



Cartographies of the tactic: Everyday resistance and spatial insurgency in Divakaruni's *Oleander girl*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the politics of quotidian resistance in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander girl* (2013) using Michel de Certeau's theorization of tactics and strategies. It conceptualizes space and time as active, contested terrains where subaltern agency is enacted through subtle, embodied, and affective practices. The protagonist, Korobi Roy, resists patriarchal, caste-bound, and diasporic-nationalist constraints not via overt confrontation, but through micro-gestures –secret readings, sartorial transgressions, strategic silences, spatial reappropriations– that tactically infiltrate and refunction the architectures of control. These acts, often dismissed as inconsequential, cumulatively inscribe an alternative cartography of belonging, one that refuses full legibility within dominant frameworks. By analyzing Korobi's navigations across Kolkata's domestic interiors and post-9/11 New York's securitized streets, the study shows diasporic female subjectivity can be constituted in –and through– interstices of hegemonic systems. In doing so, it reframes agency as immanent to constraint, privileging opacity, improvisation, and affective insurgency over visibility or strategic sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: Indian American fiction, diasporic subjectivity, everyday resistance, spatial theory, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Oleander girl*, Michel de Certeau

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Indian-American Anglophone literature, questions of diasporic identity have often been approached through thematic frameworks such as hybridity, memory, and cultural displacement. While these paradigms have illuminated the fragmentary nature of diasporic subjectivity (Raghavendra, 2022; Srinivasan, 2018), they often privilege symbolic representations over the material and embodied strategies through which diasporic subjects negotiate structures of power both in the homeland and in diaspora. Such approaches carry “epistemological consequences” (Kiang, 2021, p. 1), as they tend to overlook the quotidian operations through which agency is enacted not through overt and frontal confrontation, but through subtle reconfigurations of space, affect, and temporality. As a result, “a closer look at the ordinary life” of subjects, as Senft (2016) observes, is “what has been lacking most in ... subaltern history from South Asia” (p. 26). This study emerges from a critical need to move beyond identity as metaphor and explore the micropolitics of resistance as enacted through everyday practice. Specifically, it examines how spatial and embodied tactics can serve as vectors of subaltern agency within diasporic literary narratives. The urgency of this intervention lies in its capacity to bring into critical focus the underexplored terrain of spatial resistance and affective insurgency within Indian-American women’s fiction.

The Indian-born American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Oleander girl* (2013) offers an especially fertile textual site for such a reading, not only for its engagement with themes of diasporic identity, gender, and transgenerational trauma, but also for the way its protagonist, Korobi Roy, navigates space and temporality as means of epistemic and affective survival. The novel “is a female bildungsroman” (Bhattacharya, 2024, p. 136) that follows Korobi, an orphaned young woman raised in a conservative Bengali household, who sets out on a journey from a cloistered upper-caste Kolkata household to post-9/11 New York in search of her deceased mother’s hidden past and the suppressed truth of her biracial heritage. This physical and emotional journey is not simply a narrative of diasporic discovery or identity formation; rather, it functions as a staging ground for the protagonist’s tactical engagements with space, time, and cultural expectations. Her embodied refusal to conform to predetermined roles –be it as bride, daughter, or diasporic citizen– is enacted through everyday gestures that reconfigure power without directly confronting or resisting it. What distinguishes *Oleander girl* for this analysis is its attunement to the minutiae of spatial, sartorial, and emotional practices that function as counter-discourses to the hegemonic norms regulating race, gender, and belonging. This study argues that Korobi’s everyday acts –such as her rejection of a traditional bridal sari, her silence in the face of patriarchal interrogation, and her navigation of unfamiliar urban terrains– constitute a tactical poetics that both inscribes and resists the cartographies of control that seek to delimit her subjectivity.

To pursue this argument, the study draws its theoretical foundation from Michel de Certeau’s *The practice of everyday life* (1984), a landmark text that challenges prevailing understandings of power and resistance by focusing on the quotidian operations of those without access to sanctioned positions of authority. Central to de Certeau’s framework is the distinction between strategies and tactics: while strategies belong to the institutions and structures of power –urban planning, state apparatuses, familial hierarchies– tactics are the tools of the weak, employed on “the space of the other” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). These tactics include the improvisational maneuvers, ephemeral gestures, and embodied acts through which individuals subtly reappropriate dominant systems. As de Certeau writes, tactics are “clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the ‘strong’” (p. 40). This conceptualization enables a shift away from heroism and visibility as the primary markers of agency and instead values those practices that evade legibility, operating through delay, deferral, poaching, and silence.

