

PARADIGMS OF SURVIVAL: DELINEATING THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ONE AMAZING THING*

Sambhu R., Assistant Professor in English, N.S.S. College, Pandalam, Kerala
Anjana R B, Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kollam, Kerala

Abstract

The term “diaspora” has come to acquire a multitude of varying connotations. The historical roots of diaspora, which stretch back to biblical times, has since come to evoke the voluntary or forced movement of people across national boundaries. In case the movement was voluntary, it was often the result of seeking greener pastures or a longing to reunite with one’s parent community, and in case it was forced, as it most often was, it was occasioned by colonialism and racial persecution. Although a number of writers have been contributing actively to Indian diasporic fiction ever since the dawn of Independence, there have been few who have been able to balance diasporic politics with compelling narrative techniques. A name that stands out in this respect is that of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a major Indian diasporic writer often described as a story teller of exquisite lyricism. She weaves a suspenseful and unforgettable survivor’s tale in *One Amazing thing*, published in 2009. The present paper titled “Paradigms of Survival: Delineating the Quest for Identity and Survival Strategies of Migrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* is an attempt to throw light on the inner turmoil of the characters in the novel as they try to come to terms with their diasporic identity.

Keywords— *diaspora, hybridity, identity, migration, survival*

The term “diaspora” has come down to us from the Greek word *diaspeirein* meaning “to disperse” (Merriam Webster 2021). While the traditional definition of the term in the Biblical-Roman-Jewish tradition emphasized the circumstances of the origin of the migration, the recent usage emphasizes the end result of the migration—the presence of diasporic communities. The term now captures the sense of the self for various communities in the decentred, post-modern and globalised world. Diasporic writing, as such, deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity, double consciousness, assimilation, belongingness, hybridity, acculturation, marginalisation and reinvention of several cultural domains especially those of religion, race, dress, food and music. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. Uma Parameswaran has defined the immigrant experience as:

[T]he first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (165)

Suppressed distress and anguish brought about by the change in the environment create a distinct and unique sensitivity which imprints diasporic writings with the authenticity of emotional upheaval. Diasporic literature offers a fresh look at the diversity of multicultural reality. The diasporic subject, most of the time, emerges as a metaphor, constantly seeking its own meaning as it shuffles back and forth in its imagination between recollected homeland and adopted home. A sense of displacement is a perennial theme in all diasporic literature. The displacement also gives rise to the concepts of double consciousness and unhomeliness which mark the diasporic identity. It is apt to quote Lois Tyson who analyses this concept thus:

Double Consciousness and unhomeliness are the two features of post-

colonial diasporas. ‘Double consciousness’ or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused...To be “Unhomed” is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself; your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak. (421)

Indian diasporic writers like Uma Parameshwaran, Geetha Hariharan, V SNaipaul, Bharathee Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, AnitaDesai, Kiran Desai, Chitra BanarjeeDivakaruni, though settled abroad, express theirlove for motherland in their writings. Apart from these, there are many noted writerslikePreetaSamarasan, BapsiSidhwa and Jhumpa Lahiri, writers of Indian origin butborn outside India who have portrayed the loneliness and the feelings of the secondand the third-generation immigrants of not belonging to their home country or hostcountry.Theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayathri Spivak and Stuart Hall have also played a key role inpromoting diasporic studies.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born July 29, 1956) is a novelist, short story writer and poet hailing from Bengal although she settled later inthe United States. Hailing from the soil of culture and traditions, herwritings deal with the wide variety of life in India. Immigrant experiences, especiallythat of the women, turn out to be a recurring concern in her works.Her career as a writer beganin 1987 with the publication of her first book of poems *Dark Like theRiver*, published by the Writers Workshop, Calcutta. It was followed by her workslike *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle: Poems about Women fromIndia, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1991), *Leaving Yuba City* (1997).Not much later, with a realistic mode and description of the complicatedrelationship within a Bengali family, her second novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) wasreleased. It dealt with the theme of discrimination against women in India while itssequel, *The Vine of Desire* (2002) had too much soap opera of the predictablestoryline. The beginning of the Twentieth century was a flowering period in herliterary career with her other novels, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *Queenof Dreams* (2004), *The Lives of Strangers* (2005), *The Palace of illusions; ANovel* (2008) which portrayed the experience of Panchali from a feminist perspective, *One Amazing Thing* (2009), *Oleander Girl* (2013) and *Before We Visit the Goddess*(2016) are her recent works.

