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REVIEW ARTICLE

RE-NEGOTIATION OF LOYALTIES AND RE-BUILDING IDENTITIES: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ONE AMAZING THING*

*Sudhakar, B.

Assistant Professor, Department of English (SF), Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture, Palani, Dindigul

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*Corresponding Author:
Sudhakar, B.

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ABSTRACT

As an acclaimed author and master storyteller, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has a yearning for creating characters torn between the past, present and future. She brings real humanity to her stories and a belief that the universal can be found in the most personal of stories, as stereotypes fall away to be replaced by self-actualised individuals. After the collapse of colonial empires in the twentieth century, many indigenous writers documented their voices in literary works. Postcolonial writers assert their visions, tell their stories and reclaim their history through academics. Divakaruni is one such writer whose immigrant experiences are aesthetically documented in *One Amazing Thing*(2009). This paper aims to avert the "Re-Negotiation of Loyalties in Relationships" in the world. Its effect on the immigrants is examined in response to the new dimension of diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial theory deals with literature produced in countries that were now colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonising countries that take colonies or their peoples as its focus issue. The theory is based on the concepts of oddness and conflict. According to Edward Said, "the ancestry of postcolonial criticism can be traced to France Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French in 1961, and voicing what might be cultural resistance to France's African empire" (Qtd. in Barry, 139). Academicians that postcolonial theory came into existence to show the people's actual life, culture, religion, and racial resistance against colonial invasion into their territories. The truth is that one does not know much about all these things. The theory stands for the present and future and opposes remaining still in the dim light of colonial subjugation. People who lived in utter poverty in the colonial period continue to live their lives in the past, even postcolonial times. The poorest people were unaware of their culture, how life must be, and how to lead a decent life, and they did not even have rational thinking. The pre-colonial concept focuses on the Postcolonial period, and then it speaks also about the cultural, traditional and linguistic, especially language fragmentations which prevailed in the native languages. However, with the invasion of the colonial powers, the culture and language of the colonised were strangled.

They could not develop at all and, as a result, remained the same with non-native influence. The postcolonial theory exclusively dealt with the reading and writing of literature written in earlier and currently colonised countries. And literature registered in colonising countries that deals with colonisation and colonised peoples. It focuses mainly on how literature by the colonising culture distorts the experience and realities. It engraves the weakness of the colonised people in literature by colonised peoples, which attempts to communicate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that inevitable strangeness. The present reading addresses some of the intricacies of the postcolonial condition in terms of identity and rebuilding identities as narrated by Divakaruni in her writing. Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing* is a novel of love, loss, marriage, betrayal, guilt, romance, misdeeds and characters disclosing their true selves. All the issues are unravelled under natural disasters and earthquakes. This disaster raises suspicion, and threat and finally brings people together to create a new community in terms of negotiation. Violence is another primary subject that is explored. The novel demonstrates how disaster and violence help build a new community and in redefining its identity. The stories of the characters help in weaving their relationships. The tales in the novel speak of their transformation, salvation through revelation breathing into them. Their loyalties are renegotiated in crisis. The immigrants of varied ethnicities gathered in the Indian consulate. Uma Sinha is waiting in the visa office of the Indian consulate and has a look at the other people around. No wonder there

are people of different races gathered together. They all have various plans to go and do in India. Uma's thought is expressed as follows: "It was not uncommon, in this city, to find persons of different races randomly thrown together. Still, Uma thought, it was like a UN summit in here. What were all these people planning to do in India?" (4). The presence of different diasporas in America is not questionable now. The first and the second rumbles are well ignored by the other races assembled in the Visa office, which paved the way for forming a single community in uniting relationships. It was as though a giant had placed his mouth against the building's foundation and roared. The floor buckled, throwing Uma to the ground. The giant took the building in both his hands and shook it. A chair flew across the room towards Uma. She raised her left arm to shield herself. The chair crashed into her wrist, and pain worse than anything she had known surged through her arm. People were screaming. There was dirt on his tongue, shards under his fingertips. He smelled of burning. He moved his hand over his face, over the uneven bones of his head, the stubble coming in already. She needed to fix her sari, which had fallen off her shoulder, but her right hand was pressed tightly against her mouth, mashing her lips against her teeth, and she dared not relax it (04).

