

## THE HUMANITARIAN HUES IN THE MOSAIC TALES OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ONE AMAZING THING*

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### Abstract

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's One Amazing Thing (2009) is a collection of human sub-consciousness. Caught in the clutches of natural calamity, the people trapped are faced with the challenge of surviving the odds and moreover their fear of the strangers. It is in the darkest hours of their lives that the caged souls of the apprehensive, distrustful and traumatized ego finds its conscience and give each other a piece of their spirit as an offering in the altar of Life Force. As the characters evolve in their persona with their confessional anecdotes, the readers along with, the other characters finds themselves wondering more about their own actions, becoming empathetic to others as they learn to forgive themselves. In the moment of terror, they chose to pass on their memories, the narratives of lost lovers and painful pleasures, regret and self exploration, redemption and restitution, so that they can be remembered for who they truly believe themselves to be. Like our ancestors, they chose storytelling to pass on their legacy and commemorate the human spirit.*

**Keywords:** *Death, Human Spirit, Narrative, Life, Hope.*

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The chronicle of our civilization like many before us have been marred with violence and bloodshed, it is so common place that we have learned to live with it. Every day the International news channels show reports on the ever going war in some distant nations and the subsequent refugee crisis, death and famine, war crimes and its brutal retaliations, and yet all we do about it is change the station so that we can eat our meals in peace. Death is but a mere fact of life, something we hardly think about, but how many of us are blessed enough to have time to reflect on our lives and make peace with it? We are strangers even to our own truest emotions and thoughts, if we fail to acknowledge them. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *One Amazing Thing* (2009) has exquisitely portrayed the lives of strangers stranded under the rubble of the Indian Consulate, due to earthquake. The unfortunate situation heightened by the anxiety and fear of the uncertainty, leads to more chaos. Through the perspective of Uma Sinha, an Indian-American girl, who happens to be a student of English Literature we come to know that ‘There remained four sets of people in the room, apart from Uma.’ (3) The first set being the old Chinese- American woman, Mrs. Jiang Chan with her teenage granddaughter, Miss. Lily Chan, second being a Caucasian couple Mr. Lancelot Pritchett and Mrs. Vivienne Pritchett, the third was Tariq, a young Indian-American Muslim man and the fourth was Mr. Cameron Grant, an African-American Army veteran.

It was not uncommon, in this city, to find persons of different races randomly thrown together. Still, Uma thought, it was like a mini UN summit in here. What ever were all these people planning to do in India? (4)

Uma had not included the officials of the Visa Office, Ms. Malathi Ramaswamy and Mr.V.K.S. Mangalam, who can be considered as the fifth group.

As they survived the shock of the earthquake, after initial arguments they collectively focused on surviving on the limited resources, till the time they are to be rescued. There was an open tension between Tariq and Cameron, the writer has hinted on the American- Islamic tension that led to war on Iraq and Islamophobia on the International level. Tariq openly defies Cameron's suggestions, ' "Why should you decide what we're going to do?" he said. "Why should you order us around?" ' (32) Also Uma's first thought on hearing Tariq's name candidly presents the Islamophobia that was in the subconscious level of almost everyone imprisoned there. 'A Muslim name. Uma wondered if that had anything to do with his violent outburst; then she was ashamed of such a stereotypical thought.' (23)

After an unfortunate altercation, arising from a domestic argument between the Pritchetts, resulting to physical violence between Tariq and Mangalam, Uma decides to be a pacifier and suggests,

Unless we're careful, things will get a lot worse. We can take our stress on one another— like what just happened— and maybe get buried alive. Or we can focus our minds on something compelling—... We can each tell an important story from our lives. (65)

And so begins the process of storytelling, each survivor offers the deepest most sincere part of their soul, inviting the others behind the 'spirit wall' like that of Jiang's childhood house 'built for the express purpose of deflecting the outsider's gaze.' (68)

Jiang, being the most elderly in the face of impending death has nothing more to fear from the strangers, for she has lived all her life among strangers, offers to share her life first. Astonishing her granddaughter Lily and those present there, she begins with the story of her youth in India, her forbidden love and its betrayal, her exodus from India and the struggle of new life in America resonates with her listeners on different levels. Hers is a tale of surviving all odds and making the most of what life throws on your way. Thus one by one each waits for their turn to unburden their soul.

