

Sarika: *Thanks for tuning in on APA Compass on KBOO. I am Sarika Mehta. Back in April, I had the privilege of chatting with award-winning writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She lives in Houston, Texas, hails from Calcutta India, and spent her graduate school years at the University of California at Berkeley.*

Chitra's accolades include publishing a number of best-selling novels such as Sister of My Heart and her award-winning collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage. She recently published her latest novel, Oleander Girl, which tells the story of a Bengali girl from a traditional family who comes upon a family secret that leads her to the United States in a post-9/11 world.

Chitra stopped in Portland on her book tour and chatted with me at KBOO. We began our conversation on writing from the perspective of her own various identities and making her work accessible to a wider audience.

Chitra: Well I believe, and this comes out of my experience as a reader, that if it's a good story and you've created a strong character, and you've really brought details of the setting to life, that readers can connect across cultures.

Readers are pretty smart that way, if they're emotionally engaged. They'll make a lot of leaps. I just try to create a strong story. I try to create interesting characters who are in interesting situations - often situations of conflict, and then I just let the story take over and take me where it has to go.

I find that is not a problem for readers. When I do events I see that my events are split there about 50/50, people from South Asian origin and people who are not.

Everyone seems to understand so I have great faith in the intelligence of readers and in the power of imagery because I think when those things come together an experience is created and a lot of things are understood just at the heart level.

Sarika: *Our conversation moved to inspiration, specifically what inspired the story behind Oleander Girl and why this experience was so unique to her other novels.*

Chitra: Oleander Girl was an unusual book for me because it took several years to write. With a lot of my other books, I can distinctly remember the moment when the inspiration for the book came to me.

With *Oleander Girl*, I've been thinking about these ideas for a long, long time. The book seeped into me. One of the major ideas in *Oleander Girl* is the clash between the old and the new, which I see in India so much every time I visit.

India's moving so fast. It's rushing headlong to take its rightful place in the 21st century and as it does that, there's so many changes and innovations and so much technology and a faster lifestyle. But also there's a traditional part of India thousands of years of culture and all of that is very important to India as well and those things are clashing. They're in conflict with each other.

In *Oleander Girl*, I try to show that conflict between Korobi; our protagonist, our female protagonist who comes from a very old Bengal family, very prestigious. The street outside her home is named after her great grandfather, right? She falls in love with Rajat who is very much New India.

They're new money, they're looking ahead, they're internet-savvy. Their business is art, selling art. They've opened this huge gallery in Manhattan. In their relationship is that clash between the old and the new.

As you can imagine, they're attracted to each other because of their differences but those differences will cause a problem as the book goes on.

When I think about it, I realized that we're never one or the other. In each of us, it's a mix of the modern and the ancient – things that we love about the old culture and things that absolutely drive us crazy.

We're a combination of that and Korobi is especially as the book progresses and she discovers a secret - which we won't give away - but that secret is going to propel her to America and she's going to start changing very rapidly once she's by herself, alone in America. And not just any America, the America of 2002, post-9/11 America.

I think I am also that kind of combination of old and new. There are things that I love about our Indian traditions and things that I don't think are right. The same with America, there's lots of things I love about being an American, and there are things I don't want to be a part of.

Sarika: *In 2002 the United States was grieving from 9/11. Oftentimes this grief took ugly forms of personal attacks on brown-skinned people. India's western city of Godhra experienced a tragic time of communal violence between Hindu and Muslim communities. Chitra discussed weaving these events into her story of Oleander Girl.*

Chitra: That was one of the other major themes of the book. I wanted to explore difference. How do we live with difference and how important it is to live amicably with difference because now we are this global world, we're really pushed up against people who are not like us much more in the past when we could stay in our little groups in our home cities and never move.

When now all around us are people who look different, who eat different foods, who follow different religions, who wear different clothes and more importantly who think differently whose ideologies are different.

When we come up in close contact with them, how are we to live in amity with this difference? This book examines what happens when we don't, when we hate people just because they're different and we feel that they can be destroyed because being different, they're less human than we are.

Anyway that's what leads to 9/11. In a way that's what leads to the terrible Godhra riots with the repercussions from which will go all across India and impact Rajat's family as well.

In *Oleander Girl*, these issues are really important but I had to make sure that they didn't across as preaching because then that just destroys the novel. These issues had to rise out of character in the events that happened in the world but how they impact the characters in the book, that's really what was most important, how the characters feel in the book.

Another part of the story that became very interesting to me, because I hadn't planned on it, but it just took on its own life is the character Asia, who is Rajat's family chauffeur. And his situation is interesting particularly post Godhra because he's a Muslim driver in a Hindu family.

After Godhra there's a lot of pressure on him to quit his job and not work for a Hindu.

Sarika: Not support this staunchly Hindu family.

Chitra: Yes. Not support them by working.

Sarika: By working for them.

Chitra: For them.

Sarika: Right.

Chitra: On the other hand, he has developed a great affection for the daughter of the family. This little girl who reminds him of a sister that he had who died when she was about the same age.

Here's the human connection, here's the political disconnect. How do you deal with something like that? I think that's the human story. That's what makes a novel interesting.