The situation became a disaster in the Visa office, which collapsed the entire unit. It shattered the plans and ideas of people who awaited their trip to India. The aftermath of the earthquake is immense to each character. Any impact of a traumatic experience, natural or artificial, is judged by emotional and psychological behavioural symptoms because trauma results from extraordinarily stressful events that shatter the sense of security, making one feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world. Thus, they are separated in thoughts and distance, as they are already scattered geographically by birth and culture. The characters are forced to spend several hours in the dark, dusty building. In each other's company, they try desperately to cope with the seemingly never-ending torment of being caught at the bottom of what increasingly appears to be a giant heap. The earthquake has turned the city scorching. On the one hand, the survivors are unable to escape themselves without hope to be rescued. On the other, they see destiny closing in on them, and every resistance, tangible and intangible, against its foreseeable progress comes down, like the walls and ceilings that appear to be gradually giving into the weight of the more extraordinary collapse above. The earthquake leaves the trapped victims initially knocked out and disengaged. Their situation is dismal, as the hallways are blocked with debris on the rock face of total collapse. With electricity and phone cut off and water seeping into the basement from a broken pipe, helplessness and fear grip the ensemble. There are short periods of fights, bitter arguments, mood swings, devastation, denial and irritability. At this time, a Vietnam veteran, Cameron, volunteers to handle the nine traumatised people, putting them together, treating injuries, rationing available food, calming people and making a survival plan. This African-American soldier's handling of the situation and guidance motivated them to form a community. They fight initially. At first, there was bias in people, and they fought to lead the group. Their attitude showcases their adamant behaviour in them, which is part of their cultural representation. The older man allowed himself to be pulled away, but the younger one flung him off with a curse and wrenched at the handle again. Cameron advised the people not to touch the door. But the younger one did not heed his words.

Tariq asks: "Why should you decide what we're going to do? Why should you order us around?" (32). Finally, it is clear as people of different races are ready to assimilate them to handle the situation. Thus, Cameron is elected, and it is proved through the voices: I vote to follow his strategy and offer him every cooperation. Other representatives joined him, leaving Tariq stranded. Initially, the characters suspect each other based on race and colour. Cameron's black skin makes him appear violent, and Tariq's beard gives him the appearance of a terrorist. However, through their stories, they become one and help each other heal, which helps to overcome the crisis. By assisting Uma, she gets some relief from her pain; the sari of Malathi is needed to tie her in her arms.

Malathi, a Tamil Brahmin girl, was shocked and refused to shed her dignity in doing so. She cried: 'Illay, Illay!' She cried in a tone that was impossible to be mistaken. As the situation demands, the cultural setup is loosened, and she relocated herself to the present location by wearing a sweatshirt. "Then she shot Uma a look of hate, snatched the sweatshirt from her hand, and retreated into Mangalam's office. A few seconds later, the blue sari came flying through a gap in the door" (25). Sharing the food in hand is significant in highlighting the diasporic issue in the novel. People of different cultures and ethnicities consume what is in writing. Cameron portioned out the perishables: a turkey sandwich; three hard-boiled eggs, accompanied by salt in a bit of twist of paper; and most of a salad that Mrs Pritchett had left uneaten. Malathi Ramaswamy was one more time cautioned to accept her identity in the multicultural circle. Malathi was compelled to throw away her cultural character to remain one in the present community. Mangalam's words proved this point: 'Have you gone crazy?' he whispered angrily in Tamil. 'This isn't India. You can't interfere in people's lives like this. Leave them (Divakaruni59). Mangalam considered her act unprofessional conduct and made apologies to Mr Pritchett. Divakaruni herself says: "The stories the characters tell when trapped in a life-threatening disaster transform their emotions and their relationships with each other, and that is truly amazing" (Utpal Borpujari). To overcome this emotional trauma, Uma suggests that they focus their "minds on compelling something" (65). Despite the agony of losing their entire lives due to the tragedy, each one narrates one fantastic thing that occurred in their lives. The range of stories that each one narrates pictured from childhood abuses strained marriages, and loss, unrequited love gives each character a choice to restore that one amazing feature to bury the past coldness, forget selfishness and inner violence and become compassionate. There may be confessions and wishes in their stories, but staying together as a family and helping each other in dire circumstances becomes more critical. All the characters in the novel are equally important, and their stories are equally crucial to creating the community, which brings the readers closer to understanding human nature. Divakaruni believes that it is vital for a creative person to explore pain, which her characters in the novel undergo. "Pain can help a character to grow, or it can destroy a person. It is in painful moments that the essence of who we are is often revealed"(Utpal Borpujari). It is with much pain that the characters narrate their stories. According to non-Chinese belief – the ghosts, as they were called – the children were taught from the beginning to stay away from them to keep family secrets safe. In this utterance, Jiang reveals that the Chinese people are not supposed to show their family secrets to 'others', but she breaks the taboo to make 'others' feel comfortable and stay with her story. She admits this: "I would be the first to break this taboo", Jiang said (68). Jiang attempts assimilation as a critical role in the diasporic context to ease others in the traumatic condition. In the story of Jiang, violence occurred in the form of the Indo-Chinese War of 1962. There was a massive migration of the Chinese population living in India. Families were separated due to the explosive situation of the war. The love life of Jiang and Mohit Das came to an end. Mohit says: "I love you, but I can't fight a whole country" (76). And she has to flee to non-native places to save her life. The violence turned up the life of a Chinese girl in non-native lands like India, and she moved to America, a hub of multi-cultures. In Malathi's story, violence in the shape of class boundaries is addressed. Ravi highlights: "Rigid class boundaries were the bane of Indian society and should be broken down" (12). MrsBalan's Machiavellian tactics foil Ravi's love with her servant girl Nirmala. The terrorist attack over the towers of America caused unforgettable bitter experiences in the lives of Muslims. Also, post 9/11 brought a curse on Muslim's lives. Desmond Harris writes:

I spoke to nine Muslim Americans about how misunderstandings, stereotypes, and hateful rhetoric about their religion have affected their lives in the years since. Their experiences vary with age, race, geography, and the visibility of their faith. Some live in daily awareness of dirty looks, rude comments, and constant fear of violent retaliation. Others have pursued careers in activism or processed their questions through work in academia. A few make it their mission to change minds about Islam through daily

interpersonal interactions, and must keep a careful eye on political rhetoric as a powerful shaper of the country's climate. All of them agree that since 9/11, nothing has been the same. (Vox)

In *One Amazing Thing*, Divakaruni narrates, Tariq's father and his assistant manager, Hanif, were arrested without legitimate explanation. Due to people's rare visits of customers affecting their business after 9/11, the situation worsened in every possible way that the immigrant janitorial services also became active less. Tariq's mother went hysterical after her husband's arrest. After three days of detention, he was sent back home, but the case of Hanif was a mystery. Hanif never returned from then. One day while watching T.V, Tariq's father Jala's mental pressure and torture ended up in a stroke. It was a lousy time for Muslims in America. Tariq was advised to return to their native land. As a member of the second generation, Tariq considers America his homeland. "Apart from my lifestyle differences, there was another issue: This was my country. I was American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage" (Divakaruni131). The political upheaval against Muslims in response to 9/11 compelled Tariq to move out of the US. Tariq, while concluding his story, says, "From having put up my stories against others, I can see this much: everyone suffers in different ways. Now I don't feel so alone" (143).

All the stories are unique in their possible way. Rob Neufeld says, "each story is a revelation ("one amazing thing") and a salvation. The survivors can feel "all right" and bridge cultural boundaries with compassion" (1). *One Amazing Thing* narrates a different message under similar cataclysmic circumstances. Jhumpa Lahiri comments, "*One Amazing Thing* collapses the walls dividing characters and cultures; what endures is a chorus of voices in one single room" (Goodreads). A sense of a single community formed from multi-cultures is evident in the actions mastered by Cameron and Uma. It shows the role of the newly emerged community in healing the trauma. It heals their afflicted spirits making them humans. More often than not, the hope of finding deliverance results in a self-attestation of stereotypic virtues as expected relating to the colour and culture of Divakaruni's characters. Out of the nine characters, only four of them are of Indian origin. She talks about the Indian culture and how it has formed:

Multiple images. Each character has an idea of India that is quite distinct from what others believe. Some are more fact-based. Some are largely imagined. To some characters, the journey is one of adventure and possibility. To others, a homecoming. To yet others, India is a chance for beginning anew or of spiritual reparation. (Borpujari)

This dialogue again amounts to a message that has universal value. The book, as Divakaruni says, celebrates diversity, among other things. It also helps to form a community through stories, violence and calamities. It is crucial here to observe how man learns to cope and understand the essence of humanity, especially in a crisis. A striking line at the end of the first story by Jiang sums up the narrative voice of the novel:

When had it happened? Looking back, I could not point to one special time and say, There! That's what is amazing. We can change completely and not recognise it. We think terrible events have turned us into stone. But love slips in like a chisel – and suddenly it is an axe, breaking us into pieces from the inside. (85-86)

Divakaruni is a spell-binding storyteller whose language and inventive imagination create an enlightening transition, transformation, and rebirth journey. As a great contemporary writer, her skill lies in creating rhythmic moments. She controls the story and bends it the way she wishes. The advantages of reading her work are many. She writes in a lyrical state, picking her style, which is simply unrestricted and rhythmic. She weaves an aura around her characters that readers find hard to resist. Divakaruni spent a considerable part of her life in India and then moved to America. The experience she uses entirely to her advantage. Though not autobiographical, her stories reflect that Indians living their dreams outside India, even if doing well, are devoid of an identity.

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