De Certeau's theoretical lens is particularly significant for its capacity to recover forms of agency that remain obscured in traditional paradigms of feminist or postcolonial critique. Much of the existing scholarship on diasporic Indian women's writing remains invested in tracing voice, articulation, and oppositional subjectivity as the primary modes of resistance (Dwivedi & Lau, 2014; Hussain, 2017; Senft, 2016). These approaches, while invaluable in contesting erasures of subaltern women from canonical discourse, often align agency with visibility and "do not square up with the prevailing theoretical emphasis" (Figueira, 2014, p. 56). In doing so, they exclude those practices that refuse capture by institutional or ideological recognition. De Certeau's framework, by contrast, privileges the opaque, the minor, and the ephemeral. As he notes, "a tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" (1984, p. xix). This emphasis on the interstitial and the momentary resonates powerfully with the gendered and racialized positionalities represented in *Oleander girl*. Korobi's resistance does not emerge from a position of sovereignty or radical exteriority; rather, it is shaped by the very structures she must navigate. Within these systems, her actions become acts of re-signification. De Certeau's theoretical orientation expands our understanding of how agency operates under such constraint.

The adoption of de Certeau's spatial theory enables a reconceptualization of resistance in diasporic Indian-American literature –not as rupture, visibility, or declaration, but as the embodied creativity of those operating without a proper locus. It allows for an analysis that moves beyond the discursive binaries of "tradition and modernity" (Jussawalla & Weagel, 2015, p. 12), voice and silence, and "East/West distinctions" (Malreddy, 2015, p. 9) by foregrounding the spatial and temporal tactics through which subjects like Korobi navigate and reconfigure their environments. By reading *Oleander girl* through this lens, the study intervenes in current debates within postcolonial and feminist literary criticism that often privilege narrative legibility and identity coherence. Instead, it insists on the epistemic and political value of ambiguity, improvisation, and affective opacity. In doing so, it aligns with scholars such as Highmore (2002), McDowell (1999), and Massey (1994), who emphasize the performative and politicized nature of everyday life. De Certeau's framework, in this context, is not simply a theory of space but a grammar of resistance –one that reads the city, the body, the home, and the narrative itself as contested terrains, constantly rewritten by those denied the authority to claim them outright. Thus, the study positions Divakaruni's novel not merely as a diasporic text concerned with cultural hybridity, but as a tactical text that stages the politics of the everyday. It offers a critical methodology for apprehending the subaltern not as voiceless but as tactically articulate –a subject who, while denied strategic sovereignty, navigates, poaches, and refunctions the terrain of power through acts that are as subtle as they are subversive.

2. INTERSECTING LENSES IN THE SCHOLARSHIP ON *OLEANDER GIRL*

The existing scholarship on *Oleander girl* approaches Divakaruni's novel through intersecting lenses –diasporic identity, post-9/11 racial politics, gender oppression, cross-cultural love, and the politics of Orientalist representation (Bhattacharya, 2025; Meena & Swain, 2024; Narwal, 2016; Singh, Field, & Najmi, 2022)– yet often remains tethered to thematic readings that underplay the spatial dimension of resistance. For instance, Krishnan (2025) reads *Oleander girl* as "a multilayered story with parallel plots to connect the dots between relationships, differing cultures, and identity concerns" (p. 3). She highlights Korobi's journey from "her protected and traditional upbringing" in Kolkata to an America offering "new found freedom ... and an opportunity to be close to her father" (p. 3). For Krishnan, the narrative's geography is a canvas for "personal and emotional metamorphosis", with the oleander flower as a

metaphor for “the beauty and venomousness” of love (p. 3). Yet, while she adeptly tracks the cultural negotiations between tradition and modernity, her reading treats space as a neutral backdrop, with no engagement with how physical movement – across streets, homes, airports–functions as a reconfiguration of dominant orders.

In another study, Singh and Field (2022) foreground Divakaruni’s “aesthetic of interconnectivity”, noting her post-9/11 emphasis on linking “generations, races, ethnicities, and nations” through characters who “seek new alliances with ... Indian Muslims or African Americans” (p. xxi). They argue that her fiction “moves beyond the struggles of new immigrants facing issues of accommodation, assimilation, and acceptance of female personhood” (p. xxi), engaging instead with cross-racial solidarities. Yet they also point out that “her worldview ... is largely heteronormative” and that she pays little attention to other issues such as caste (p. xxi). This political positioning is important, but their emphasis on social alliances leaves unexplored how such alliances are enacted and sustained through everyday navigations of space.

Other scholars such as Rastogi (2022) interrogate *Oleander girl* through the lens of “Strategic Orientalism”, observing that the novel appears to follow “formulaic schema” with its cover art and “Orientalist dichotomies of Eastern oppression and Western liberation” (pp. 123–124). In diasporic context, according to Asl (2024), Orientalism is used to expose “how some diasporic writers or artists have produced works catering to Western expectations or demands for exoticism, sensationalism, or authenticity” (p. 377). Yet Rastogi contends that Divakaruni “undermines its Orientalist schema” by embracing stereotypes to “undo them from within” (2022, p. 124). For Rastogi, “Strategic Orientalism ... offers a peaceful alternative to belligerent interaction with the Other” in a “terror-riddled ... multicultural” twenty-first century (p. 125). While she incisively engages with representational politics, her focus on imagery and rhetoric does not extend to the spatial enactment of such strategies –how Korobi’s bodily movements through contested terrains themselves might constitute a mode of undoing Orientalism.