Mr. Pritchett's story of the boy Lance delves deep into the psyche of his unconsciousness, his Oedipus complex

He wants to tell her she's the one who doesn't understand that things were so much better when there were only the two of them, snuggled in their whale quilt. Her raspy, lovely morning voice reading to him on Saturdays is only a memory now. (96)

His need for unconditional love, which he gave and lost in his childhood and which soured his life for any devotional affection in future, unfortunately his wife being at the receiving end. 'He has never loved anyone in the world as much as he loves this kitten. He will never love anyone this way again, with nothing held back.' (95) Mr. Pritchett had been hoping for a 'validation for the suffering of the boy he had been.' (123), from his wife but her silence had disappointed him, she on the other hand felt cheated that her husband didn't trust her enough to share his secrets with her and also because she feared she would embarrass him by expressing her sympathies in front of people.

Malathi wanted to share her story next, her story is of her hometown in India and she talks about the suffering a woman, with no substantial finances leading to her exploitations at the hands of those better fortune than herself. In the Miss Lola's Lovely Ladies Salon which had been her hopes for her dream life, she comes in contact with Mrs. Vani Balan and Nirmala. The Machiavellian tactics of Mrs. Balan on the naïve Nirmala and the latter's subsequent fall from grace twists something inside of Malathi and in a daringly stupid act she tries to avenge Nirmala by making Mrs. Balan a laughing stock. On being asked why she chose this particular incident to share, Malathi replies,

It was the only time in my life I did something brave, even though it was a big cost for me. I don't think I can do that again. I am too selfish. So it is special to me. (123)

Tariq's story echoes with that of many narratives of the Muslim-Americans after the 9/11 incident. Like many of his community members his life too is under the shroud of distrust, his affiliations are questioned, his faith is interrogated and the land where he was born and which he called his own makes him feel like a leper. 'This is my country. I was an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage.' (131) In this turmoil Farah, his love interest had been a great support, but even she failed to totally understand his plight. It was in Jiang's story that he finds some peace and sense of closure. He surmises, 'From having put up my story against the others, I can see this much: everyone suffers in different ways. Now I don't feel so alone.' (136)

After Tariq, Lily finally gets her chance to share her story, she narrates about her picture perfect family and her more than perfect brother, whose achievements makes her parents wanting her to be more like him, and her rebellions to strike a different tone to catch her parent's attention. Her successful affair with music makes her feel accepted but soon she gets tired of the monotony of her classes and competitions, which is not much of a challenge to her. It was in her solitary walks on the beach or playing her own compositions for the strangers at the park that filled her with the peaceful contentment.

Mangalam's narration of his family, his married life and his extra-marital affairs changes the way people perceives him. Through the narration we see how an ambitious youth pays heavily for the accomplishments he bargained with his marriage and how his hollow marriage makes him a puppet, cutting him off from his parents and Latika, and in a bid to get away from his marital-bondage he throws away what little self respect was left to him. In the end of his story he accepts that, "I got away geographically... But not legally. Or psychologically... Maybe today in a while, I really will become free." (164) He later adds, as if in an afterthought, "It wasn't all Naina's fault," Mangalam continued.

I started the cycle of wrongdoing. I used her to get what I wanted. It's only fair that she became the cause for losing what I wanted even more. Karma's wheel is intricate. (164)

It is Mrs. Pritchett who next volunteers a story, but she apologizes in advance for how her story may hurt her husband and also explains why her story is different from others,

The way I see these events is not how he views them; it cannot be. I only hope that he – and all of you – will see by the end why I had to tell this story.

You've been speaking of events that shatter lives in a day's time: wars betrayal, seduction, death. In my case, my life was turned around by a man I didn't know helping his wife take of her coat. (166)

This simple act of public display of affection touches something deep in her consciousness, it clutches onto her until she realizes what it is about the act that affects her so. 'It was this: my husband did not love me the way I needed him to.' (169) Thus when she does make this 'terrible discovery', she finds herself unable to go on to living with it for another day. She politely points out that her husband had always provided her well and she in return had kept a well managed household for him, well trimmed gardens and hosted parties for his clients and friends, so far she had filled her childless marriage with busying herself around her husband and desired for nothing more. However, this incident had made her question about her existence as Vivienne, and not as Mr. Pritchett. She sadly confesses that 'I was bankrupt, and it was too late to start over.' (170) and thus to end the meaninglessness of her life, she tries to commit suicide. When she is revived in the hospital she encounters an Indian nurse, whose existence she is unsure of, yet who helps her channel her energy on something positive. While Mr. Pritchett was undertaking the trip to India so that his wife may recuperate from her depression, Mrs. Pritchett on the other hand had been planning to desert her husband and try and find a new life in a strange exotic land, 'moving to live where no one knew you, shucking off your worn-out life like old snakeskin!' (171)

