

---

## **THE MINGLING OF IDENTITIES AND THOUGHTS IN CHITRA BANARJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL "ONE AMAZING THING"**

**Nirali Singh**

*Research Scholar, Manipal University Jaipur*

---

**Abstract:** Fear of death is the biggest fears in the world. When one is confronted with it then only he understands the futility of life. It is the memories and experiences only that count at the end of the day. Our times of crisis make us aware of some bitter and sweet realities of life. Things that seem to be too dear to us seem so futile and make us feel ridiculous and the things that were considered very basic and ordinary turn out to be our saviours, in our testing times. The novel *One Amazing Thing* written by Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni is the story of human emotions and sentiments. The present paper tries to evaluate how critical situations can transform ordinary humans into extraordinary beings. The paper is an attempt to analyse extra-ordinary stories of people from different cultural setups and beliefs that are brought together by a natural disaster, stories that take us through self-realisation and acceptance of one's true feelings, truths and secrets without any guilt, regret or hesitation.

**Keywords:** Identity Crisis, Humanity, Fanatical Times, Struggle, Memories.

---

**Introduction:** The novel is set in the US and takes place in the visa office in the basement of the Indian consulate. It is a usual day in the office with regular people in the waiting area, waiting for their turn to go through an interview to acquire a visa to India. The crowd comprises of an elderly, Caucasian couple Mr. Lancelot Pritchett and Mrs. Pritchett, an old, Chinese granny Jiang with her granddaughter Lily, aged thirteen or fourteen, a twenty-five year old Muslim boy named Tariq Hussein, a lanky African-American Cameroon, an ex-soldier of the US Army, Uma, a child to Indian immigrants in the US and two visa officers Malathi, the assistant and Mangalam, the boss. Everything seems to be normal at first. The staff of the visa office is busy scrutinising and checking papers while the visitors are idly passing the unproductive time. But suddenly the city is struck by a massive earthquake.

“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....Above her the ceiling collapsed in an explosion of plaster. Beams broke apart with the sound of gigantic bones snapping.” (pg 9)[1]

The earthquake, followed by a heavy downpour made things ugly. The visa office was terribly shattered, with pieces of broken furniture and glass spread here and there. There was darkness in which only cries and groans of the injured could be heard. Uma had huddled herself up under a chair and got her left arm fractured. Everybody was panic-stricken and everything was in a mess. The Afro-American commander Cameroon tried to figure out that the things could turn out very bad if people acted in panic. He commanded everyone to stay still and calm. He bandaged the injured and asked for eatables and medicines, if anybody had any. He cautioned people to be watchful and stay close to each-other.

Disasters don't come alone, they bring along death, injuries, panic and anxiety. Panic-stricken people react in strange ways because their discretion is the first thing to leave them. The young muslim, Tariq tries to push open the door of the visa office in order to escape from the basement. But the commander pushes him aside as the door could be the only support on which the whole ceiling could have been sitting. Others retaliate to this act of the commander strictly. He never wanted to hurt anybody but he had to because he was not sure that the boy would listen to him. He wanted everybody to be safe and in doing so he got everybody's harsh words and hatred in the first place. Sometime later, Mrs. Pritchett is caught by her husband taking sedatives more than the prescribed amount for her. The couple indulges

in a heated argument wherein Mr. Pritchett tries to snatch away the pills. At this moment Malathi comes to Mrs. Pritchett's rescue and states,

'Give her back her medicine. Give it back. You have no right to treat her like that just because you are her husband.'(pg 59)[1]

Mangalam had overheard Malathi's words, pulling up her arm he says, 'Have you gone crazy? This isn't India. You can't interfere in people's life like this. Leave them alone.'

To this Malathi retorts, 'Don't you touch me. Don't tell me what to do? What do you men think you are?(pg59)[1]

Lily pushes and hits Mangalam when he doesn't leave Malathi. Mangalam tries to hit her back, which enrages Tariq and he starts beating up Mangalam badly, throttling him up until Cameroon comes to rescue the victim...that is Mangalam.

This incident is an effect of being stuck in a situation where one's hands are tied with helplessness and abandon. The fear of death in the minds of the people in the visa office gets transported into their actions in the form of abuses and blows.

As they wait for the rescue team in the claustrophobic dark, Uma decides that everybody should indulge in a game, A game where everybody would narrate at least one story which they could say was one amazing experience of their lives, because if panic had to be eked out of the vicinity people need to talk in a positive manner. Initially, nobody feels interested in whatever she says. They have their excuses ready, to escape from the task. But slowly and steadily they develop interest and start sharing their experiences.

The incidents and experiences that the survivors share with each-other portray them in a completely different identity. From earthquake survivors waiting for the rescue team, they show themselves as an embodiment of various human emotions and behaviours.

Chinese granny, Jiang is the first person to narrate her story. She tells about how her life was all ok till the Indo-Chinese war began. She doesn't feel ashamed about her ardent love story with an Indian banker, Mohit, rather she speaks with great pride and comfort in front of her grandchild Lily about her past. She narrates all her experiences when she was in love with an Indian boy and how fate ruined her love story.

