

Racial and Religious Discrimination in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* and *One Amazing Thing*

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Abstract. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author, poet and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston, USA. She is well known for poetry, short-story writing, children's fictions and novels. Her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* won American Book Award in 1995. She has written more than fifteen books and her fiction has been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. Her major novels include *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *One Amazing Thing*, *Palace of Illusions*, *Oleander Girl*, *Vine of Desire* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Divakaruni deals with the theme of racial and religious discrimination, shifting identities and cultural assimilation. Her each novel reflects racial discrimination and quest for identity of South Asian Immigrants. Through the novels *Queen of Dreams* and *One Amazing thing* Divakaruni portrays racial and religious discrimination as social evils in all over the world. The present paper aims to message to all to stop discrimination on the basis of race, religion, culture and language. Human beings need to change the society in order to establish peace throughout the world.

Keywords: Diaspora; racism; discrimination; cultural assimilation; humiliation.

As an Indian Diaspora writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her creative output has raised awareness as well as suggested alternatives. Racism as well as other issues faced by immigrants at schools, colleges or the work place have been discussed in her novels. This paper makes an attempt to justify that Chitra Banerjee as a South Asian Diaspora writer has tried to portray the social evils of religious and racial discrimination all over the world through her novel *One Amazing Thing* and *Queen of Dreams*. Modern age is the age of globalization, radicalization and inter-nationalization, but we still witness the narrow boundaries of caste, class, race and religion.

Divakaruni deals with the issues of religious, racial and gender discrimination in her novels. The stories of her novels are based on her experiences. She focuses on real problems of human life and tries to solve problems. Before she began her career in fiction writing Divakaruni was a well known poet. She used to write poems on several themes like discrimination, feminism, relationship, nationalism etc. She has much focused on the immigrant experience and the South

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Asian women. She depicts the struggles of women trying to search their own identities. K.S.Dhanam remarks:

Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faith who share a common female experience. All her protagonists search themselves within the contrary boundaries of their culture and religion. She portrays the notions of first generation migrants with their children born and raised in foreign land. Her novel includes the immigrant experiences of confrontation between two identities. She has her finger accurately on the Diaspora pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos ... (Dhanam, 62)

In the nineteenth century, colonization induced forced migrations, especially from the Indian subcontinent to countries like West Indies, Maldives, Mauritius and Africa and created Diasporas who experienced very strong longing and nostalgia for the motherland. Their unwieldiness to give up their native identity, combined with rigidly institutionalized difference between ruling class and the ruled laid the foundation of racism towards coloured Diasporas as well. Diaspora populations, especially those who moved from colonies in America in the twentieth century, faced multiple dilemmas varying from conflicts of identity to racist discrimination while struggling to assimilate into main stream. When the immigrants arrived and settled down they were dishonourably harassed by the local people and media. They were considered, "Non-European or Non-Belonged" Outsider by some ethnocentric Europeans. In Britain the child, born in England of parents who came from South Asia was always referred to as immigrant, who still keep themselves in their enclaves and do not mix with the host society. Language is another barrier. After migration they feel alienated, homeless and struggle to survive. Finally they develop their global identity as Indian Diasporas.

Divakaruni portrays the issues of identity crisis and racism in her novel *Queen of Dreams*. The novel focuses specially on the issues arising in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks in USA, intermingled with the parallel story line of Mrs. Gupta's work as a clairvoyant interpreter of dreams. Through the protagonist Rakhi and other character Belle, and Rakhi's mother Mrs. Gupta the writer has tried to show feminist emancipation and women empowerment. *Queen of Dreams* is the story of second generation immigrant girls Rakhi, a Bengali, and Belle, a Punjabi. Belle's parents have tried their best but has failed to imbibe the tradition of Punjabi wife in their daughter. The more they try, the more she rebels against the man changing her name which is given by her parents, Balwant Kaur in favour of the westernized name 'Belle'. Rakhi, a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, is struggling to keep her footing with her family. Rakhi's parents on the other hand, try to fortify her against any duality of identity by giving her monochromatic western upbringing. Rakhi tells Belle :

What cruel Karma has placed me in the care of the only two Indians who never mentioned their homeland if they could help it. (*Queen of Dreams*, 82)

Rakhi and Belle are friends and business partners in 'Chai House'. They face a catastrophic challenge in September 2011 after the terrorist attack. Rakhi refuses to shut down the shop. She says:

I don't have put up a flag to prove that I'm American. I am American already. I love this country. Hell, it's the only country I know. But I'm not going to pressure into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passer by. (264)

Both of them assume themselves as Americans, their credentials are questioned by an angry mob of white Americans who want an outlet for their anger against the perpetrators of the mayhem at the world trade center. The irony is that second generation Indian Rakhi and Belle have had their lives equally disturbed and yet are paying a double price because of the Sikh's colour. Jespal pleads with the mobsters who attack the shop after 9/11 attack, saying, "we haven't done anything wrong. We are Americans, just the way you are, we feel terrible about what happened." (267)

Racist hostility by white majority has become especially evident in America after 9/11, as seen in various incidents of attacks upon Sikhs supporting beard and turbans, who were attacked only because they look like Arab terrorists. Identity makers are, thus, perceived as a challenge to the supremacy of sovereign center of U.S. society in the post 9/11 world order. During the crisis of the September attacks they especially became an open invitation for assault. But Jespal's beard and turban is strange assertion of his cultural roots, than his words are of American Identity. He is targeted and beaten by the mob of Americans flushed with hatred and fear of anything that looks different from white American stereotypes. Jespal is hit and spat upon and is forcefully reminded of his physical differences :

Looked in a mirror lately? You aren't American.
It's success like you to who planned this attack
on the innocent people of this country. (267)

Rakhi asked to the Native American,

But if I was not American then what was I? (271)

Rakhi asked this question because she had successfully assimilated herself in American culture and identified herself as American. While first generation Diaspora may have faced religious and racial discrimination but today it is changing gradually.

