

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Dissolving Boundaries: Cross-Cultural Understanding in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Life and Literature

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.512](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.512)



Article info

Article Received: 10/06/2025
Article Accepted: 28/06/2025
Published online: 30/06/2025

Abstract

"The art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about."

This philosophical remark by the versatile Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni appears very crucial in this globalized and multicultural scenario where the so-called boundaries of time and space are dissolving rapidly. As an immigrant from Calcutta to California, her life as well as literature imbibes the spirit of cross-cultural understanding. She writes out of her experience, and she has experienced both the power and the price of living in a multicultural country like America. She has tasted the bitterness of racial discrimination but has not missed the sweet flavor of freedom and opportunity as well. Her cross-cultural background gives deep insight into the phenomenon of diversity-the diversity of culture, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Optimistic as Chitra Banerjee is, she not only accepts this disparity, but appreciates and celebrates it also. Herein lies her forte. Owing to her Indian mettle she believes in uniting, synthesizing, combining, and harmonizing the things. She has strong conviction that "the books will bridge the cultures." The present paper is an endeavor to investigate how books and narratives can serve as cultural ducts, fostering intercultural empathy, dialogue, and understanding. It examines the narrative strategies, symbolic designs, thematic concerns, and character constructs that enable Divakaruni's narratives to transcend geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. Through an analysis of hybrid identities and intercultural relationships the paper probes into the potential of *One Amazing Thing* (2010) as a narrative in challenging stereotypes, nurturing multicultural harmony, and catalyzing cross-cultural reconciliation.

Key Words-Multiculturalism, Stereotypes, Hybridity, Identity, Narratives, Empathy.

There is no denying the fact that globalization has triggered unprecedented mobility and has paved way for mass scale migration. In words of Henry Louis Gates, the world has become a jamboree "fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class and gender." To encapsulate these diversities multiculturalism is an umbrella term which signifies the co-existence of various cultures. This co-existence can be a mess or mosaic, depending upon the perspective. The present paper is an attempt to find out how the life and literature of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has the power to change perspectives, thus developing cross-cultural understanding.

Divakaruni's migration to America made her a writer. She opines that the culture in which we are born and brought up comes to us as natural as air. We hardly take any account of it. It is only when we come across other cultures and view ours from a distance, we evaluate it and value it. It was her migration to America that gave her a platform to compare and contrast Indian cultural system against the backdrop of multicultural hype and hoopla. As a true citizen of the multicultural world, she dives deep into various cultures and produces an unbiased account of their characteristics. She eulogizes India for its spiritualism, traditional values, family ties, compassion and warmth but does not flinch from criticizing its rigid class system, gender discrimination and orthodox social taboos. She has all the appreciation for the exposure, expression, energy, and enterprise that America offers to immigrants, but she does not forget to mention the pangs of being addressed as 'other', 'alien', 'foreigner' and 'minority'. Her bicultural experience has been beautifully immersed in her writings.

Cross-Cultural complexities like cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, Identity crisis, Identity negotiation and racial discrimination find expression in most of her works like *The Oleander Girl* (2013), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Queen of Dreams* (2004), *Arranged Marriage* (1995), *The Unknown Errors of*

our Lives (2001). But *One Amazing Thing* (2010) is an epitome of multicultural literature in itself. The very setting of the novel in the basement of visa office of Indian consulate, is perfect for cross-cultural encounter. It appears no less than "mini-UN summit." From this microcosm of multicultural society Divakaruni painstakingly gleans her characters. With Chaucer like knack, she invests them with idiosyncrasies and distinct appearance. There is Jiang, a Chinese old woman dressed in a traditional tunic, her sullen teenager granddaughter Lily; Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett, an upper-class Caucasian couple; Cameron, a lanky African American ex-soldier in his fifties; Tariq Husein, a fair skinned young Muslim man of twenty-five; Malathi and Mr. Mangalam, two visa officers; and Uma Sinha, an Indian American girl doing her graduation. Each one of her characters shines like an individual star in the galaxy of multiple characters who are from diverse ethnic groups with different age, culture, class, and ethnicity.

In the beginning they are all strangers and stereotypes to each other. There is binary of "us" and "them." Uma finds Malathi untrustworthy for no reason and perceives Tariq as violent due to his Muslim name. For his black skin, Malathi terms Cameron as dangerous. Tariq is hostile towards Cameron because of his African American origin. Mrs. Pritchett, a white American, looks at India and Indians from colonial lens. At the same time, prejudiced Indian staff in visa office sees foreign visitors as demanding and culturally insensitive. Owing to their different cultural orientation, these nine people built up imaginary walls of suspicion and skepticism against each other in a small, shared space of visa office. These characters come from various lands with their peculiar religion, class, and ethnic background, still they have one thing in common i.e., compassion for humanity.

