



EXPOSING THE MENTAL TURMOIL OF THE CHARACTERS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ONE AMAZING THING*

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ABSTRACT



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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific and acclaimed writer. Women's oppression and their attempts at liberating themselves from restrictive emotional and familial relationships and social circumstances is one of the major themes in Divakaruni's fiction. *One Amazing Thing* is structured with the descriptive scenes. It is designed on the lines of travel fiction as often to be found in travelogues. The structure of the novel is the collection of the experience of nine travellers trapped in the Visa office at an Indian consulate after a massive earthquake in an American city. The group consists of a Visa officer and his assistant Jiang a Chinese – Indian woman and her Grand daughter Lilly, an ex-soldier filled with guilt, an Indian American girl Uma, Tariq a young Muslim man and an old white couple the Pritchetts. All of them are from different cultural backgrounds approaching with the different perceptions of human conditions. For the sake of diversion and also for the sake of escaping the shadows of lurking peril, it is decided by the group leader that they should tell each other stories, the stories exposing some emotional and painful memories. Despite the agony of losing their entire lives due to the tragedy, each one of them narrates the one amazing thing that occurred in their life. There may be confessions, pleasures, regrets and wishes in their stories but all of them staying together as a family and helping each other in their circumstances become more important. Divakaruni brings them all on an equal plank, a new paradigm with horizontal connections, an interdependence overpowering the vertical hierarchy.

Keywords: *Circumstances, Travelogues, Trapped, Earthquake, Lurking, Recognize.*



The amazing experiences happened in the lives of nine victims make the plot of the novel *One Amazing Thing*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni mixes her own experience of escaping from a hurricane hit against her house in this novel. Here she focuses on nine person's personal experiences who are trapped in an earthquake. They expose their sufferings in order to get solace. Through their experiences, Divakaruni portrays the reality of everyday life. Nobody can survive without facing any trauma. The mental turmoil differs from person to person but sure, it continues as long as they live. Everyone is forced to manage and control the turmoil. In this novel the nine heroes and heroines expose their terrible experiences while they are trapped in the visa office during an earthquake. Their expectations of landing in India fail as the massive earthquake hits. Divakaruni expresses some painful and emotional experiences of travellers through this novel.

Divakaruni gives equal importance to all the nine characters mentioned in the novel. They are trapped in the broken building fragments. There is no enough food, water, medicine or basic needs. They cannot escape from physical or mental pain. Amidst all these worries and sufferings, Uma proposes them to tell the amazing experiences in everyone's life. "Everyone has a story, I don't believe anyone can go through life without encountering at least one amazing thing" (OAT 65). It may be the mechanism of lessening their present pain and fear, strengthen psychological insight, improve confidence, and supports to forget others pain. The co-operative ideas can rebuild the life of the victims and they can be able to realize the reality of life. Divakaruni mentions in one of her interviews that the structure of the novel was modeled on the Panchatantra:

"In terms of the structure of the book, where everyone is equally important, I am going back to ancient storytelling forms, like the Panchatantra, the wise animal tales, where all of the animals are telling stories from which everyone in the company can learn" (Zupancic:5).

Jiang is an Indian - born Chinese woman. Who narrates the amazing story through her experience. Though she is a talented and successful

business woman, her personal life is very pathetic. Most of the Chinese people who live in India do tannery business and do not get enough respect or recognition from Indians. They are considered as lower people. They spend most of their time in their own camps. As a Chinese woman, Jiang starts managing her father's shoe shop. In the mean time she falls in love with a Bengali young man named Mohit Das, who belongs to an honorable and reputed family and works as a manager at National and Grindlays Bank. He hasn't enough courage to do anything against his conservative society. Jiang's turmoil strengthens in the form of Indo - Chinese war. This war makes huge exodus among the immigrants from India to China. Thus Mohit Das and Jiang separates and he does not help her because of his cowardness. Her love marriage is interrupted by the migration. The racism and casteism raise their ugly head.

Jiang immediately married a middle aged man and leaves to America. In spite of having a prosperous future, she feels about her past as a bog. She never likes to remember that her mental turmoil is the perfect example for what is happening in every migrants life. They always have the nostalgia towards their own land, their culture and life style. The earthquake worsen her turmoil more.

Malathi is another character who belongs to a conservative Brahmin family. Her parents want her to be married off as early as possible because of the common practice of the society. As a Brahmin girl she would have been married off but she wants to continue her teaching profession. Within these complications and many chaos she continues as a beautician in Lola's saloon and settles in America. After that she gets a chance to meet a radical woman Mrs. Balan who commits a great mistake towards her maid Nirmala. Knowing this, Malathi takes revenge and punishes her and she thinks that the tort performed on Nirmala is imposed overall female in the society. Malathi at the time of her immigration was warned against the impending perils of cultural diversities but the idea of earthquake as a hazard for their existence was beyond her imagination. She says,

No one, however had thought to caution her about earthquakes where she came from,



when people said America, many images flashed in their heads. But an earthquake was not one of them. (OAT 15)

Divakaruni explores the whole female's attributes through Malathi. Women will not always have tolerated the patriarchy, sexual abuse, slavery for years. One day they will protest and no one can bear it. It is proved by Malathi, then she moves to America.

The next narrator Tariq reveals his unsecured state in America. After the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, New York, USA in September 11, 2001, the innocent Muslims also are portrayed as terrorists. Tariq's father along with Hanif is arrested after this incident and his mother becomes paralytic. His family encounters the greatest temptation and goes into a pitiable condition. Behind all doors of the minorities everywhere, this is the real condition. The combined agony of the collapse of the Twin Towers irritates the whole life of the immigrants. They feel loneliness, helplessness, extra-ordinary physical and mental pains. Thus they become the refugee in that particular land.

