we may be rightly said to have entered an Age of Terror. Unpredictability has become the new norm for an increasingly anxious global community and how it sees both social conflict and environmental events, and with the increasing perception of terror as the defining feature of our age is a concurrent slippage and evolution of thinking about tragedy. Terror and tragedy obviously have much in common: both attract and repel both compel “us to approach with sympathy and recoil with alarm” (Douglas-Fairhurst 62), both exploit our aversion toward unpredictability (an aversion that is at the core of ecophobia), both stimulate our distaste for violence against our own agency, and both present unequivocal notions of right and wrong. They both also assert assumptions about positions, about what and where we are in relation to other things and concepts.

In *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni, through the protagonist Korobi explores the two different versions of socio-political scene of two countries, India and the United States of America. The similarities in the contemporary issues that these two countries face, in terms of culture, politics, economic and social, outlines an individual’s plight in the modern era of globalization. Though Korobi’s stint with America is just as a tourist, her experiences during the short stay are in fact similar to the immigrants’ life out there. Her only advantage being, she had no compulsions to stay back as her main purpose was to locate her long lost father, moreover her commitment to Rajat to return, once mission accomplished and settle with him was at the back of her mind and each move of hers had to be responsible as to fulfill her promise to her loved ones.
The realities of the contemporary world is brought to light more from the perspective of different women like Korobi, Seema, Mrs Bose and Sarojini, with different attitudes who are categorically more passive and highly affected by the everyday violence in the form of sexism, patriarchy, oppression though not visibly experienced like the women of lower strata or the underprivileged. Their background, education and social status are their advantage, but still certain obstacles do make their life difficult and they are at times forced to adhere to societal norms due to their gender. But these women emerge triumphantly through the many difficulties they come across and ascertain their individuality.

...in the city of one’s birth, one can never be a tourist. Sarojini tries to visualize the spaces her granddaughter is traveling through, the smell of the new dish, the exact purple of the flowers, the city radiating out from the foot of the Empire State Building in every direction. Wherever you turned skyscrapers sprouted, housing lives and histories beyond your ability to imagine. To the left, a river; beyond that, the start of an ocean. Ahead, the green gash of Central Park, beautiful and dangerous. The cold, exhilarating wind whipping her granddaughter’s hair into her face. She is glad Korobi is getting to see something of the world, for this moment of respite in a minefield of uncertainty. Why then the prick, like a thorn beneath her skin? (136)

Korobi’s determination and her stubbornness to find her father and her true self was mainly because she earnestly believed that one should never live a lie and choose something just because it is easy. This motivates and reminds her of her responsibilities towards Rajat, her Grandmother and Maman. “Remember who you are. Remember the world that waits for you here, its privileges and obligations. What happens in America isn’t your life; it is only an interlude” (139). Korobi acknowledges the attraction she has towards Vicks, because he is simple and easygoing and make her feel at ease with herself sans the pretense of pleasing to be accepted into any kind of designated relationship.

However, she realizes that it is Rajat whom she deeply loves and it is this realization that helps Korobi to have an intense desire to return to India and finally into Rajat’s arms. Both Korobi and Rajat, through their momentary separation realize
the true intensity of their relationship, which otherwise would not have been possible. Korobi’s scary experience with Mariner, brings out the strong woman in her and that’s when she comes to understand “…through my open window the smell of the land seeps into me, mossy and damp and clean. It reminds me of the hills where Grandfather had sent me- to keep safe from men like Mariner, I see that now. I never appreciated them, grumbling when the teachers took us on steep weekend walks among the deodar trees to see the ice sparkle of the Kanchenjunga peak. Sorry, Grandfather….” (215). The predatory attitude of some men towards women makes life so unsafe, a fact Korobi learns through her experience with Mariner and appreciates and thanks her grandfather for protecting her so far.

Though this experience scars Korobi, she realizes that one cannot remain protected forever and you have to build on your inner strength to protect yourself in such incidents. Through her journey to America, Korobi discovers so many things about herself, her strength, her weakness, her fears etc. finally she emerges a confident women who is in control of her life. Her maturity is evident when she decides to return to India after finding her father, and letting him free to be with his present family. At the same time she showers him with her unconditional love and affection. She assures him that their relationship will be very special and would not burden him in any way or put any kind of obligation on him, as whatever happened in their past was not their fault.