In a feminist study, Thampy and V. N. (2022) analyze the “power imbalances caused by war-induced terror” and its “double impact” on women (p. 1), especially in the diaspora. They argue that *Oleander girl* depicts “the collective anguish of women in a terror-torn society” where post-9/11 fear intensifies “the existing stringent constraints on a woman in an orthodox family in India” (p. 2). Korobi’s decision to return to India, they conclude, reveals “the encompassing power of love ... [that] diminishes the negative effects of war-induced terror” (p. 1). Their feminist critique of patriarchal entrenchment is sharp, yet by focusing on ideological confinement, they overlook how resistance might also be enacted in small-scale, tactical appropriations of domestic and public spaces –subtle acts that de Certeau’s framework makes visible.

The question of women’s agency is also explored by Bera (2022), who frames the novel within the “diasporic sublime”, where the protagonist’s journey enacts “the elevation of diasporic women from objects ... to the state of the ... sovereign subject” (p. 146). She notes that Divakaruni “raises the question of agency and authority within the patriarchal restrictions of the Bengali community”, where “a woman and her choices still came secondary to the decisions made by the superior male figure of the family” (p. 146). Drawing on Bonnie Mann, Bera critiques Kant’s coding of femininity as beauty and masculinity as the sublime, re-reading Korobi’s transformation as a philosophical ascent. Yet, in privileging moral and psychic elevation, this reading risks abstraction, overlooking the quotidian navigations –walking unfamiliar streets, negotiating thresholds, appropriating spaces not intended for her– that embody this ascent in lived terms.

Collectively, these studies position *Oleander girl* firmly within Indian-American Anglophone literature, aligning it with contemporaries like Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri, and probing its engagement with post-9/11 racial politics, feminist resistance, and representational strategies. However, their readings share a limitation: space is treated primarily as symbolic or thematic rather than as an active, contested arena in which characters improvise, resist, and re-map dominant orders. This reflects a broader lacuna in South Asian diaspora criticism, where mobility is often discussed in metaphorical terms rather than as embodied, tactical practice (Asl, 2023, 2026; Mishra, 2007; Pourya Asl, 2026; Qiuchen et al., 2024). A de Certeauian approach to *Oleander girl* addresses this absence by shifting the focus from symbolic journeys to the “spatial stories” enacted through everyday life. Korobi’s crossings –whether in Kolkata’s patriarchal interiors or in the securitized post-9/11 streets of New York– are not merely passages between cultures, but insurgent navigations that tactically rewrite the meanings of those spaces. Reading the novel through this lens reveals a dimension of everyday resistance largely unexamined in current scholarship, positioning Divakaruni’s work at the nexus of postcolonial spatial theory and Indian-American literary studies. Before we delve into the analysis, a brief overview of the framework in the following section is helpful.

3. MICHEL DE CERTEAU AND THE TACTICS OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

De Certeau’s (1984) work is pivotal in reorienting critical attention from structural paradigms and macro-politics toward the micrological practices that constitute the quotidian experiences of those operating within hegemonic systems. Rather than assuming resistance to be enacted through grand gestures or revolutionary rupture, de Certeau posits that the most subversive practices are often immanent to the systems they appear to affirm –conducted by individuals who inhabit, co-opt, and refunction structures without ever overtly opposing them. Central to his theory is the distinction between strategies and tactics, a binary that organizes his analytic framework. Strategies are the purview of institutional power, predicated on “a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 36). In other words, strategies function from a locus of power –they are spatially legitimized, encoded in laws, urban planning, bureaucracies, educational systems, and ideological apparatuses. Strategies produce legibility, order, and surveillance. They regulate the spatial and temporal rhythms of social life and seek to render all practices transparent to systems of control.

In contrast, tactics are the “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus”, a mode of “making do” within the interstices of dominant systems (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). If strategies are stable, spatially anchored, and authorized, tactics are mobile, temporal, and improvised. A tactic “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (p. xix). Tactics are not frontal assaults on power but are characterized by a poaching logic: they operate within enemy territory, “clever tricks” that repurpose the tools of domination toward non-prescribed ends (p. 40). This is the art of the weak –an art based not on structural inversion but on everyday subversion.

De Certeau’s framework offers a paradigmatic shift in conceptualizing resistance. He recasts the consumer, walker, reader, and homemaker not as passive recipients of dominant ideology but as active participants who “divert” or refunction the signs, spaces, and temporalities imposed upon them. He writes: whereas “strategies are able to produce, tabulate,

and impose these spaces, tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (p. 30). For instance, a pedestrian’s movements across an urban grid may appear compliant with city planning, but the actual paths traced –unexpected detours, pauses, shortcuts– constitute a “spatial acting-out of the place” (p. 98), a micro-resistance that inscribes the city differently from above and below.

