

# Conflicts and Collective Resilience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*

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Conflicts afflict all mankind but inflict spice to life and literature by breaking monotony. "In literature a conflict is a literary device characterized by a struggle between two opposing forces" (Master class). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing* is a novel about the strife for life of a group of people from diverging ethnic backgrounds converging and bonding in a common ground of space being struck by a natural disaster. The nine characters assembled in an unmentioned US city's Indian consulate for processing visa to India range from a teenager to septuagenarian and are exposed to conflicts either external/internal or both. Their plurality of races convinced one of the characters Uma, a student of literature to ponder over the ambience as "a mini UN summit" (4). The dragging process in the embassy, waiting after 3 pm for a 9 am appointment made Uma to speculate about her fellow applicants and doubt the integrity of the employees in the embassy.

They were Jiang- an old Chinese woman and her granddaughter Lily in her teens, Mrs. and Mr Pritchett, -a Caucasian couple, Tarik - a bearded young Indian man of twenty--five, Cameron- a lanky African American around fifty-five. In addition to the applicants for visa Uma scrutinised the behaviour of Malathi- the woman employee clad in a blue sari. V.K.S Mangalam was the visa officer. The first conflict experienced by the characters before the realization of the earthquake, was with the technology, Uma couldn't connect with her boyfriend for "the phone would not cooperate, no service, the small lighted square declared" (8), Even Cameron complained of network problem. Conflict with technology due to its inaccessibility increases tension.

When the earthquake struck all the characters in the novel were in conflict with Nature. The conflict with Nature promoted all the other types of conflicts. The magnitude of the earthquake was so huge that it created an effect of a conflict of a "person versus the unknown or extraterritorial" (Seven types of Conflict in literature). "It was as though a giant had placed his mouth against the building foundation and roared"(9). The earthquake intensified the characters' conflict with technology, for electricity failed and the phones went dead. All the characters were in conflict with physical self. "Almost

everyone had cuts or bruises” (23). Jiang was “bleeding copiously” (23). Uma experienced acute pain because a chair had crashed into her wrist and fractured it. Cameron, suffered from asthma, which aggravated due to smoke. Malathi was in conflict with her- self for allowing Mr.Mangalam, to kiss her that morning and assumed that “she might have been the reason the earthquake had happened” (14). When the disaster hit Malathi accused Mangalam for his behaviour and he too was in conflict with self and felt “a dreadful hollowness, as though someone had scooped out his insides” (19). The characters were also in conflict with other characters as well. Cameron assaulted Tariq to prevent him from opening the door of the room they were trapped and the latter was burning with anger, and told Uma later that he is going to kill Cameron. Malathi was expressing her disgust towards Mangalam, Mrs and Mr Pritchett were playing the blame game with one another for their current plight. Almost all the characters were in conflict with Fate/ God for they feared death. Mr. Pritchett experienced an “after effect of shock” (43) and wanted to tell Uma that he was frightened of “dying in a slow drawn-out way, from starvation or maybe lack of oxygen”(44), or drowning as the water level in the room was rising. Tariq, a devout Muslim could not concentrate on his prayers. Thus the characters were caught different types of conflict.

In spite of the multiple conflicts experienced by the different characters, they also exhibited humanity and collective resilience. Cameron, a veteran, played the leadership role ignoring his own torment due to asthma and coordinated the others to share their eatables and all the possible first aid materials. He helped Uma whose hand was broken to shift position and place, When Uma cried out of pain, Malathi who was prejudiced about African Americans in general and who disliked the “Western ways” (18) of Uma reciprocated with “an answering cry” (18). Cameron bandaged the bleeding old Jiang by stripping off “the bottom of his T-shirt” (23) Then he urged Malathi to part away with her sari in order to dress Uma’s broken arms. Though Malathi was reluctant citing that it would be “immodest” (25), she yielded when Uma gave the sweatshirt of hers. The character’s conflict with Nature also made them to appreciate limited resources. When Malathi proclaimed about the availability of Mr.Mangalam’s bathroom and guided Cameron “into the sagging cramped space, Cameron couldn’t have been more delighted if he he’d been ushered into a spa suite at a resort hotel” (38) Everyone felt better and even started chatting. As the water level was rising in the room, the characters’ conflict with Nature intensified and panic bred. Cameron had to take the tough decision of opening the door. He was in conflict with his inner self which voiced “ Would you give up Seva?,,, Not even if you knew everyone was going to die because of your decision?” (46). Everyone except Jiang formed a line behind Tariq and after a hard struggle pulled the door open. Tariq not heeding to Cameron leapt out of the room where there was a rumble and gave a shrill cry. Lily the smallest in the crew risked her life and rescued Tariq. In the course of her venture, she even hit a dead corpse but kept her nerves. Everyone collectively cleared the debris and brought Tariq back into consciousness and Tariq was in conflict with his self for causing more trouble and for depending on others for his survival. Everyone had “to deal with the fact that their greatest hope-that the door, if only they could open it, would lead them to safety and sunlight-had evaporated. Until now death had been a cloud on a distant horizon, coloured like trouble but manage ably sized. Suddenly it loomed overhead, blotting all possibility”(55). The conflict between the Pritchetts worsened as Mrs. Pritchett attempted to take an overdose of her pills. It was followed by chain reaction of spats between Malathi and Mangalam, physical conflict between Mangalam and Lily, succeeded by Tariq and Mangalam, Malathi and Tariq. Uma cried “Stop!... You have all turned into savages!” (62,63). But the conflict among the characters continued and Tariq punched Cameron’s nose and blood gushed out from Cameron. Thus as hopelessness increased due to the conflict wrought by Nature, the conflict among characters went beyond control.