The threat and fear that an individual experiences is marked by events which are unpredictable and it is often a reminder of intricacies of elements that constructs our understanding of this world. The vulnerability that every life is subjected to strengthens the “survival of the fittest theory.” Life is to be lived to the fullest, and for this “optimism” is the much needed attitude, in Oleander Girl that’s one attitude that all the characters have, an extension of the author’s (Divakaruni) personality. Seema’s decision to leave her husband Mitra, who had long back given up hope of resurrecting his life post 9/11 allowed himself to fall prey to a wayward life of gambling. His inability to fight back and rise to the situation to protect his wife and care for his unborn child proves time and again the paradox of male behavior, considered superior in a gender biased world. The mental strength of Seema is brought forth when she realizes that she can indeed find ways out, so that she can provide a bright future for
herself and her child, and thus by selling her hair, and buying flight tickets with that money she leaves for India for good to be with her mother.

In the case of Sarojini, she is finally able to come out of her shell of a submissive wife, and gives approval to Korobi to travel, her conviction that women are strong enough and need their space and freedom to make choices in life, a desire that she herself had as a young woman, but did not materialize as she was very domicile and unable to break the barriers thrust upon women by patriarchal tradition. “…with all due respect,” he tells sarojini, “it’s a bad idea to send an unmarried girl abroad by herself. In fact it’s downright dangerous. Who knows what temptations might come her way? ” (144). Sarojini is not a bit shaken about these words as in her heart of hearts, she trusts Korobi. The regret that she had, for not supporting her daughter Anu, though remains a pain uncured, she nevertheless finds solace by allowing her granddaughter Korobi to go to America and find her father.

On the other hand Rajat’s mother Mrs Bose was humiliated by Mr Bose’s father on account of her social status and informed outright as not fit as a life partner for his son. She takes the insult so hard that she vows to change her destiny through hard work to prove that where and how you are born is not your mistake and wealth is something one can acquire and ultimately change your social status. If not for the insult, the urge to create an empire all by herself would not have been fulfilled. These individual milestones in a woman’s life are recorded through stories in narratives, though fictional, there are traces of real life experiences, because without experiences there are no stories. This can go a long way in instigating collective strength among the oppressed. So when does the interchange or transformation of power take place? Is power just a mirage? Does being ignorant or agreeing to historical contexts as rules to be followed leads to oppression and finally is oppression nature’s way of bringing out the unknown aspects of life?

The women characters in Divakaruni’s *Oleander Girl* are socially conditioned to be the person they are and their ability and intellect to understand their experiences, to understand right and wrong helps them to change for their convenience. This culminates in affording a life by making their own choices, taking their own decisions, finally changing the attitude of people around them. To change things
around you, you have to change first, a statement that asserts that every individual has a role to play in the sphere of life, the immense support offered by the male characters help these women to overcome their obstacles with ease and as Emerson opines:

…For there are always a certain number of passionately loving fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons who put their might into the endeavor to make a daughter, a wife, or a mother happy in the way that suits best. Woman should find in man her guardian. Silently she looks for that, and when she finds that he is not, as she instantly does, she betakes her to her own defences, and does the best she can. But when he is her guardian, fulfilled with all nobleness, knows and accepts his duties as her brother, all goes well for both.

The new movement is only a tide shared by the spirits of man and woman; and you may proceed in the faith that whatever the woman’s heart is prompted to desire, the man’s mind is simultaneously prompted to accomplish. (350)

In a modern society Emerson’s ideas may sound utopian, as the number of incidents where women are molested, tortured and deprived of basic human rights as promulgated by media, the society is becoming far from safe for women. Apart from physical violence, the role of women in a society is limited, though it is just high and low when compared within different cultures, but the subordination still exists. The major cause for concern is that though the entirety of universe is considered dynamic and ever changing, certain age old beliefs and traditions which piously follow discriminations are very static.

One of the reasons that keeps women from performing or indulging in certain activities in the society, say during early ages where social gatherings were more for rituals or traditional events like festivals, worship etc was due to the menstruation taboo. The basic knowledge that menstruation is a biological process that prepares a woman for motherhood is in denial, and it is considered in a religious context as being impure, and a reason to keep women isolated on those days. This practice is still followed in certain cultures even in today’s modern world. This inferior status of women to man is similar to the nature/ culture dichotomy. Any sort of bias cannot be justified as every creation is important. All life forms possess a soul that is invaluable
and understands the purpose of life. As Emerson’s philosophical take on creation quoted by Philip Cafaro explains this fact:

…the one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man.(3)

Though the development of civilization began in the natural world, the claim of humanity to have acquired knowledge is false, because knowledge does not imply a set of information passed on from ancestors and blindly followed through generations. Knowledge is fixation of facts as assessed by thoughts and experiences over a period of time. It is indeed mind’s convictions, which are open to scrutiny and change.

