

## Story is a Tool: Reference of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*

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### Abstract

The evaluation of contemporary Indian English Literature is indeed a difficult task. Since independence, it has acquired a new dimension as literary writers have adopted a new perspective towards their past and culture. Writers such as Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Toru Dutt, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and other eminent literary writers achieved global acclaim for their authorship. This array, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has come to occupy a prominent place in Indian literature with the publication of her poems, short stories, and novels. Her novel, *One Amazing Thing* is reputed and deals with immigrant experiences. In *One Amazing Thing*, the nine customers are trapped by a major earthquake in an Indian visa office in American. In this situation, each character narrates one surprising story from their life like love, history, marriage, and displacement. This paper discusses how nine major characters react in a critical situation and how they use the story as a tool.

**Key words:** Stories; Earthquake; Relationship; Nostalgia; Circumstance; Immigrant

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### INTRODUCTION

Indian writing English is a branch of study in the mainstream of English Literature. From the pre-independence to current times, the world has witnessed various movements and phases of Indian writing in English. Indian writers have been giving significant contributions to world literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poet, teacher, and novelist who was born in 1956, in Kolkata. She wrote ten novels, two short stories, and four poems, and her fiction has been translated into many languages. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is her first novel and immensely popular. Chitra Banerjee's novel set in the United States and India and portrays identity crises, marginalization, isolation, immigrant, assimilation and adaptation, racism, and nostalgia.

### STORY IS A TOOL

A man wants to express his feeling through the medium of language when he reads, observes, and understating things. Whenever he starts sharing his ideas, his communication naturally grows. When communication develops, the narration follows it. They are both interlinked and reliant on each other. The word narrative derived from the Latin verb *narrare*. It means 'to tell'. The narrative is at literature, music and song, dance, serials, speech, film, theatre, television, comics, painting, video, sculpture, visual arts, photography, journalism, and ect. Roland Barths says that "The narrative is present in every age, every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is or has been person without narrative.... It is simply there, like life itself" (*Introduction to the Structural Analyses of Narratives*, 65). The word 'story' may be used as a synonym of 'narrative'. The word 'story' comes from the Latin word '*historia*'. When people were sitting around the fire at night, someone said, "Tell us a story". Kent

Puckett remarks in his book *Narrative Theory* (2016) that “‘Story’ a sequence of action or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse” (p. 5). The story can be two categories: fiction and non-fiction. Stories teach human beings such as love, forgive others, and morals. Every story contains a lesson to the audience. Human beings convey his/ her pain, joy, and experience through the story.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* (2010) explores the different experiences and how nine characters come together and share their stories in the aftermath of a disaster. It is a beautiful and entertaining novel and the nine short stories contain a large story. Benna Agarwal says “Divakaruni makes the experience in the mode of travel narrative with the ample scope for the self-revelation of the character” (*A New Voice in Indian English Fiction* p. 22). The novel moves through nine characters like Jiang, Lily, Cameron, Uma, Mr. Pritchett and Mrs. Pritchett, two visa officers Mr. Mangalam and Malathi, and Tariq. The nine people stayed in a small room in the Indian visa office aftermath the natural disaster and they are very panic. At the beginning of the novel, Uma reads Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1387). She gets the idea from it and wishes to share one amazing story from life. When Uma tells her idea to everyone, all are acknowledged to narrate a story from their life.

The first narrator, Jiang narrates the historical account of the two countries China and India. She reveals her past memories of India and her love affair with a Bengali man. Nevertheless, when the war between India and China breaks out, her life is shattered and forcing the Chinese to leave the country. She does survive in their own shelter within the Chinese camps in India. She felt the agony of her unstable life with her identification as a Chinese in her recollections. She says, “But no one ever looked, on one gave the Chinese any through-not until much later. Indians considered us below them because many of us were in tannery business or owned leather goods stories. That was okay with us. We had our own people, and we have got from them everything we needed” (*One Amazing Thing*, p. 68). In this respect, the author expresses the mental turmoil of displaced people.

In the novel, Malathi is a young lady and working at the Indian visa office in the United States. She has left her home in Coimbatore to settle in the United States. She narrates two types of story; childhood experience and the story of Ravi, Mrs. Balan, and Nirmala. The story reveals the cunning nature of Mrs. Balan and her treatment of the maid Nirmala when she comes to know about their love affair. Mrs. Balan doesn’t like the love development between Ravi and Nirmala but she surrenders to Ravi’s wishes. In order to end this affair, Mrs. Balan takes Nirmala to Chennai to attend her brother Gopalan’s birthday party which for separation from Ravi. Malathi had formed a relationship with Nirmala and she

considers Malathi as her sister. Malathi couldn’t forget what Mrs. Balan had done to Nirmala and she decides to take revenge upon her. Mrs. Balan comes into the parlor to curling her hair for the engagement party of Ravi. Malathi gets the direction from Lola to use a liquid to wash the hair of Balan. During the process of curling, she mixes some chemicals. For this horrible fault, Malathi leaves from Coimbatore. Eventually, Malathi gets a job in the Indian consulate in America. It was another mode of revenge in the life of women. With these types of revelations, Chitra Banerjee presents her concern for women.