This attention to spatial practice positions de Certeau within a broader field of theorists interrogating the politics of space. Unlike Henri Lefebvre (1991), who articulates a dialectical triad of spatial production (perceived, conceived, and lived), de Certeau focuses less on totalizing production and more on the insurgent reappropriations of space by everyday actors. Edward Soja (1996) extends de Certeau’s emphasis on spatial imagination, identifying “thirdspace” as a site of radical openness. But while Soja seeks to theorize spatial hybridity, de Certeau remains attentive to the performative, fleeting, and embodied nature of resistance –a resistance made legible not in masterplans but in “ways of operating” (1984, p. xiv).

This subtlety becomes especially relevant in analyzing practices that are affective, embodied, and gendered. Feminist geographers such as Massey (1994) and McDowell (1999) have drawn on de Certeau to examine how women navigate spatial hierarchies through everyday practices that neither submit nor confront but evade, defer, and refunction. Indeed, de Certeau’s account is deeply attuned to how power does not simply repress but structures possibilities of movement, speech, and visibility. Yet those who lack a sanctioned “place” can use time as their weapon, engaging in maneuvers that “take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depend on them” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). It is this strategic temporality –this manipulation of *kairos* rather than *chronos*– that grants tactics their efficacy.

Narrative, too, becomes a central terrain for de Certeau’s theorization. He maintains that stories are tactical devices –a way of having a hold on things (1984, p. 22)– capable of contesting the “concept city” imposed by planners, administrators, and ideologues. As with spatial practices, narrative practices engage in a semantic drift, or “wandering of the semantic” (p. 102), whereby individuals detach prescribed meanings and rearticulate their lives through non-legible trajectories. De Certeau remarks: “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (p. 129), suggesting that tactical narratives move transversally through the static orderings of space and identity, refusing their containment. In this sense, stories are not merely representations; they are enactments of subversion, poached from and yet disruptive to the normative architectures of meaning.

Affective tactics –those inscribed in silence, gesture, deferral, and bodily comportment– also play a vital role in de Certeau’s framework. While not always foregrounded in his original text, de Certeau’s insights have been extended to the terrain of affect by scholars such as Highmore (2002) and Ahmed (2004), showing how moods, hesitations, or intensities function as embodied tactics. The body, far from being a docile substrate, becomes a site of inscription and improvisation –what de Certeau might call a text “acted out” (p. 115). A cough in church, an inappropriate garment, or a delay in speech may all register as micro-political interventions in a system that seeks smooth, legible operations.

Therefore, de Certeau offers a theoretical grammar for analyzing the subversive creativity of those who dwell without sovereignty, who move within systems without fully being of them. His emphasis on the performativity of space, the opacity of tactics, and the temporality of everyday resistance makes his framework especially potent for interrogating how minor practices –often dismissed as trivial– compose a poetics of insurgency. As he succinctly concludes, there is a certain pleasure in “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’” (p. xix). It is precisely this pleasure –and its critical potential– that animates the tactical subject, whose agency resides not in demolishing systems, but in “turn[ing] to their own ends forces alien to them” (p. xix), or the spaces and discourses imposed on them.

4. EVERYDAY INSURGENCIES AND AFFECTIVE REAPPROPRIATIONS

In *Oleander girl*, the contours of female subjectivity are not carved through grand insurrections but through the subtle, quotidian operations of what de Certeau terms “tactics” –the ephemeral, improvisational acts of those who “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). The protagonist, Korobi, inhabits a subject position defined by absence –of her mother, her history, and institutional legitimacy. Yet this absence becomes her terrain of operation. Devoid of “a proper place” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 186), she inhabits the fissures of the symbolic order and poaches from within, refunctioning spaces, speech acts, bodily comportment, and even temporality as vehicles of affective and epistemic insurgency. Rather than engaging with hegemonic systems through frontal confrontation, Korobi is depicted as tactically insinuating herself within their interstices, improvising meaning and agency in the very spaces meant to render her inert.

The novel opens with a dream sequence that immediately stages the tension between desire and interdiction: “Salt and sand are on my tongue ... they fill my mouth, choking me” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 1). This sensorial collapse –within an otherwise fluid and sensual aquatic race– functions, in de Certeauian terms, as the incursion of the strategy into the domain of the tactic, a reassertion of patriarchal interdiction into feminine fantasy. The choking salt literalizes the symbolic violence that interrupts desire. The image of “tangled in my bedsheets” on her dead mother’s bed yokes personal trauma to an occluded maternal genealogy (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 1). This dream, as a textual artifact, encodes what Spivak might term the “effaced itinerary” of the subaltern woman –a memory so thoroughly repressed it reemerges only through metaphor and sensory disruption. Korobi’s subjectivity, then, is constituted in the liminal zones between symbolic inheritance and illegible affect, and it is precisely in these gaps that her tactics begin to proliferate.