To bring these characters closer Chitra Banerjee introduces a catastrophic earthquake. At first all of them are agitated and behave selfishly. But at a crucial juncture they all

overcome their differences and work as a community for their rescue. They share whatever limited resources they have to offer - food, water, medicines, clothes, physical help, and moral support. With no electricity and lost phone connections they are imprisoned in the office. The increasing water level makes the situation more life threatening. At this moment, Divakaruni unexpectedly introduces the magic of storytelling through Uma. Seeing their approaching end Uma suggests that each one of them should tell an important story from one's life before going into oblivion of death. Thus, Divakaruni brings her characters emotionally closer as they start sharing their lives through stories.

Jiang is the first participant. She recalls her childhood in Calcutta's Chinatown. She is the first girl in the family to break the taboo and join the family business of shoe making. She mentions Indo China war of 1962 and her forced marriage to a middle-aged dentist Curtis Chang. She narrates her struggle as immigrant to America and how she had to sell her jewelry to start a grocery store. Owing to her business skills, she soon owns a department store. To break off all the ties with past, she starts communicating in mandarin instead of English. But it is all in vain. The memories of her childhood and youth in India pull her back. The old Jiang feels an urge to revisit the city Calcutta where she had grown up. Her story is a tale of racial discrimination. She painfully admits "Indians considered us below them because many of us were in the tannery businesses or owned leather goods stores." (Divakaruni, 2011, p.68) Her shift to America was more about emotional displacement than geographical. Jiang feels like a hollowed-out bamboo in a new land and tries to negotiate with her new existence. Her story changes the perception of her granddaughter Lily. Initially viewing Jiang as a strict guardian of tradition, Lily gradually comes to recognize the depth of her grandmother's sacrifices and unspoken regrets. Through this story Lily and Jiang forge a

powerful intergenerational bond that fosters healing within the family.

Next volunteer is Mr. Pritchett with his tough and painful childhood memories. His story is about utter loneliness and alienation. Right from his childhood he has been unfortunate to lose his loved ones- his father, his only friend Jimmy, and his pet Shere Khan. Neglected by his drunkard mother and tortured by his stepfather, he diverts his energies to study mathematics. An unloved child starts loving numbers. At least with them he has no fear of abandonment. Mr. Pritchett's story lays bare 'a wound not yet healed.' Through his story, Mrs. Pritchett discerns that her husband's traumatic childhood experiences have shaped his attitude towards life. This realization releases her past hurts and she feels healed.

Malathi's story gives glimpses of typical Indian society with its tradition bride viewing, dowry negotiation and class discrimination. As Ravi puts it "rigid class boundaries were the bane of Indian society and should be broken down." (Divakaruni, 2011, p.112) Malathi is a product of society that denied her education and equality but the selfsame society gave her strong faith in God, the law of Karma and power to empathize.

Now Tariq overtakes with his story which is wrought with malignant aftereffects of 9/11, a black day which not only ruined business but lives of many. The Muslim citizens, howsoever good natured and law abiding they had been, were looked down with suspicion and hatred. Out of fear they consciously discarded their cultural emblems like hijab. One day Tariq's father is abducted for no reason and after a few days released in the same mysterious way. His father takes this incident to heart and gets paralyzed. His family is compelled to go back to India. But Tariq looks at America as his home and the thought of leaving his home disturbs him. Moreover, he finds himself misfit to both the countries- in America politically and in India culturally. 'Conflicting loyalties warred' in his

head. Tariq's story changes the outlook of other survivors. They validate his humanity, creating a community of acceptance that begins to heal his wounds.

Now Cameron takes the lead. His story is about his cosmopolitan existence, racism, repentance, and redemption. He poignantly relates how "Outside of class his touchiness pushed away the few students who tried to befriend him." (Divakaruni, 2011, p.186) Haunted by terrible memories of isolated childhood, his tough days in Vietnam, his aborted child and ex-girlfriend, Cameron is truly upset. It is on the thirtieth anniversary of his son's death, Cameron meets a holy man, Jeff. He opens his heart to Jeff who suggests him to sponsor an orphan to unburden his soul. Cameron finds an orphanage in India and sponsors a girl child called Seva. Now he is planning to meet her in India if destiny permits. This moving story changes the sceptical attitude of Mrs. Pritchett. She is able to see the human pain in him beyond his colour and uniform.