If Jiang represents the issue of Chinese immigrants living in India, Tariq represents the poverty of a minority community in his recollections. In his narrative, there are secret recollections of the events of 9/11, and how they distorted the fate and predicament of Muslims. He tells how they were humiliated after the attack at the Trade Centre, and he remembers the arrestment of his Abba. Their identity was suspected and they were forced to leave America with their families. Tariq returns back to India but he finds himself half and a half on the realization of his position. Insecurity, fear, and nothingness dominate his consciousness. The author points out here the sensibility and insecurity of immigrants moving to the global community.

Another narrator Lily is a Chinese girl who expresses her childhood experience in her life. Lily’s parents believe that her brother Mark is a perfect child, obedient, polite and gifted but Lily is bad, make small problems, sleep late, skip homework and miss classes. Her brother secretly teaches the flute to her. The effect is that Lily moves to the other side becomes obsessively concentrated on perfection, and constantly training to win competitions. In the novel, Lily’s tale occupies a key role.

Manglam is a visa officer who tells memories of childhood and his love for Naina to everyone. He meets Naina a dinner and expresses his love. When Manglam’s parents visit his house, Naina doesn’t give respect to them and she behaves as a crucial woman. Moreover, she doesn’t like Manglam to speak with other women. He asks Naina for a divorce. It effects he misbehaves wrongly with other women. The self-realization of Manglam and misbehave with Malathi are listed here “Naina’s still my wife. I can’t forget that... I don’t want to die without telling you that I’m sorry for my misbehavior” (p. 164). He confesses that all that happened in his life was not Naina’s mistake as it was him. Finally, he reunited with his wife Naina wholeheartedly.

The next narrator Mr. Pritchett came from South Indian to America. At his innocent age, he feels his mother’s love and affection. He adjusts himself by doing his personal works in his life. He comes in contact with Naina who the daughter of government officials. Mr. Pritchett married Naina with her father’s permission. Naina was generous

enough to manage all household expenses herself. It relieved him of his financial burden and he was left free to send all his cheques to his parents for repaired the roof and medical bills. His parents had planned to visit his new fancy flat and new wife. Naina who retains western sensibility no longer cares for the sentiments of parents. Here, there is a reflection of the clash of tradition and modernity. He comes to a bitter realization and it distinctively exposes the insecurity existing in the male psyche: "Those of you familiar with Indian traditions will realize what an insult that was to my parents and to me. But couldn't say anything. Naina's last sentence made me aware of how beholden I was to her. It was her flat I was living in her food I was eating. Even job I held was due to her father's string pulling. I was ashamed that once I had considered these indications of good fortune" (p. 157). Such a negligent attitude brings a lot of chaos and isolation in Mr. Pritchett's life. He realizes that made the biggest mistake in his life by marrying Naina. The author remarks here how western culture destroyed the family.

In chapter 'Fourteen' Mrs. Pritchett dwells on narrating her own story. Mrs. Pritchett expresses her unhappy marital life. She is solely devoted to the management of the household and waiting for her husband. Depression and Desperation make her restless. She takes sleeping pills and swallows whole alongside two glasses of wine. She feels "suspended like jellyfish in the darkening waters of her mind" (p. 169). After the revelation of this terrible incident, she reveals her own consciousness. She makes a confession, "what terrible discovery did I make that pushed me into this desperate action? It was this, my husband did not love me the way I needed him to" (p. 169). Finally, the doctor advises her that you must live in a peaceful place for her health, so she decides to go to India.

Cameron, in *One Amazing Thing*, an Afro-American, ex-soldier, recalled her lover, Imani. He meets her at a party and built a physical relationship with her. Its effect Imani is pregnant by Cameron. When Cameron suggests abortion, Imani starts crying and she says "You want to kill our baby?" and 'it so important for you to get away from you people" (p. 183). She quit him by swear. After their separation, Cameron shifted from India to America due to his guilty consciousness. Cameron joined the army and spend his leisure time with Jeff, who Buddhist priest. His voluntary service at the hospital and his service to the orphanage rendered him satisfied. He decides to adopt a child. Finally, he adopts a child from an orphanage and sponsors the child. He applies for a visa to go to India to see his adopted child Siva. In the world, many children

don't have still food, dresses, house, and parents in life. Cameron's story will be a lesson to all to follow in life.

Everybody had revealed his own story but Uma was still waiting for her turn to pour out some suppressed pain of her heart. Uma reveals the facts related to her own college days. She recalls that one day she receives a call from her father from California. It was unusual. Her father informs her, "I can tell you this. I'm planning to get a divorce. Your mother and I no longer have anything in common except you and we've launched your successfully into the world" (p.196). Thousands of unanswered questions haunt her consciousness. She fails to focus on her studies and pretends to be ill to escape the burden of the assignments. However, in this relationship, she finds the reflection of betrayal that completely shatters the smooth course of her life the earthquake on the board. In the following reflection of Uma, Divakaruni presents a reconstruction of the fragmentation of the child psyche in view of the breach of the relationship among the parents. She says "But thing were not the same. The relationship between my parents and me had shifted... I was careful to withhold the deep of my being, the plea to my mother that would have shattered if she had learned of my Father's betrayal" (p. 206).

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## CONCLUSION

Divakaruni gives a clear picture of human turmoil through the nine characters. Though they are from different natives, religions, castes, and races, they become helping each other - by treating the injuries, sharing their meals, and consoling others. *One Amazing Thing* is an open-ended novel. Divakaruni does not like to end up the turmoil by closing the novel. The victims hear the sound of the rescue team yet there is no conclusion that whether they rescued or not. When people share their feeling and sorrow with other people, they can solve their problems temporarily.

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