It is Cameron who decides to offer his story next, he speaks of his ambitious youth, how he had worked hard for a college credit and it came precariously close to destruction by his then girlfriend, Imani's unplanned pregnancy. Fearing that the child might tie him down to her and the life he desperately wanted to be free from, he asked her to abort their child. Years later when he would drop out from college and retired from the army, he finds it hard to look back and regrets his decisions. To atone for his sins he volunteers at hospitals and where ever his skills

may be required to make a difference. Like the way he took charge to help his fellow survivors have a better chance, until help arrives. He was in the Visa office to procure a visa to visit Sewa, an orphan girl child in India he had been a sponsor for, and whom he planned to adopt. She was his ray of hope, his chance to lay his demons to rest.

The last storyteller of the lot was Uma, who was the first character introduced in the novel, it is as if, the circle has come to an end. Her narrative exposes the fragility of human relations once in college an unexpected call from her father turns her world upside down. He lets her know now that ‘we’ve launched you successfully into the world’ (196) he plans to divorce his wife. Uma is baffled at the announcement and in haze she mopes around, until she decides to leave everything and everyone behind and take road trip with an acquaintance, Jeri and a stranger, Ripley. On the road, high on marijuana, and witnessing the bright lights on sky, that was actually due to a blast at a nearby chemical plant, which they believed to be ‘aurora borealis’, she has an epiphany. ‘Something had happened as I lay in the field, watching the sky, an understanding that I couldn’t control the lives of others— but neither could they control mine.’ (204) She returns to her old life but resolves to never put her in the place where her mother would be, if her father had not timely changed his mind to divorce her. Years later, when Uma lies to Jeri, who wanted to know the truth if what they saw was indeed aurora borealis, she does it to comfort her dying friend whose last words to her are ‘Did a lot of stupid stuff. But at least I saw one amazing thing.’ (208)

The unfolding of the situation and how the motley of strangers comes together to help each other survive is a tale of nothing less than heroism. Though each faced their traumatic situation in their own way while Tariq went to his religion for strength, Mangalam compartmentalized the crisis, ‘Right now, his brain was a file cabinet where he had shut all the drawers except one.’ (52) Lily had her music and Cameron focused on surviving the present, ‘But he couldn’t afford the luxury of reminiscing.’ (46) Just as Cameron’s life saving skills helped them protect their body, it was Lily’s music ‘She played a melody, short and serene, and the light fell through the ruins above them and shone on her for a few seconds before it died away.’ (152) and Uma’s suggestion of storytelling, that helped each one not just stay calm, but make peace with their life. People started looking beyond their fears and thinking about the others, at times sacrificing for others. ‘Uma noted that there were more snacks now than she had

originally counted. People must have taken things out of their secret stashes and put them in the pile...' (147) The characters too evolve with the knowledge that they may not be rescued in time and thus try and find peace in their last moments, Mangalam who once feared that Malathi's exposure might damage his image among those who might be the last people he would see before dying later confines in Malathi, 'I think we might die here... I don't want to die without telling you that I 'm sorry for my behaviour.' (165) Since it may be the last time anyone had a chance to know them, their need for approval is urgent, 'Uma suddenly felt it was crucial that she ask the company what they thought of this.' (208)

Awaiting the imminent disaster, 'One man began a cryptic prayer, "God, let it end, let it just end fast!" ' (190) it was as if the collective prayer voiced by one. The novel ends with a not so definite answer to the predicament of the characters, whether they are saved or they die waiting is left unanswered, however we know for sure that each have searched in 'their own Mnemosyne, pool of memory, drawing their dearest secrets out of them,' (191) and now if they survived they would never be the same again. The writer has made an effective use of narrative voice bringing out the desired result and just as Chaucer's pilgrims made their voyage, the characters of this novel too have travelled far and wide, deep and high in search of the meaning of their existence.

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