One of the most profound manifestations of tactical resistance occurs in her preservation and rereading of the letter from her mother, which is hidden in her school trunk, a “first, cherished secret” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 3). The letter functions as what de Certeau calls a “poached” object, an artifact seized from the official domain of familial secrecy and transformed into a personal archive of counter-memory. In reclaiming this epistolary remnant, Korobi performs a textual reappropriation that undermines the strategic temporality imposed by her grandfather, Bimal Roy, whose panoptic control manifests through the destruction of photographs and the mythologization of lineage. By re-reading the letter, Korobi does not merely remember but rewrites the maternal past, generating an alternative historiography that destabilizes patriarchal pedagogies.

Such resistance is not confined to textual practices but extends to her embodied, sartorial defiance. This is perfectly demonstrated in her rejection of the “itchy, heavy silk” bridal sari and the “large bindi ... like an astonished third eye” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 13), which constitutes a refusal to inscribe her body within the visual grammar of caste femininity. As de Certeau asserts, “tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time ... they manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’” (1984, p. xix). Korobi’s bodily comportment thus becomes a site of aesthetic and political improvisation. In this regard, bare feet on the veranda, spontaneous singing, and private sartorial transgressions constitute a corporeal rhetoric that inscribes resistant meanings onto hegemonic surfaces. These micro-acts of defiance do not seek to dismantle the dominant order. Rather, they rewrite it from within, repurposing its symbols to serve alternative ends.

This logic of tactical appropriation extends to Korobi’s affective relationships, particularly with Rajat. Her confession, “the real reason I love him ... is because underneath it, I can sense a secret sadness” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 4), marks an affective poaching of her

mother's language of love, yet with critical distance. The confession reveals that rather than simply reproducing inherited tropes of romantic fulfillment, Korobi interrogates them to expose their insufficiency. Moreover, the spectral presence of her mother, "with no mouth" (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 5), haunts this relationship, a literal figuration of the unspeakable and the silenced female subject. This mouthless apparition becomes emblematic of de Certeau's tactical ethos—a haunting that does not speak but insists on being recognized. It disrupts the symbolic economy of gendered futurity embedded in the marriage plot and demands a recalibration of emotional epistemology.

The engagement party at the Oberoi Grand further exemplifies Korobi's tactical incursions into the spaces of bourgeois-nationalist performance. Her decision to purchase and conceal a "maroon kurti—off-the-shoulder", elicits "a mix of horror and pride" (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 18). This garment, secreted away in her almira, operates as a tactical archive of sartorial insurgency. De Certeau's description of tactics as clever tricks, dispersed, tactical, and acts that "make use of the cracks" (1984, p. 37) finds its analog in this act of deferred defiance. The kurti's hidden presence challenges the symbolic order from within and thus renders the wardrobe a site of latent resistance. The almira becomes a heterotopic repository of identity not-yet-enacted, a mobile archive of future ruptures.

In the culinary space of the domestic sphere, Korobi enacts a nuanced performance of disengaged participation. While the women prepare the feast, she remains affectively absent, observing but not internalizing. Her comment, "Maybe it brings back memories of my mother's wedding day" (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 13), is speculative, a distancing maneuver that refuses emotional capture. This temporal delay, this refusal to inhabit the symbolic fullness of ritual time, is a tactic of interruption, what de Certeau might term a manipulation of temporal economies to generate epistemic opacity. She appears complicit, yet never fully so. Her presence becomes a residue, a tactical shadow haunting the strategic performance of tradition.

Indeed, the Roy household itself is a paradigmatic strategic space: it operates under the logic of surveillance, ritual, and symbolic repetition. Bimal Roy's authority is spatialized through the orchestration of pedagogies, the strategic suppression of visual and historical archives, and the circulation of silences. Yet Korobi navigates this architecture through a mode of spatial re-inscription. Her retreat to the "overgrown tangles of bramble bushes" and collapse beneath the "ancient banyan" tree (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 55) functions as a spatial tactic, a moment of withdrawal and reinterpretation. The garden, not hers by ownership, becomes hers by use—by memory, affect, and introspection. As de Certeau reminds us, tactics operate in "the space of the other" (1984, p. 37); here, the garden becomes a practiced place, inscribed by her refusal to inhabit the strategic center.

The dissonance between strategic temporality and Korobi's refusal of its smooth progression is most evident in her decision to postpone her marriage to Rajat: "Until I find him, Rajat, I'm not sure I can get married" (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 67). This act of delay is not a mere postponement but a reconfiguration of narrative time. De Certeau emphasizes that tactics are temporal rather than spatial—they operate in time, not on fixed grounds. Korobi's refusal to conform to teleological sequencing interrupts the strategic flow of caste-nationalist ideology, reclaiming time as a site of agency. In suspending the operation of patriarchal futurity, she creates what de Certeau terms a "mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place" (1984, p. 36), or within an alien terrain.