The superiority of man over woman and culture over nature is due to the similarities between woman and nature. Woman’s physiological function of giving birth and nurturing (providing breast milk) is an internal process, something natural, that is part of evolution and ever present which erodes her of her well being and stability whereas man is associated with creating things externally, all that is required for the clan’s survival. Women go through a lot of physical changes which is painful. Simon De Beauvoir argument sums up the above concept thus:

Here we have the key to the whole mystery. On the biological level, a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence [i.e goal oriented, meaningful action]; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. In the animal, the freedom and variety of male activities are vain because no project is involved. Except for his services to the species what he does is immaterial. Whereas in serving the species, the human male also remolds the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future. (58-9)
The role of a feminist towards sexism and that of anyone concerned with the environment around them ranging from an ecologist, an environmentalist, a farmer or an ordinary person involves “ethics” to understand and make others understand the need for compassion to put an end to oppression, which in the long run can cause immense damage to the entire world. Primarily a woman, moreover environmentally conscious, together can become a strong element which can equate the definition of an “ecoﬁeminist” ready to take on issues which are indeed interconnected. It is through experiences that one connects with nature; at times responses correspond with that of nature by transmitting emotions within. For happiness, sorrows and sufferings, a connection with nature is felt, an invisible thread that makes one realize that the climate within and out is same. For instance when there is joy, nature too is viewed with bliss, and if there is sorrow, the outside also seems gloomy. Similarly any changes in landscape like storm, rain, heat, breeze, and sunshine brings about a change in human emotions. Thus it is evident that humans can articulate nature in profound ways.

She remembers the palm trees in the back, how the leaves whispered when the wind blew. So many nights she listened to them as she paced the terrace, carrying a colicky Korobi, her own insides still raw from having Anu ripped away. Still and all, it had been a healing place. (165)

When Sarojini realizes that she is solely responsible for caring for little Korobi, as she has lost her mother, it brings along hope. Her pain of having lost her daughter, though not forgotten is replaced with new birth, new life and her renewed role of a mother. It is a reminder of the cycle of birth and death that accompanies life on earth. The imagery of women as mother is deeply associated with the imagery of nature as mother and this is where the two concepts meet. So is “mother” a socially constructed reality? If so why is it diﬃcult for a woman to have her own identity, why is she carrying the burden of a “self” created through the norms of patriarchy?

Korobi’s quest for her father was partly due to her desire to know her mother as she feels she can identify a lot of her real “self” through knowing her mother. The concept of mother as loving, caring, nurturing is a construct of the human psyche. Comparing women to nature is a way of extending the thought of natures’ compassion
to all living things by providing all that is required to sustain life. Though experiences vary, the universal notion is the same; similarly nature has a destructive side to it like earthquakes, floods and deaths. Catherine in her book *Mother/ Nature* implies the idea of nature with mother in the words of the first-century Alexandrian Jewish Scholar Philo:

Nature has bestowed on every mother as a most essential endowment teeming breasts, thus preparing in advance food for the child that is to be born. The earth also, as we all know, is a mother, for which reason the earliest man thought fit to call her “Demeter”, combining the name of “mother” with that of “earth”; for as Plato says, earth does not imitate women, but women earth….fitly therefore on earth also, most ancient and most fertile of mothers, did Nature bestow, by way of breasts, streams of rivers and springs, to the end that both the plants might be watered and all animals might have abundance to drink. (32-3)

Having lost her mother, Korobi’s identity is incomplete, though her grandmother showers her with all the care and nurture her mother would have given. But still deep inside Korobi there is a sense of unrest, as a part of her is unknown to her. If a child’s identity is formed due to her mother, then definitely the argument that all living things on earth identifies with nature stands true. Thus the violence implicated on women in the form of rape, abuse, and oppression is equivalent to the extortion of resources beyond permissible limits from nature and the role of man in the former and latter, as he is more associated culturally with the task of inventing, agriculture, technology etc. and the need to control women, both the acts are justified as the norms of patriarchy.