Mr. Pritchett is the next person to narrate his story. In his tale one finds the loneliness of a child born to a drug addict, drunkard mother. The painful and abusive childhood that Mr. Pritchett spent developed him into an extrovert adult, who busied himself in business and its calculations. Same is the story of Cameroon. The Afro-American, army man was never so disciplined in his teenage as he became after joining the army. He indulged with a girl and fathered a child, but when confronted by the truth of fatherhood, he suggested an abortion. This deed of his infuriated the girl and she cursed him for being at unrest for all his life. To find solace he wishes to adopt a child from an orphanage in the North-East India.

On the one hand, Cameroon's and Mr. Pritchett's stories were dark and full of misery or a lack of satisfaction with life, on the other hand Malathi's takes everyone along with the reader into the beautiful and mesmerizing world of a beauty salon, where high society ladies visit to cover their ugly, bitter realities. Malathi develops a fondness for the place on her first visit and she decides to work there. During the course of her employment she upsets one of the high profile clients and thus has to leave her job at the salon and join the consulate with the help of her generous employer.

Tariq reveals the pain and anxiety the muslims in the USA go through after the 9/11. His story is full of anger and helplessness because being a citizen of America, he and his family and other muslims like him are treated like outsiders and looked over with suspicion. His anger and sorrow is visible when he says,

‘This was my country. I was an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage.’(pg131)[1]

In Tariq’s tale we find delineation from the place where he was born and called himself the native of. He is forced to move to India, a place which is juxtaposed to the American culture and lifestyle. The same idea of delineation is reflected in the novel *A New World* written by Amit Chaudhari. The protagonist of the above stated novel Jayojit feels delineated to the place where he was born and brought up. His prolonged stay in the US has made him alien to the whole Indian setup. He is an Indian citizen working in the US, who never wishes to return to his motherland.

Lily is a true reflection of the teenagers and her over-anxious parents worried over the prospects of their child’s future, symbolise the figure of modern society parents who fail miserably to understand the emotional needs of their child. They keep stuffing the child with modern gadgets but do not understand that the he or she just wants a bit of their attention and care. As teenagers become hostile towards their parents same ways Lily thinks that her parents don’t love her at all and just sideline her for no valid reason. She suffers psychologically and finds herself lonely and abandoned.

Times of crisis can generate more serious problems. Such situations on the one hand can give rise to fights, loot and crimes on the other hand they can also set examples of human behaviour and compassion. The disaster ties strangers into an unspoken relationship called humanity. People start helping each-other, even when they themselves are going through pain and suffering. Malathi gives her saree to Cameroon to make a plaster and a sling for Uma’s broken hand. Initially, she finds it quite immodest and unacceptable when Managalam tells her that she would have to take off her saree, but after a while she understands the urgency of the situation. Everybody gives whatever eatables or drinks they have for everyone to have a small share in it. Nobody acts selfish, baring one or two instances. People give a helping hand to each-other. Uma herself being in severe pain thinks about Tariq’s injuries and goes to lend him medicines. The way Cameroon runs here and there to help people and makes things work out of nothing, shows that humanity is still alive in the hearts of people.

The situation could have been very different where people could have murdered each other for food, water, medicines, etc. Disasters create situations of panic and trauma which can cause more chaos and suffering. But the survivors in the visa office maintain their dignity as humans and do not lose their cool. Rather they narrate their life histories in order to keep away the negativity and hopelessness that irresistibly seeps in such frenetic times. Though strangers, but they go an extra-mile to help each-other when struck by the disaster. Malathi gives her saree to be made a sling for Uma’s broken hand. Everyone contributes the eatables they have. They help each-other in every possible way.

Love is also an underlying theme of the novel. The love of the survivors for their lives is incredible. In situation of a disaster people lose all hope of survival and chose to die before the actual death steps in. But all the characters in the novel, struggle hard to live and think the right way. They not only lose hope but also find a unique way to avoid conflict and increase empathy.

Mr. Pritchett’s care for Mrs. Pritchett is a fine example of the bond of love. The way he manages his home during her illness and looks deeply after her well-being, shows that love just does not mean exchanging glances and sending gifts. Jiang and Mohit’s love for each-other displays that love can happen across cultures and sees no boundaries.

All the stories narrated by the characters in the novel are apart from each-other but they all are a reflection of life and its expression. Humans are driven by their situations and some situations create magnificent examples of mutual understanding, empathy and acceptance. It is evident from the novel that how identities change with the changing situations, circumstances and places. Every story holds importance and significance in the lives of the characters. They are not just stories but life changing experiences for them. There is no room for either questions or suggestions. One cannot point out why the other way was not chosen. They are plain stories of the way they handled their lives and adjusted

with it. Travelling from various backgrounds these survivors end up caught in the basement amidst an earthquake and subsequent flood. Their stories reflect difference of backgrounds but at the end they are an outcome of human psychology and behaviour put to test in a variety of circumstances and situations. All the characters started with one identity that is visa seeker to India. With the earthquake and heavy rains their identities shift and they become victims at the hand of nature. During the course of the narration, everyone changes from earthquake survivors to sufferers at the hands of life. There is a mingling of identities shown by the author. Tariq's remark seems so apt and true,

For 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. (pg136)[1]

**References:**

1. Divakaruni, Banerjee Chitra. *One Amazing Thing*. Washington D.C: Penguin, 2014. Print.
2. Chaudhari, Amit. *A New World*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
3. Kumar, Amit. *Concept of Nationalism with Wound of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines"* IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science. Volume 20, Issue 7, Ver. IV 2015; ISSN: 2279-0845. Print.

\*\*\*