This tactical repertoire is further extended by Korobi's diasporic journey. Her decision to "buy a map of New York, ask Desai about buses, learn to get around" is not merely logistical (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 113); it is epistemological. The map, conventionally a strategic object that organizes space from above, is here re-appropriated as a tool of self-inscription. Walking, for de Certeau, is "a space of enunciation" (1984, p. 98), and Korobi's intention to navigate the

city alone becomes a performative act of writing herself into the urban fabric. Her sandals, “unsuitable Kolkata sandals” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 114), embody her hybrid positionality: neither fully assimilated nor entirely rooted. These “misfit” shoes mark her as one who walks not in compliance but in dissonance, inscribing tactical presence upon the diasporic terrain.

The symbolic layering continues within the investigator’s office, where the interplay between technological modernity and ethnic marginality is particularly notable. Desai’s office, with its “sleek and modern” gadgets juxtaposed against the owner’s “biblical” hair and its crumbling Victorian walls (Divakaruni, 2012, pp. 114–115), stages the collision of surveillance and myth, modernity and decay. Initially intimidated, Korobi reclaims this space through narrative. Her request to speak “in private” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 115) is both literal and tactical—a refusal to be narrated by male authority. De Certeau describes narration as a practice “of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language)” (1984, pp. 97–98); here, Korobi repossesses the narrative domain, asserting her own truth against the strategic scripts of diasporic male epistemology. Her emotional response, reflected in tears upon receiving Desai’s kindness, registers not weakness but affective resistance. As de Certeau notes, “everyday practices [are] ‘ways of operating’ or doing things” (1984, p. xi), and these affective operations often disrupt the instrumental rationality of power. Therefore, her tears become a *détournement*, a diversion of bureaucratic space toward human empathy. Even her silences are tactics: withholding information from Rajat —“I didn’t tell him” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 137)— is not deceit but a tactical delay enacted from within a structure she does not control. Unlike a strategy, which presumes a stable position of power from which to manage relations, this moment of silence operates opportunistically within the very terrain of patriarchal expectation. By momentarily suspending disclosure, Korobi exploits the gaps of everyday interaction and transforms silence into a maneuver that resists the demand for patriarchal transparency without claiming sovereign authority over the situation.

Clearly, Korobi’s identity is not discovered; it is enacted. Through micro-resistances — i.e., poaching letters, manipulating garments, walking through the city, delaying decisions— she inhabits a tactical cartography that undermines the architecture of control without ever confronting it directly. As de Certeau writes, narration “establishes an itinerary (it ‘guides’) and it passes through (it ‘transgresses’)” (1984, p. 129). Korobi’s story is one of transversal gestures, affective insurgencies, and epistemic improvisations. She does not dismantle the house, the marriage, or the family—but neither does she become their captive. In other words, her journey is one of reauthoring from within, a surreptitious creativeness that composes, beneath the visible structures, a subtextual world of resistance. Korobi lives not in the architecture of revolution but in its shadow—where, in the folds of fabric, in the delay of time, in the unsaid and the improvised, tactics bloom. Therefore, Korobi’s trajectory does not merely chart a *bildungsroman* of diasporic self-discovery but orchestrates a complex choreography of everyday tactics within the normative structures of patriarchy, caste ideology, neoliberal capitalism, and diasporic nationalism.

The narrative continues by embedding resistance in domestic minutiae, foregrounding the character of Sarojini, Korobi’s grandmother, whose retrieval of a realtor’s business card from a cluttered drawer is emblematic of de Certeau’s notion of “silent production” (1984, p. xxi). Sarojini’s gesture is precipitated by infrastructural decay—the symbolic leak that forces her to reengage with forgotten possibilities. The act of retrieving “the card with its glaring-red logo” from a drawer of “miscellaneous items” is deceptively mundane (Divakaruni, 2012, pp. 165–166), yet it exemplifies what de Certeau defines as the use of “cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers” (1984, p. 37). The leak is allegorical, a rupture in the architecture of bourgeois respectability that exposes the fragility of

the space Sarojini is expected to safeguard. When she proceeds to call a real estate developer –previously dismissed due to class and gender anxieties– her act becomes a tactical reappropriation of capitalist instruments. She sells the ancestral home not as an act of submission but as a manipulation of spatial semiotics: she diverts the function of a space from its organizing strategy, converting domestic heritage into a contingent survival mechanism. It is not an erasure of history but a reencoding of it through affective pragmatism.