Sarika: *While pursuing her graduate studies, Chitra co-founded a domestic abuse shelter for South Asian women. She discussed the importance of having a shelter for this community, as well as how these issues manifest in the larger cultural perspective.*

Chitra: That's right. I was one of the co-founders of Maitri, which has now grown into a big and powerful and wonderful organization in the Bay Area. It was the first organization of its kind to help South Asian survivors of domestic violence and/or women who are trying to break out of domestic violence situations.

I think I just came into it slowly. I started by working with the women's center on campus then I started volunteering on mainstream shelters and then we realized the need of a South Asian shelter because often these women are in such distress that they cannot go to a mainstream shelter. It's just too difficult for them.

A South Asian shelter, they feel more comfortable. They're more willing to come there for ...

Sarika: Culturally.

Chitra: ... culturally. They feel they don't have to explain their whole culture when they go on top of all of the trauma that they're facing. Yeah. Now I live in Houston and I'm on the advisory board of Daya, which is a similar organization.

Working with women who have been in situations of domestic violence really made me realize how complex this problem is particular in the South Asian society because it comes out of I think misunderstandings of what a woman's role is, how a woman should be treated and there's often this kind of belief that a wife needs to put up with whatever her husband decides to hand out to her.

If she does anything against that, it will shame her family. These are some of the cultural issues that I have to work with and all of us who are in the field of domestic violence prevention. We have to work with these.

I think this is connected to what *Oleander Girl* is about although this is not about domestic violence, it is about control. The family secret that has been kept from Korobi all her life, part of the reason for keeping that secret is to control Korobi. Part of the reason that secret occurs in the first place is because there was a desire to control another woman in the family.

I just thought that although on one level, family secrets seem like it's a wonderful device, really they come out of some very deep rooted problems in our thinking about women.

I think that's important to remember. I'm writing about violence against women in the South Asian context because that's the world I write about but violence against women is a worldwide problem. It is something that as thinking human beings we need to consider.

We need to consider and think about what we can do about it. A lot of people are very uncomfortable dealing with domestic violence and violence against women, rape, things like that.

A lot of people just don't want to bring it up and a lot of people get angry because some of my books deal with these issues of not just violence against women but if you look at it from a positive angle, the empowerment of women which will hopefully prevent such situations from happening.

Not just the empowerment of women but the consideration of a woman as a valuable human being who deserves to be treated decently, decently with consideration. A lot of people are just uncomfortable with that idea but I figure as a writer I just have to write about things that are important to me, that matter to me.

I've pretty much stopped caring what people will think. I just try to create a really good story with a strong character that people will care about and my hope is because that's happened to me as a reader.

My hope is sometimes the books will change people's minds about how they believe, what they believe because sometimes we believe things because we don't know any better. We believe things because we haven't come across the truth of this issue.

We've just heard about it or we've seen it from a very far distance. A book really allows us to get into the minds and hearts of people in a wonderful, inviting and non-threatening way. It's my belief that books change lives. Books have certainly changed my life.

Sarika: *Given the intense nature of the content and the lack of well-known South Asian American writers at the time, I did wonder how the South Asian American community reacted to her books.*

Chitra: When *Arranged Marriage* came out, which also deals with a lot of complex relationship and role issues, women who change after they come to the US and *Mistress of Spices* has a character who is in a situation of domestic violence and another character who is having major conflicts with her intergenerational family because she's chosen to marry outside of the Indian family.

When these books came out, I think there was a lot of outcry in the South Asian-American community because at that time, there were not that many writers writing about the South Asian-American community.

This is mid 90s, right? I think hardly [inaudible 00:14:44] was there. There were many Asian writers but there weren't many South Asian writers writing about the immigration experience.

There was huge outcry. There was a sense of, "Oh you're giving away our secrets and now everybody will think we're no longer ... we're not that model minority community."

I think people got over it because now the reaction is pretty positive. I think our community has also progressed. We're much more confident of ourselves. We feel that we have a place in America and we don't have to be a model minority anymore.

We can be a rich, complex, diverse community.

Sarika: *In addition to *Oleander Girl*, Chitra also recently published her first children's book, *Grandma and the Great Gourd*, based on a folktale that she herself grew up hearing.*

Chitra: Yes it is and such a pleasure to write this children's picture book *Grandma and the Great Gourd* is written from a story my own grandfather used to tell me when I was little in India. He was to say the story to me in Bengali. It comes out of our oral tradition.

It was a great deal of fun just writing that down, writing that story and remembering the sounds that he used to make, remembering words out of my language. A lot of rhythm and rhyme and onomatopoeia.

It's a very typical folktale. It's a hero's journey. One of the things I love about the story which I've kept in its original form is that the hero is a grandmother. Isn't that cool?

Sarika: That's really cool!

Chitra: She's going to undertake a dangerous journey through the forest to go see her daughter. She's going to come back through the forest but there are all these animals waiting to eat her up and Grandma has to use her wits and figure out how she can get out of this predicament.

Sarika: Thank you for hanging out with me at KBOO.

Chitra: Thank you. Oh, I love being at KBOO. It reminds me of my student days at Berkeley. (Laughing)

I love Portland. My experience with Portland has been very positive. I think Portland is a city of readers and I appreciate that.

Sarika: *That was award-winning author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She recently published her latest novel *Oleander Girl* as well as the children's story *Grandma and the Great Gourd*. You can keep up with her at her website: ChitraDivakaruni.com and on facebook at facebook.com/ChitraDivakaruni.*

I'm Sarika Mehta and you're listening to APA Compass on KBOO 90.7 FM in Portland.