Though the start of feminism could be traced back to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the feminist literary criticism established as a theory originated as an aftereffect of the “women’s movement” of the 1960s, thus analysis of gender equality is an age old intellectual movement. The study of nature, framed as ecocritical theory came into the foray in the late 1980s. Past studies of both the theories have discovered the collaboration of the role of gender in nature, in analyzing the cultural construction of a society and also bring along with it awareness
about the importance of nature. As Catherine finds out, Getting at the root cause of gender oppression was a landmark book by anthropologist Sherry Ortner “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in which she opines that the closeness of women to nature is the reason for the cross-cultural perception of women’s “universal subordination” and as a result nature is also “universally devalued” (37).

The liberty to exploit women or nature stems from the notion that there is nothing that belongs to her and it is her duty to part with her resources as and when the demand arises, thus the act of violently extracting the requirements by “others” is justified. For instance for Korobi, even her hair belonged to a whole lot of other people. “it’s my hair,” I say defiantly. But my statement is only half-true. That hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini’s granddaughter, to Rajat’s fiancée, to papa and Maman Bose’s daughter-in-law to-be (178). She is a resource in every sense, she is owned by others. At times, the statement that exploitation and ownership attitudes only vests with men do not stand true, as women are equally involved in propagating such an image.

Maman and Korobi’s grandmother tries to control Korobi into making her believe that the traditional concepts of a woman should be followed if she has to be loved and respected in the society, Korobi’s individuality and her desires are dismissed as childish tantrums. “Guardians of culture and morals” (38, Mother/Nature), a tag that put women on the pedestal of culture and at the same time ignored her presence in the architecture of culture. This attitude can be detrimental as the potential of both women and nature are sidelined because nurturing and caring are very much needed to improve the quality of life and helps in finding a meaning and purpose of life. The negative aspects that such a thought system can bring about is, it would make men less responsible about women and environment whose equal participation is needed to restore the damage done so far with regard to the unrest, disharmony in general to the lives and nature around us. Thus identity based on roots that is “home” needs to be redefined. To quote Catherine:

These analyses assume that men– atleast elite men of the industrialized Western world to be more alienated from nature than women and in some cases more immoral than women, in general as well as in terms of their
participation in ecological destruction. I do not dispute that many of the
decisions resulting in pollution, species extinction, and overuse of the earth’s
resources are made by elite white males at the level of large corporations,
governments, and international organizations. But I am less certain that we can
then conclude that women are innocent of causing damage to the environment,
possessed of a concern and love for nature lacking in men, and more capable
of effecting ecological healing. It seems somewhat of an oversimplification
and even somewhat dangerous to assume that women are “by nature” or by
socialization nurturant, benign beings who need only be given free reign for
the world to become a better place. (42)

The subjugation of women and nature’s identity can be restored by being
aware that only by breaking the stereotype image of women as caregivers can bring
about a social change. Korobi’s decision to travel all by herself, is a bold step despite
the offer from Rajat that they will go to America together, once they are married is
indeed an individual’s step in that direction. The need to relate is of primary
importance in human lives. Only through such relations the desire to communicate
emotions can be satisfied so that a feedback is gotten in order to act accordingly to
better behaviors and attitudes for common good. The relationship between Rajat and
Korobi is deeply embedded in trust. She enjoys the freedom required to pursue her
dreams and her individuality is respected.

Personal empowerment is the key to discovering oneself, and it’s more
important for women, in order to break traditional constraints that confine her to be
exploited. The universal notion of nature/ women relation can be reversed for a
positive attitude, to repent or reform the ecological sins committed so far with the
equal participation devoid of any gender difference, for that matter any differences
that originates in the mind should not be allowed to hinder the real progress of
humanity, not in the anvil of industrialization but protecting nature at all cost.

The story of each individual contributes to the writing of history, so the focus
needs to be on the “self.” Human mind always searches for answers outside their
realm, whereas the truth is the solutions for all adversities faced remain within. “Is it
the enveloping darkness, comforting as a womb? Is it the intermittent chorus of frogs,
punctuated by firefly light, reminiscent of younger years when one had the ability to marvel at every minute miracle?” (191). There is a need to sharpen human intellect with the help of all sources like spirituality, religion or anything that is important enough to manipulate human psyches in judging right and wrong. Time is a crucial point, which enables humans to evolve, beginning from the mother’s womb, the safest place and in the consequent journey undertaken in this world. The ability to cherish every moment begins with childhood, the phase that is eponymous with the popular phrase “ignorance is bliss.” When life moves beyond these stages, the uncertainties that are faced are blamed on fate or destiny. However a careful introspection of “self” will hold some clue to the events that has occurred.