One Amazing Thing is a riveting novel written in the form of a garland of stories by ChitraBanerjee Divakaruni. The plot, which unravels through the stories of nine differentpeople from ninedifferent cultural backgrounds, interweaves elements of Indian myth and culture, to create a captivating story that is as much about the struggle for identity as the ability to reclaim it through the act of narrativizing one’s experiences. The plot follows the nine predominant characters being stuck in the visa office at an Indian Consulate after a massive earthquake strikes in an unnamed American city. The group, which makes several futile attempts to ease their way out of the debris, comes to the conclusion that they have to wait out the catastrophe until help arrives. They decide to keep up their flagging morale by helping each other to whatever food they have and by recounting stories from their lives. These stories that have a strong personal flavour and are reminiscent of the frame-narrative structure of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*, present the group with the only chance of survival. These stories are selected so carefully and honestly that each of them forms “one amazing thing”— a secret they have never parted with before, and which holds the key to their individual as well as diasporic existence.

As already mentioned, the important characters in this novel include nine people who represent avariety of nationalities—African-American, Caucasian, Chinese andIndian, each with its own set of religious beliefs. Cameron, an African-American and the unofficial leader of group, Tariq a young Muslim, Uma, a student of Indian origin, Lily and Jiang, a granddaughter and a grandmother, Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett, Malathi, an official at theIndian consulate and Mr. Mangalam, another

official at the Indian consulate are thenine important characters who appear in the novel. There are several instances in *One Amazing Thing* where Divakaruni explores diasporicelements through the different characters and their life stories:

They had loved their jobs, plunging enthusiastically into theirworkdays. They had celebrated weekends with similar gusto, gettingtogether (in between soccer games and Girl Scout meetings andBharatanatyam classes for Uma) with other suburbanite Indianfamilies...bemoaned the corruption of Indian politicians...To which hermother had replied, with maddening good humour, “But sweetie, allthat has changed. It’s a different India now, India shining! (5)

This passage explores the double consciousness of the Indian origin peopleliving in America. It expresses their anguish, liking and concern for their homecountry and also presents the life style which they always crave for amidst Western modes of existence.

For the Diaspora community, it is very hard to leave the country behind eventhough one has left it in a material sense. Immigration becomes the majormotif in post-colonial literatures across the world, but in Diaspora Studies, it is looked at from a differentperspective. First, it is a very personalexperience, second, migrants are unhappy with having to ‘settle down’ in the adoptedland which seems more like ‘settling for’ that land, sometimes at the cost of theirsensibilities. One is entirely cut off from one’s family and has an existence with atotal lack of direction. One may also experience cultural shock and constant pressurewhich leads to emotional stress.

The element of nostalgia and sense of belonging are the other two importantdiasporic elements highlighted in Divakaruni’s novel. Nostalgia functions as anemotional reassurance, as a bridge between the past and the present, as a path toexplore east-west confrontation, and as a channel to relive and remember. This isevident in the character of Uma who expresses her feelings for her homecountry in the following words: “Though she had always decried touristicamusements, she felt a sudden desire to see the Taj Mahal” (7).

Uma’ s American life has alienated her from the Indian tradition of belonging andfamilial bonds. She is not able to connect with her family back in India and is oftenconfused to take a decision regarding her life. The following passage reveals theturmoil in the mind of Uma:

Uma looked down at their intertwined fingers and was surprised to see that Ramon’s were as brown as hers. But this was not right. Ramonwas lighter skinned. In this not quite a memory, Uma’s eyes moved uphis brown arm, his shoulders, and his neck, until they alighted on his lace. She gasped because the man was not Ramon at all. He wasIndian. (177)