Last but not the least, Uma Sinha puts forth her story. Uma is a young Indian girl brought up in western ways. She has live-in relationship with an American boy Ramon. She wants to handle life on her own, therefore, she prefers a college away from home and protective shield of parents. One day she finds out that her parents are getting divorced. She is completely shaken at this revelation as she has always lived with the illusion that her parents have a good marriage. This announcement changes her from within, and she finds herself unable to trust anyone in this world. Although later on his father discards this idea of divorce as folly, the relationships are not reconciled. Uma grapples with the pain of unrequited love, an act that estranged her from her conservative parents. Wracked with guilt for defying their expectations and burdened by heartbreak, she finds herself suspended between the weight of tradition and the pull of modernity. Through the quiet power of storytelling, she begins to process her trauma and carve out a renewed

sense of agency. Apart from the disillusionment and family conflict Uma's story hints at misconceived notion of India as a country 'with its heat, dirt, noise, crowded buses, beggars, bribes, diarrhea, bootlicking and the streets littered with garbage.' This portrayal is dismissed in the story itself when Uma's mother says it is 'a different India now, India Shining!' (Divakaruni, 2011, p.5)

As Judith Herman claims "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (Herman 1992, p. 133). The stories in this novel play a pivotal role in dissolving the boundaries of class, race, gender, and nationality. As the stories proceed a strange kinship and empathy develops among all the characters. These stories range from love, betrayal, war, seduction, revenge to unabashed confessions. They open up wounds, fears, hopes, and triumphs. With each story the characters get strength to face life and realize that human aspirations, dejections, struggles, fears, pleasures, and pangs are transcultural and transnational, in fact, universal. In words of Tariq "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, 2011, p.136) For immigrants, refugees, and those caught between cultures, traumatic experiences may include racism, displacement, or loss of cultural belonging. These multicultural narratives address their personal, social, and cultural traumas.

The narrative strategy of Divakaruni operates as trauma therapy. Expressing painful memories in the presence of compassionate listeners allows individuals to revisit and reshape their trauma, reclaim ownership of their narrative, and rediscover a sense of belongingness and emotional connection. This pass time activity of storytelling turns into narrative exchange and dialogue. It evolves into something far more powerful- a collective therapy session. A story according to Divakaruni heals both the teller and the listener.

Not only the act of telling stories but the act of listening is equally therapeutic. Listening involves patience and tolerance, which can put a check on violence, hatred and prejudice. When the group listens without judgment to each other's story, they restore a sense of social safety and belonging.

The abundant use of metaphors and symbols makes the narrative more convincing. The earthquake in the novel is not merely a natural catastrophe or plot device but a strong metaphor of transformation. It strips away the characters' social facades and compels them to engage with one another deeply at human level. They are no longer individuals separated by class, race, or immigration status, but people bound by shared vulnerability and experience. Divakaruni has rightly observed "All the boundaries of their separate lives had crumbled with the walls around them." (Divakaruni 2010, p. 32) Faced with death, engulfed by panic, and haunted by the psychological aftershocks of catastrophe, these characters are forced to confront their most primal fears and unearth long-buried personal hurts. Other symbols like water, food, and darkness also play a vital role. Water recurs as a powerful motif. At times, a force of devastation, as seen in Cameron's hurricane, yet also a symbol of renewal and life. The interplay of darkness and light emerges as potent metaphors for fear and hope. The oppressive gloom of the basement evokes confusion and disorientation, while the faint glimmers from candles or cell phones offers endurance, clarity, and the persistence of hope amid chaos. Sharing food, medicine and other commodities shows a sense of compassion, community, unity, sensitivity, and solidarity.

With so many diverse voices within a story, Divakaruni weaves a rich tapestry of multicultural America where multiple identities and perspectives coexist. Her fondness for polyphonic text is in sync with the mood of multiculturalism. By granting each character the space to narrate his own story, Divakaruni invokes the core tenets of narrative therapy i.e.,

empowering agency, affirming self-definition, and honoring individual ownership of experience. The polyphonic structure illuminates how each personal story adds texture, nuance, and depth to a shared tapestry of understanding and empathy. Each story deconstructs cultural assumptions and rebuilds trust. This technique of Divakaruni resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel which suggests that multiple voices create a richer, more democratic vision of truth (Bakhtin 1984).

Through its multicultural characters, intricate narrative layers, and evocative symbolism, the novel suggests that the human spirit is capable of resilience, redemption, and renewal. All this starts with a simple act of sharing- sharing of stories becomes sharing of the self. The act of telling a story unfolds healing, connection, and the quiet triumph of hope. The novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010) establishes the power of exchanging dialogues and negotiating differences in finding unanimity amid anonymity. What stories can do in visa-office the same can be done by books in the world at large. Thus, Chitra Banerjee triumphantly confirms that the books can bridge cultures.

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