Parallel to this, Korobi's relational engagements with Rajat and Vic illuminate affect as a site of tactical subversion. Rajat, whose moralistic scrutiny and possessive surveillance of Korobi's body renders him a figure of strategic subjectivity, governs affect through patriarchal instruments of control. His inability to “trust” her following the Mitra scandal reproduces the disciplinary gaze de Certeau attributes to the rationalized, “totalizing eye” of systems (1984, p. 92). Korobi's decision to withhold communication until Rajat acknowledges his error is not a romantic interlude but serves as a discursive tactic, an assertion of narrative sovereignty within a landscape that insists on her transparency. This refusal to be readable on patriarchal terms exemplifies what de Certeau calls a non-proprietary practice, one that repurposes emotional labor as resistance. Vic, by contrast, offers a touch “like a falling petal” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 162), which resists consumption and closure. The ambiguity of the kiss, both acknowledged and deferred, disturbs the conventions of romantic narrative and bodily legibility. Her memory of it –“Why couldn't I forget it?” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 170)– does not operate as erotic longing but as ontological destabilization, a symbolic disturbance that rewires her internal maps of loyalty, fidelity, and desire. Here, affect itself becomes a tactical poaching of gendered scripts.

Moreover, the spatial imaginary of California functions as a palimpsest for tactical improvisation. Korobi's declaration that she will “play it by ear” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 171) inscribes herself within de Certeau's formulation of the “art of the weak” (1984, p. 37), which refers to a mode of being that privileges fluidity, responsiveness, and unpredictability in hostile terrains. Hence, her journey to California is not a pursuit of linear emancipation but a spatial disidentification with the genealogical burdens of the Bose household. In this relation, the sites she traverses –e.g., motels, airports, sidewalks– are not mere backdrops but function as what de Certeau identifies as “pedestrian speech acts” (1984, p. 97), embodied inscriptions that write subjectivity through movement. By refusing spatial fixity, Korobi thus rewrites diasporic space not as containment but as performative improvisation. In other words, her mobility enacts a refusal to be territorialized by nationalist, patriarchal, or caste-based scripts.

Perhaps most materially subversive is Korobi's decision to sell her hair. While this may appear a gesture of financial desperation, its symbolic implications are manifold. In severing her hair, which is a traditional marker of bridal purity and caste respectability, Korobi tactically sabotages the representational economy that codes women's bodies as sites of lineage and honor. Her assertion, “It's my hair” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 178), is not merely a claim of ownership but an act of *détournement*, a calculated re-signification of her body against the logics that have traditionally commodified it. The transformation, which is shown in “a mass of curls, barely reaching my shoulders” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 177), performs what de Certeau describe as a visual tactic, a disruption of the aesthetics demanded by heteropatriarchal scrutiny. She poaches this script and in so doing repurposes the act of selling her hair into a symbolic severance from the economies that have previously inscribed her body with cultural meaning.

Similarly, her silence after Rob Mariner's assault operates as a tactic of opacity. De Certeau notes that tactics often manifest as furtive, “multiform and fragmentary”, and indirect (1984, p. xv), resisting the rational logics that seek to order subjectivity into neat narratives. Relatedly, Korobi's refusal to explain herself is not passivity but tactical withdrawal from a juridical-discursive regime that demands victimhood be legible, confessable, and thus

narratable. Her silence protects not merely her dignity but her interpretive agency. In the same vein, her bond with Seema, a transgressive feminist solidarity enacted through whispered confidences and sartorial exchanges such as the Prada suit, functions as an emotional and material counter-economy. “I hope it’ll bring you good fortune” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 180), Seema says, converting the commodity into a relational currency, a weapon against the masculine economy of suspicion and surveillance.

This counter-economy extends into diasporic memory through the retrospective narrative of Anu Roy, relayed by Mrs. Anand. Anu’s refusal to “smoke pot” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 221) or compromise her family’s trust appears, on the surface, as conformity, but under de Certeau’s lens, it emerges as a tactical negotiation within structures of cultural surveillance. Her statement, “She told me her family had taken a big risk in sending her to the US” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 220), reveals not submission but a keen awareness of representational stakes. In this manner, Anu’s love affair, which culminates in her disappearance, is not a failure but a form of affective poaching: a transgressive appropriation of erotic agency within a field overdetermined by respectability politics. In other words, her affective vulnerability becomes a counter-strategy that dramatizes what de Certeau would call the “ruses of pleasure” that repurpose systemic norms for minor resistances (1984, p. xxi).

The intergenerational layering of these tactical inscriptions culminates in Korobi’s mirror scene: “Today I was looking at myself in the mirror, my skin, my hair –I’m seeing everything differently now” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 226). The mirror operates as both object and metaphor, a medium of re-visioning that enables the deconstruction of internalized race hierarchies. De Certeau refers to such acts as “inscriptions ... on the body” (1984, p. 139), which indicates a subversive writing that reclaims perception as epistemic agency. When Sarojini responds, “Then you would have looked African, too” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 225), her denial performs a final effort at strategic containment. Yet even this denial cannot withstand Korobi’s insistence on speaking her mixed-race identity aloud: “That I am half-black myself” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 226). In naming what has been disavowed, she carves out a discursive terrain where shame is transfigured into knowledge, and concealment into proclamation.

