

HUMAN RESILIENCE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ONE AMAZING THING*

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ABSTRACT

One Amazing Thing by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an inspiring and deeply moving saga about the incredible resiliency of the human spirit in the face of natural disasters. In the novel, fascinating events unravel against the daunting backdrop of a massive earthquake. This riveting tapestry of nine dazzling stories, skillfully woven together by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, unfolds when a group of nine people, from startlingly disparate backgrounds, are unexpectedly trapped in the visa office at an Indian embassy in the aftermath of a gigantic earthquake. The present paper is a modest attempt to study the indomitable and indefatigable resiliency of the human soul in the face of a gigantic adversity.

Keywords: ecofeminism, ecocriticism, nature, natural disasters, ecology, environment

One Amazing Thing by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an inspiring and deeply moving saga about the incredible resiliency of the human spirit in the face of natural disasters. In the novel, fascinating events unravel against the daunting backdrop of a massive earthquake. This riveting tapestry of nine dazzling stories, skillfully woven together by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, unfolds when a group of nine people, from startlingly disparate backgrounds, are unexpectedly trapped in the visa office at an Indian embassy in the aftermath of a gigantic earthquake.

While anxiously awaiting and praying for their miraculous rescue from their unforeseen confinement, they begin to narrate stories, each one of them harking back to the 'one amazing thing' in their life. As they begin sharing intimate things they have never articulated before, the ubiquitous walls dividing the novel's characters on ethnic and racial grounds, start collapsing gradually. Their life-affirming stories underscore what it means to be human.

Like the storyteller of the iconic *1001 Arabian Nights*, the characters of *One Amazing Thing* recount stories with the lofty intentions of saving one another. Hence, the nine stories are a tremendous infusion of hope and courage, they are an echo of solidarity and kindness amidst uncertainty. Like Scheherazade, Divakaruni's characters reckon that "speaking out-taking a risk and taking a stand-could be the difference in saving one's people or in allowing the chaos to go unchecked" (Bennett 185).

As Christopher Hobson says, "Disasters are ruptures in the basic functioning of society. Without downplaying the terrible damage they bring, they also create important opportunities to empower people and potentially bring about deeper changes in a society" ("Human" 32). He further adds that as "these terrible events do hold within them the possibilities for beneficial change", we ought to "identify and emphasise this more positive component" (33). Divakaruni, too, seems to hold similar views.

We all know that natural disasters are beyond the control of human beings. As Brannigan says, "Nature has its unforgiving way of reminding us that we are inescapably in-between, situated

within time and place” (1). However, in the novel, *One Amazing Thing*, Divakaruni shows us that how we regulate our response to such calamities makes all the difference. In the novel, a natural disaster provides the sweeping background which acts as a catalyst of change in the life of our nine characters.

The nine stories recounted in the novel are so intimate that we can feel every single emotion of the person narrating them. They transcend cultural boundaries as the struggles and failures of Divakaruni's characters are universal in nature. Hence, the novel beautifully juxtaposes nature's brutal ferocity with the indomitable strength of the human spirit.

One Amazing Thing is not simply a piece of fictional bravura. In actuality, it is an interdisciplinary tour de force. The novel defies a simple categorization owing to its multicultural dimension. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni enmeshes seemingly dissimilar themes into a single narrative, revealing to us that they are, in fact, always part of the same narrative. The novel encourages intellectual debates on diverse topics such as racial prejudice, cultural antipathy, alienation, ethnic diversity, and immigration.

However, my analysis will focus on the connection between ecofeminism and storytelling. Divakaruni's novel powerfully conveys the role of storytelling in transforming minds and hearts in a manner that has the potential to make the world a better place. Like the theory of ecofeminism, the stories told in *One Amazing Thing* disseminate the message of harmony, kindness, compassion, love, solidarity, and hope. As one of the characters, Tariq, states towards the conclusion of his story, “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” (Divakaruni, *Amazing* 136). The following lines explicate the nexus of storytelling and ecofeminist thought quite lucidly:

Literature, by its very definition in our society, has been used to make the theoretical practical, to transform complex philosophy into concrete experience through the imagination. Since ecofeminism proposes to be a way of life more than a theory, literature seems a natural medium for disseminating its ideas and practices. By incorporating the tenets of ecofeminism into literature, people can discover avenues for discussion leading to practical application of its theories. But the first step is making people aware of the problems and the interconnectedness of life, of cause and effect, and of the need to take personal responsibility for the consequences of our actions. (Bennett 10)

I also intend to show that contrary to the popular belief that women lack agency and resourcefulness in disaster situations, they display magnanimous survival skills. The women characters in Divakaruni's novel have been portrayed artfully with all their complexities and idiosyncrasies. They are all unforgettable and captivating in their own right. They keep coming back to you even after you have finished reading the novel. Divakaruni's novel has a richly layered narrative and its women characters definitely add beauty and depth to it. Throughout the course of the novel, we witness their fascinating metamorphosis into beacons of emancipation and hope.

This novel is enthralling as it is essentially a story about stories and their incredible hold over the human consciousness. It is a stirring acknowledgement of the power of stories to touch us in ways we did not know we could be touched; it is an effort to transport us to worlds we could never experience with our self-limiting perceptual beliefs and views.

As Barbara Bennett observes, “Such powerful stories can lead readers to great and significant transformations, for once we have knowledge, we can never go back to blissful

ignorance” (15). She further states that ecofeminist storytelling can take myriad forms, but the basic purpose remains the same: questioning the ideology that has “put us in an ecological and humanitarian predicament” (16). Stories give us the courage to challenge the status quo and the prevailing structures of power.

Hegemonic masculinity has hitherto relegated the role of women in restoring normalcy in post-disaster situations to the fringe zones. However, visionary writers like Divakaruni are trying their best to dismantle these seemingly innocuous sexist notions pertaining to the response of women vis-à-vis disaster situations.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the women of *One Amazing Thing* are not emotionally fragile Fay Wrays “screaming hysterically in the clutches of King Kong”. They, in fact, possess the spirit and nerve to topple him down (Finlay, “Floods” 149).

At this juncture, I find it prudent to mention that Jiang's story is one of the most powerful narratives comprising the novel. Her story is a fascinating blend of love, heartbreak, courage, hope, and second chances in life. Jiang's story is so overwhelming that it brings down the walls dividing the characters and they are more than willing to share stories of their own. In the novel, Divakaruni quite skilfully demonstrates the important role played by stories in bringing people together.

It is pertinent to mention here that all these stories are emotionally charged narratives. What makes them all the more endearing is the fact that the people narrating these stories have the courage to speak their truth, no matter how daunting or disconcerting it may be. The way they narrate intimate details from their own lives is indeed remarkable. Towards the end of the novel, we see how these heart-warming stories function as the lynchpin of human connection in the novel by offering an incredible opportunity to a group of trapped strangers to authentically connect with one another. What makes these narrative gems even more valuable is the fact that we hear them unravel against the ominous backdrop of a life-and-death situation. These moving stories relay the message that “we are not alone on this planet” (Bennett 130).

For Divakaruni, the ultimate message conveyed through these stories is the invincible power of the human spirit. These stories act as the perfect antidote to the turmoil prevailing in the Consulate building in the aftermath of the earthquake. They pull the trapped survivors out of the abyss of despair.

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