Tariq experiences force to return in to their native land with their family immediately. Tariq tries to settle his parents and at the same time he is called by his lover Farah to stay in India with her. He is in a chaotic mood whether to stay permanently in India or return to America. Tariq concludes "From having put up my story against others, I can see this much: every one suffers in different ways. Now I do not feel so alone" (OAT 143). Through the characters Tariq the author brings out the internal turmoil of immigrants.

Mr. Mangalam recalls his childhood experience during that day. He says that playing of the flute is his only consolation and freedom. He feels a vacuum in his mind and the success in music makes him to realize the joy of life. So he feels "I played the melody for a long time, discovering something new" (OAT 146). From these words the innermost nostology of Mr. Mangalam can be viewed.

The next narrator Mr. Pritchit was hailed from South Indian family. He was born and

broughtup from extra helpings of food and new cloths on pongal to fees for the best school. He does not get love and affection during his childhood because his mother falls in love with her lover Marvin and spends her time with him. In order to avoid loneliness he brings a kitten to his home. One day it dies due to suffocation and he is very disappointed. Then he turns his whole attention towards his favorite subject Maths. After reaching a young and enterprising age, he falls in love with Naina, the only daughter of a well-settled family. They get married. They do not have mutual understanding and it digs a great orator between them. He longs for true love and affection from his wife but he does not get it. Mrs. Pritchit lives a luxurious life and never be respectful towards him or his family. When he falls in love with Latika, a moderate woman, his wife Naina imposes blame on her a theft of heavy amount and charged by the police. He wants to help her but he is warned by his higher officials. His mental witness tortures him. Eventually Naina attempts suicide. To bring diversion from this critical situation they want to have a trip to India. By narrating this both of them realizes their mistakes and get a chance to reveal their inner feelings and secrets that they are hiding in their mind more than thirty years. Divakaruni figures out the entanglement in men - women relationship. The mental turmoil reflects in the form of culture and habitual practices.

The next narrator of the story is Lily, Jiang's grand daughter. She is an over – protected child in the family. She is not treated as a grown-up but a pampered child. Her brother Mark is always praised and his achievements are spoken by her parents. She gets jealous towards her brother. By understanding this Mark tries to channelize her talents in a new way. Her interest in the flute playing receives many awards. In a course of time her brother's grades decreases in the University. She tells it to her parents and encourages him to promote. Divakaruni constitutes atmosphere suitable for the unfolding of the horrors that are often to be found in travelogues or picaresque novels of eighteenth century. Recalling the experience of Lily, Divakaruni records:



Lily imagined herself buried under that pile, wood and metal and pieces of glass pressing against her backbone, her mouth stuffed with dirt. She imagined feeling a hand around her foot, and then that hand going away. I'll wait here, she said It wasn't heroism. When she thought of her journey in reverse, slats of wood coming loose again in her fingers that uncontrolled sliding, it made her body heavy with terror.(OAT 51)

Through Lily's story Chitra Banerjee exposes that every child needs its freedom, self- identity and individualism. Nobody wants to be more protective. Every person has their own turmoil depending upon their age, situation and capacity.

The next one to narrate the story is Cameron, the veteran African-American soldier. Divakaruni depicts the evils of racism in the society through Cameron. Initially he rows to fight against the racism of the society. Even though he is a meritorial student in his childhood, his dream of becoming a doctor is disbanded. His lover Imami forced him to marry immediately and settle down in life by showing her pregnancy. He absolutely refuses and proposes her to abort. Later getting guilty over this he approaches a holy man and he gets advice to adopt a child. Thus he starts his trip to India to see his adopted child. The fate does not allow him to enter India.

The ultimate narrator Uma is a University student, who is enjoying her career. Her life is very amazing until her father announces the desire of divorce to his wife. After a course of time he withdraws his idea and asks her not to open the topic before her mother. The disgusting desire of her father makes a turmoil in her mind and fails to give concentration in her studies. She decides to return to India after twenty years. She draws all her money and decides to fly away.

Uma is the one who starts the narration and creates the dangerous situation into somewhat comforting till the rescue team arrives. She is also the one to bring end of the narration. Initially there is no mutual understanding among the nine trapped

victims. They suspect Cameron because of his black coloured skin and Tariq being a Muslim but soon they cope with each other. Sunalini comments about the emotional appeal of *One Amazing Thing* "Divakaruni gives the gamut of emotions and reactions to her characters. All of them carry at least a tinge of poignancy" (7).

Divakaruni gives a clear picture of human turmoil through the nine victims. Though they are from different views, ways, natives, religions, castes and races, they become adjustable to each other. They cannot consider and with stand their own ideologies, practices, cultures, views or any other reasons. They are in the destination of helping each other - by treating the injuries, sharing their meals, consoling others. The earth quake does not know whether they belong to the same community and religion. Everyone try to fly their flag high but it can be allowable only in their prosperities. Life is like a treking path and it does not be always smooth. While in the crust they can show up but in course of time it will change. Now they can realize the fact of Karma.

One Amazing Thing is an open ended novel. Divakaruni does not like to end up the turmoil by closing the novel. The end is depending upon the mind – set of the readers. The victims hear the sound of rescue team yet there is no conclusion that whether they rescued or not and their turmoils end up or not. Without any partiality the turmoil catch up each and every one's life. It may be between male or female, grown up or young, educated or uneducated, black or white, wealthy or poor. The colours may be changed. By sharing the amazing experiences they get consolation among them. This is life. Every character in this novel shows their own mental turmoil through their role as a father, mother, lover, friend and customers. Thus the novel *One Amazing Thing* is an emotional voyage of the characters struggling with their inner and onesselves to generate the psyche of depression and fragmentation.

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