The final spatial reappropriations in the novel are no less radical. Korobi’s decision to remain in America, resisting Sarojini’s plea to “just come home” (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 225), is an assertion of spatial agency over emotional nostalgia. This choice enacts what de Certeau describes as the use of the “terrain imposed ... by a foreign power” to one’s own ends (1984, p. 37). The foreignness is not merely geographic but epistemic –the terrain of whiteness, neoliberal individualism, and diasporic expectation. By choosing to stay, Korobi does not assimilate but negotiates, poaching from this space a field in which she might craft her identity not as a derivative of Indian tradition or American liberalism, but as a tactical hybrid, an insurgent blend of affect, memory, and movement.

Divakaruni’s narrative thus renders the everyday as a terrain saturated with insurgent potential. Through gestures as minor as walking with “one precise foot after another” or reading a poem left behind by her father (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 275), Korobi enacts a de Certeauian grammar of resistance. Her life becomes what de Certeau describes as a story that “cuts across” the map (1984, p. 129), refusing to be reduced to the cartographies of caste, lineage, patriarchy, or nation. The final wedding photo, its spectral “two small ovals of light” and the conspicuous absence where the grandfather would have stood (Divakaruni, 2012, p. 288), captures this refusal: a negative space that asserts presence through absence, a gap that resists erasure by becoming legible. These silences, absences, and ephemeral gestures, though often dismissed as inconsequential, cumulatively compose a counter-history of minor insurgencies, through which Korobi reclaims narrative authorship and spatial sovereignty. In this regard, *Oleander girl* articulates what de Certeau names “a guileful ruse ... of the weak” (1984, p. 37), a mode

of living that infiltrates, repurposes, and rewrites the systems that seek to define it. Korobi does not destroy the edifices that contain her, but she subverts their semantic and spatial authority through tactics of delay, silence, improvisation, and affect. Her resistance is not spectacular but cumulative, dispersed across acts that, taken together, compose a theory of everyday insurgency. Her life, in de Certeau's terms, is a practice –not of survival alone, but of invention: a cartography of poaching, a writing of the self against the maps that would erase her.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has examined the underexplored terrain of everyday resistance in Indian-American Anglophone fiction through a de Certeauvian close reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander girl*. It has foregrounded how quotidian acts –often overlooked by dominant paradigms of feminist and postcolonial critique– can constitute potent forms of agency. Central to this investigation is de Certeau's distinction between strategies, which operate from institutional positions of power, and tactics, defined as temporally and spatially opportunistic maneuvers of the disenfranchised who must operate within the frameworks imposed upon them.

The central argument of this study has demonstrated that *Oleander girl* does not merely recount a bildungsroman of diasporic self-discovery but stages a dynamic choreography of everyday tactics whereby the protagonist, Korobi Roy, inhabits a fluid subject position articulated through absence, partiality, and improvisation. The findings have shown how her tactical engagements –ranging from secret readings and sartorial subversions to affective dissonance and narrative elisions– serve as calculated responses to hegemonic spatial and discursive regimes. These responses emerge not in oppositional revolt but as affective, epistemic, and spatial infiltrations that evade, refunction, and ultimately rearticulate dominant logics. The study has shown that Korobi's refusal to be legible within traditional frameworks –be it through the manipulation of domestic rituals and the temporality of engagement, or her refusal to conform to nationalist teleologies of belonging– exemplifies de Certeau's conception of the art of the weak as an epistemological mode of surviving and rewriting imposed systems.

Through this tactical lens, the analysis has illuminated how Divakaruni's novel foregrounds the embodied practices of subaltern female subjectivity not through explicit confrontation with patriarchy or diasporic nationalism, but through spatial reappropriations and affective disruptions that re-signify agency. Korobi's negotiation of domestic space, her spectral inheritance of a disavowed maternal lineage, her navigation of diasporic urban environments, and her re-inscription of emotional and familial structures have emerged as key vectors of tactical resistance. The findings also have underscored how temporality itself becomes a site of tactical intervention –where delay, hesitation, and silence are not marks of passivity but modes of resisting strategic sequencing and epistemological capture.

In conclusion, this study argues that Divakaruni's *Oleander girl* enacts what de Certeau names a multitude of trajectories with their own temporalities and thus offers a radical rethinking of agency that privileges the covert over the overt, the affective over the declarative, and the improvised over the institutionalized. Korobi's narrative is not one of radical rupture but of accumulative subversion –a poetics of presence constituted in absence, a politics of resistance articulated through the ordinary. As such, *Oleander girl* must be recognized not only as a diasporic text but as a tactical one, a literary enactment of everyday resistance that expands the boundaries of postcolonial feminist critique and demands a rethinking of how agency, space, and subjectivity are theorized in contemporary Indian-American literature.

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