Uma, succeeded in diverting the minds of her peer members by saying “We can each tell an important story from our lives”(65). She convinced them to share “one amazing thing” (65). As one by one obliged by telling stories their differences dissolved and united them. “Divakaruni brings a real humanity to these stories and a belief that the universal can be found in the most personal of stories, as stereotypes fall away to be replaced by fully realized individuals” (Roy). The narration of stories unburdened the narrators and the listeners were able to relate with the narrator. Each story revealed conflicts experienced by the characters and the expression of the past conflicts bound all the characters and strengthened them to withstand the looming crisis collectively.

The first person to reveal the life secret was the Chinese lady Jiang, the oldest in the crew. She explained about her crisis due to her Chinese community’s conflict with Indian society. Jiang’s family owned Feng’s Fine Footwear shop in Bengal and thrived. She reciprocated to the love proposal of Mohit Das. He resisted all repercussions in his family and even Jiang was very strong, but she was in Conflict with God/Fate “the tardiness of the mills of God... began grinding at once, though perhaps not in the way the requesters had envisioned” (74). The Sino-Indian war commenced and the whole nation was raging against China. Mohit cautioned Jiang to leave India immediately as they were on the line of being sent to internment camps and confessed: “Forgive me... I love you but I can’t fight a whole country” (76). Jiang felt doomed and could not even share her grief with her family as they had huge problems. The Chinese conflict with society was massive and there was a mass Chinese exodus. Within two days, she was married to a Chinese man Curtis Chan and was shipped to America leaving her entire family. Her parents died in camps and her brother sailed to Australia. Her conflict with society was so intense and she said “That was the last time anyone would see me cry” (78). When she left India, she shed her tears for her entire life. As time is the healer she accepted the course of life and started loving her husband Curtis Chan. She said “That’s what is amazing. We can change completely and not recognize 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). She connected with her brother Vincent, who settled in Australia many years later. After her husband’s death she responded to her brother’s invitation of taking a trip to India to check out the possibilities of retiring there. When Jiang narrated her story it was great shock to her granddaughter Lily for she could hear her grandmother talking in English for the first time.

All the characters were moved, listening to Jiang’s life story. They started thinking of their past conflicts and expressed their desire to visit Jiang’s childhood place. Mr.Pritchett’s story was a story about abandoned childhood and conflict with his mother’s boyfriend Marvin, who deprived Pritchett of his kitten and about his passion for Maths. He wanted to travel to India in order to provide recreation for his depressed wife. When Mr.Pritchett was narrating the water level in the room increased and they had to confine themselves to a smaller place. As time went by the physical suffering of the crew augmented for all the resources food, water, fresh air were depleting but all the characters had inner strength to share their life. Cameron was saving his last medicine-puff to share his story. Malathi narrated her story in Tamil and sought Mr.Mangalam’s translation. It was a story about her passion to work in a beauty parlour and how she took revenge against a rich lady Mrs.Vani Balanby applying the wrong stuff and causing instant hair fall. Vani exploited the life of her maid Nirmala because the former’s son Ravi had a fancy for the latter. Malathi’s conflict was with an individual person, rooted in the class difference. Her aim is to save a lot of money and settle in India by owning a beauty parlour. After Malathi’s narration part of ceiling was falling down.

Tariq’s conflict was with society. His story was about how his father’s life was doomed due to his Muslim identity and Tariq’s rebellion by exhibiting his identity externally. He wanted to go to India to meet his lady love Farah. Lily’s story was about conflict with self -her passion and

sudden dispassion for flute, the rise and fall of her elder brother Mark. Upon the urge of the crew she played a melody in her flute knowing that it will deplete oxygen. Mrs Pritchett's story was about conflict with her- self. She narrated her deterioration of love with her materialistic husband, her attempt to commit suicide and her encounter with a nurse who prompted her to reconcile with Mr.Pritchett and to take a long trip to exotic places like India. Mr.Mangalam's story was about his hard work and conflict with his rich dominating wife Naina, his ruined relationship with his co-worker Latika. Mr.Cameron's story was about conflict with his self, his experience in war, mishap in love, abortion of his progeny, adoption of a girl, Seva in India as penance and his mission to meet her in India. Uma's story was about conflict with her -self, her rebellion against her parents, kick-boxing classes and she ended her confession by mentioning aurora.

The narration of each character's individual experience, transcended and became universal, lightening the burden of characters. It prompted reconciliation between the Pritchetts, Mangalam and Malathi, united all the characters despite their diversity. Though each individual was battling for survival he/she found meaning in collective survival. Coexistence became the essence of their existence. Gradually without any insistence they volunteered to share their last morsel of hidden food which might have helped them to survive as an individual. They experienced purgation as Tariq confessed: "From having put my story against the others, I can see this much: everyone suffers in different ways. Now I don't feel so alone" (136). Their differences based on ethnicity, religion, gender, language dissolved and they were bound by humanity. Lily responded to Tariq by saying that she considers him to be her brother. Thus the barriers were broken, among the characters and they encountered their conflict with Nature with collective consciousness by giving vent to their emotions through narration of life stories which was reciprocated by empathetic listening. Viktor Frankl, a world renowned psychiatrist had the experience of listening to a woman and convincing her not to commit suicide in the middle of a night. The reason for the woman's change of mind was the readiness of someone (Viktor) in the world "to listen to another's pain" (The Power of Listening). Though the characters in One Amazing Thing were on the verge of death, the fact they could express and impress merged them to emerge strong and prolong. Through collective resilience they were able to withstand the conflicts

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