Thus dismissing life altogether superstitiously based on past knowledge is not a good idea as it would take away the zest for life and awareness would be replaced with ignorance. The development of “self” can help analyze the importance of all good things that are required for a healthy body and mind, the two important elements of human physiology and definitely the role of nature in providing food, water, shelter and clean air. These needs can never be replaced nor can the importance of these natural elements be replaced with culture, economy or politics.

A clean environment is often considered safe and therapeutic. In the midst of chaotic cities, the dream of an escape into the lush, serene greenery is associated with peace. The sensitivity to the environment is heightened with the knowledge that for a better quality of life, pure resources are needed. Exploring avenues and possibilities based on individual experience to bring back the lost charm of environmentalism in each and every citizen can be made possible, by leaving for once, the comfort zones and by stepping beyond borders to understand issues from a different perspective. Converting thought into action is made possible through travel, a physical act but a metaphor for the inner journey taken to discover self.

Healing is a process attained through knowledge, for Korobi who was kept in denial regarding her parentage discover along with it, many other facets of life which otherwise she wouldn’t have known. Being an Indian though the religious, caste and class prejudices were known to her, she is surprised to understand that being married to a foreigner is a taboo in the first place but what is worse is if he is black. She is
amused at the varied differences that humans practice or discover day after day which is downright illogical for a sound mind. “Sarojini wants to explain the complicated gradations of race prejudice in India, how deep its roots reach back. Why, for so many people, having Korobi’s father turn out to be black would be far worse than if he were merely a foreigner…” (225).

Korobi represents women who think out of the traditional constraints and she does not entertain age old prejudices which otherwise have plagued a good percentage of human population even in the era of neo-globalisation. “Did my mother ever tell you why she wanted to name me Korobi?” “She did, actually,” he calls out over the heads of other passengers. “Because 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” (253). The strength of every creation stands out as skillfully as explained by Emerson:

Man is that noble endogenous plant which grows, like the palm, from within, outward. His own affair, though impossible to others, he can open with celerity and in sport. It is easy to sugar to be sweet, and to nitre to be salt. We take a great deal of pains to waylay and entrap that which of itself will fall into our hands. I count him a great man who inhabits a higher sphere of thought, into which other men rise with labor and difficulty; he has but to open his eyes to see things in a true light, and in large relations; whilst they must make painful corrections, and keep a vigilant eye on many sources of error. His service to us is of like sort. It costs a beautiful person no exertion to paint her image on our eyes; yet how splendid is that benefit! It costs no more for a wise soul to convey his quality to other men. And every one can do his best thing easiest…He is great who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others. (270-1)

Anu played her part and so did Korobi and the rest of the women characters sketched by Divakaruni in Oleander Girl. Each contributes to the feminine power in myriad ways. They are the source of strength to their loved ones. This strength is something that is acquired from nature but the awareness is brought out when human thoughts are put into action to produce experiences that can strengthen within to
spread knowledge to others. This uniqueness of every living form should enable mankind to understand the greatness of life. In such a scenario thrusting the responsibility of environmental protection on women alone is out of question. It is a responsibility which ought to be shared between individuals, nations, even to the minute organisms that form the universe.

The word “ecology” originates from the Greek word “Oikos” which means household. “House” is very important for everyone, but the connection of women to it, in particular is what defines society. But considering men to be more powerful and of enjoying a higher status because of their control outside the domestic domain is not fair. The slow process of women’s liberation movements which is gradually attaining a role reversal would explain that if women can be extremely skillful and talented in caring and nurturing, then such a passionate attitude if allowed to spread beyond homes, into the society, can bring about sea changes in other arenas of life. Sherilyn MacGregor supports this argument by explaining the difference from the viewpoint of feminist scholar Carol Gilligan (1982) that “women speak in a different voice from men and hold a different set of moral values from men …women’s moral decision making is based on caring in context rather than on the notions of abstract rights and justice that characterize a male approach to moral dilemmas” (27).

Peace and justice can prevail in a society when there is understanding and co-operation among all the occupants. This is an attitude much cultivated “within” than on the outside as assumed. The race to change or conquer all the ills of a society needs to begin from “inside”. A feminist approach focusing on the notion of motherhood can be used to build a society whose prime aim is to care and nurture for life and control the pleasure of destruction that vest more in masculine minds. Though selfless dedication, a norm since prehistoric times attached to a woman’s psyche can entrust them as ambassadors of future conservation of resources both human and nature