The cultural and emotional difficulty faced by the expatriates in their adoptedhomeland is featured in this novel through the character of Tariq. This character whilediscussing his life story had mentioned how after the 9/11 attack in New York hefound himself changed because of the changes in the society which viewed Muslimsas a threat. He explained how he started growing a beard and became extremelyreligious. Although living in America, Tariq reveals his own state of mind. He tells the tale of his incredible love for Farah. She is the daughter of his mother's childhood best friend. She came to America to further her education after graduating from the University of Delhi. Her mother is a widow. Farah can only mix with other Muslims from India. She used to go to the mosque on a regular basis. She is uninterested in music, movies, or magazines. He stops shaving his hair when she touches and loves it. After the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City collapsed, innocent Muslims were labelled as terrorists. Following the events, Tariq's father and Hanif are arrested. His family has been through a lot of difficult times. Many immigrants' stability and security are harmed as a result of their status. They experience feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and mental anguish. His experiences compel him to return with his family to his

homeland. Farah asks him to join her in India. He can't decide whether to remain in India or go to America.

Tariq has dual feelings as an Indian and as a Westerner. This dual feeling is a characteristic feature of Diaspora. Once Tariq realises that the Western culture has alienated him from his native land and culture, he realises his rootless feeling and his inability to connect with his homeland. The characters in the novel tend to practice their traditional customs and religion and it is often too conscious. This is seen in the following lines where Malathi presented her religious nature- "Krishna Krishna Krishna-but most of all a prayer for forgiveness for she might have been the reason the earthquake had happened" (14) Most of the emigrants possess a strong desire to retain their traditional values and traditional lifestyle even when they are away from their homeland. This is seen in the novel through several incidents when the characters narrated their life stories.

Divakaruni presented race consciousness through Tariq's life story and Cameron's episode. Cameron, the African-American ex-soldier represents the segregated section of the society where coloured men and women were considered taboo and were racially considered inferior. He is haunted by the mistakes that he had made in his early life. His ambition to become a doctor has been dashed. Imani, his lover, puts pressure on him. By revealing her pregnancy, she persuades him to marry her. He declines, requesting to abort the foetus. Imani curses him and throughout his life he suffers from breathing problems. He believes that it is the consequence of his wrongdoing towards Imani. He feels guilty and disappointed. He also tells a holy man, Jeff, about his sin and seeks his guidance. He makes the decision to go to India.

Alienation and rootlessness are the elements that lie at the root of the Diasporic experience. These emerge in the novel through the characters of Uma, Lily, and Malathi. Malathi begins an affair with her official Mr. Mangalam, and once the earthquake occurs, she suddenly feels that it is the result of her "Karma". She allows herself to be an adopted and Westernized individual at the same time she clutches to the Indian roots, at the cost of realizing at the end that she belongs nowhere.

Uma, another central character whose parents have a deep fascination for their hometown Calcutta however could never connect with her parent's retirement dreamland. She never had a sense of connection with India. It was through her parents that she realised and got to know what India was. Nothing fascinates her in India except her sudden desire to see Taj Mahal, the monument of love. It is through Mr Pritchett that the writer has presented nostalgia in the novel, a strong feature of diasporic writing. He has also presented her as an alienated individual not belonging to any social groups and not being able to connect with anybody.

Malathi is a strong woman character who breaks out of her shell to overcome all the barriers erected by society. Through this character, Divakaruni portrays the double consciousness that exists in the mind of the expatriates. People from the East experience double consciousness in terms of their language. In this globalized world English is considered as the lingua franca, as a language that has the ability to serve as a proxy for so many neglected native languages. Malathi faces some issues in using the English language comfortably and she attends several training classes to keep herself at par with Western societal standards. Jiang, Lily's grandmother portrayed in the novel, is not interested in exposing her childhood memories and had created a boundary around her. As soon as Lily hears the story, she wonders thus: "Gramma really fooled us all these years, pretending she didn't know what we were saying, forcing us to speak Mandarin!" (82)

Diasporic literature is a journey into the grim reality of the emotionally and culturally volatile life of Second-generation emigrants. Writers from all over the world have experienced and explored the diasporic community. It also serves as a mediator between the material and spiritual worlds, between the bygone and the future sphere of experience and tends to dwell on the memory of the past and the thoughts of the upcoming generation. Indian diasporic writers reinvent their birthplaces in their literary works by making use of native myths, customs and legends. Diaspora writers often focus on the dispersion and trauma of people who live away from their homes.

The novel *One Amazing Thing* can thus be regarded as a novel that presents the distorted, displaced and demolished section of the society who gets trapped in a niche between life and death. The novel is more like a psychological journey because each of the characters describes their life stories with uncompromising and often heart-wrenching honesty. The concept of “Trishanku” as introduced by Frederick Monika is a term used to refer to the diasporic community. Monika has taken this term from Indian mythology to address the mental confusion faced by the diasporic community when they belong to two different cultures. All the characters in the novel express this dilemma at some point of their lives. Monika considers the tug of war between two cultures as similar to the accursed state of Trishanku who “wanted to reach heaven in his mortal state” (5), having enlisted the help of Vishwamitra, but was denied admittance since he was still in a corporeal form. She considers the homeland as exercising the same pull on its immigrants as Vishwamitra who took exception to Trishanku being denied entrance and kept him airborne between heaven and earth. The separation from the home country, she argues, far from severing the umbilical cord of national affiliations, serves to strengthen all bonds.

Diasporic writing reveals how two contrasting cultures coexist in people who live away from their homeland and have adopted their present nation as their homes. Diasporic literature addresses the clash between one’s native culture and adopted culture. In *One Amazing Thing*, Divakaruni has tried to address this particular issue through the characters of Tariq, Lily, Jiang, Malathi and Mangalam. Divakaruni’s writing asserts that diaspora is not just a scattering or dispersion but it is an experience which happens through a blend of culture and multiple journeys. It is an experience which is determined by the questions like who is travelling, where one is heading to, and under what circumstance it is taking place.

In her novels, Divakaruni mainly analyses the lives of women turned upside down by the universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder in order to articulate the diasporic dilemma and double consciousness. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s fiction, we tend to see characters living away from home countries and planning to visit their native land once. Most of these characters are conditioned by their native upbringing but have risen above their traditional constraints. Most of the characters created by Divakaruni are also distanced from her homeland. Even though these characters think rationally, psychologically they retain some of their traditional beliefs. Important to note is the instance of karma depicted at various places in the novel which inculcates a sense of Indianness in a thoroughly foreign setting.

Through her work, Divakaruni has presented themes of alienation, self-questioning, self-transformation, the search for identity and the exploration of roots. *One Amazing Thing* presents different characters’ sense of belonging to the native and the adopted homeland. The work thus portrays a clash of cultures and the issues that beset individuals brought up in two worlds. The multicultural beliefs of these characters prevent them from taking any particular action and they are haunted by several ideas.

The subtle emotional excavations, rekindling of memories, positive images of homeland and the mixing up of the cultures add lustre to the novel. *One Amazing Thing* by Divakaruni can be seen to explore the theme of compassion and mutual understanding where diversity leads to unity and hybridity and thus the work becomes universal. The novel can thus be classified under diasporic literature on account of its theme as well as characterisation. The climax of the novel is also interesting because Divakaruni has not followed the traditional way of ending a novel; instead, she has left it open for the readers to imagine and ponder over. Thus, the work is evidently postmodern because the author has captured the multiplicity of life experiences from a hybridized perspective. The fate of all the nine characters in the novel remains unexplained and Divakaruni invites the readers to interpret the rest of the story.

Works Cited

Benson, Eugene, and L.W. Conolly. *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Jijnasa : A Journal of the History of Ideas and Culture

ISSN : 0337-743X

Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.

“Diaspora.” MerriamWebster.com, 2021. <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/diaspora>. 10 May 2021.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *One Amazing Thing*. Penguin Books India Private Limited: New Delhi. 2010. Print.

Frederick, Monika. *Diaspora & Multiculturalism: Common Traditions & New Developments*. New York: Rodopi, 2003.

Hawley, John C. ed. *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Studies*. Noida: Gopsons Papers Limited, 2004. Print.

Miller, Jane Eldridge. ed. *Who's Who in Contemporary Women's Writing*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Monica, S. “Portrayal of Women as a Powerful Force in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels”. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*. June 2016. Web. 4 Nov. 2019.

Parameswaran, Uma. *Writing the Diaspora: Essays on Culture and Identity*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007. Print.