The racial discrimination took a dreadful form in America for the South Asians after 9/11 which has been presented by Chitra Divakaruni in her novel, *The Queen of Dreams*. Here a second generation Sikh young man Jespal is given nasty punches by a few American youth, though he keeps on crying that he is an American like them. This is an insecure situation of the Diaspora identities which creates a question before the Diaspora Theorists of Diaspora identities as to which nation which their parents and grandparents had once left, to settle or the one accepted them from the heart. Furthermore, such reactions of the American youth towards south Asians also raise few other issues, whether it was done because of their nationalistic feelings and the South Asians suffered because of the mistaken identities or it is a manifestation of the feeling of resentment and revenge against Diaspora communities who are entering their country's liberal immigration policy and grabbing their job opportunity in their own country. In order to avoid discrimination in many countries one follows the anti-discriminatory law. But there is a difference between practice and theory. In theory, the respective governments of the countries created an anti-discriminatory law but in practice the picture is different.

Jespal became a victim because of his religious and racial identity. Lack of awareness of religious and cultural differences between Sikhs and Muslim led to confuse the two identities and resulted in attacks on Sikhs mistaking them for Muslims. *Queen of Dream* describes the lack of common cultural ground between Diasporas and the host society. Rakhi, Belle, Jespal and all those characters are as American as can be, but their rights to their religion, language and communal customs need to be protected from those who erroneously think of themselves as more American than those from other cultural roots. After 9/11 the resistance to racism is being asserted even more emphatically through hyphenated racial cultural identities, often expressed through literature.

Stokely Carmichael, a USA Civil Rights campaigner in the 1960s formulated a definition of institutional racism quoted by Anthony Giddens in *Sociology*:

The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture or ethnic origin, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping of disadvantaged minority ethnic people. (638-39)

The idea of institutional racism was developed in the USA in late in the 1960s by Civil Right activist, suggesting that the racism pervades in all the societal structures.

In *Queen of Dreams* and *One Amazing Thing*, Jespal and Tariq become victims because of prejudice, ignorance, and thoughtfulness. Divakaruni deals with

these vast issues of the world. Race and religions are the most potent symbols that allow nation across the world to retain their identities as diverse cultural zones. Through both novels Divakaruni wants to say that native and immigrant in the USA need to change themselves and help the society in order to make fraternity and peace. The immigrant should try to assimilate in diverse cultures of the world. Abha Pandey in her book entitled *Indian Diasporic Literature* says:

The feeling of rootlessness alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and suffering due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language climates into conflicts, fight for identity and on the other hand lead to birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group. (Pandey, 120)

One Amazing Thing was first published in 2009 by Hyperion, USA and in India it was published in 2010 by Hamish Hamilton. It has 208 pages as a short novel but it holds so much in few pages. It explores the theme of racial and religious discrimination through his characters. It is the story of nine people who are trapped in the visa office at an Indian consulate after a massive earthquake in an American city. The novel introduces us with the first character Uma Sinha. When the first rumble came in the visa office, she watched flaked of plaster float from the ceiling in a lazy dance until it disappeared into the implausibly green foliage of the plant that stood at attention in the corner. She watched but she really didn't see it because she was mulling over a question that had troubled her for the last several weeks - did her boy friend Ramon love her more than she loved him? She thinks about inter-racial relationship which is not accepted by her parents. Uma Sinha is inspired with Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. It is a tale of twenty nine pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Divakaruni has portrayed her characters like Chaucer who presented a wide range of religious and racial people at one place. *One Amazing Thing* has also been inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Like Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Uma thought, it was like a mini UN summit was there. The nine people are related to different religions and races at one place. All those people were planning to go to India. She describes the characters as two visa officers, Malathi and Mangalam, a Chinese-Indian woman Jiang with her little grand-daughter Lily, an ex-soldier Cameron, Tariq, a young Muslim man, an angry man, with new America and a couple Mr. Pritchett and Mrs. Pritchett. Uma requests everyone to tell a story which they have never told before, recalling one amazing thing in their life. The tales are tragic and life-affirming. Every character tells his or her story one by one.

In *One Amazing Thing* 'Jiang' began her story. She spends much of her life since childhood in India. She had a shoe shop named 'Feng's fine footwear'. She loves every aspect of her work. One day she met a Bengali boy named Mohit Das. She fell in love with him. But she wants permission for marriage from her

father. When she told his father about her love for Mohit, he said, “can fish love birds” ? (*One Amazing Thing*, 73)

Mohit’s family member didn’t think of marrying him with a Chinese girl who does not belong to Hindu or Bengali community. They were devastated by the prospect of their only son, the carrier of the generation, marrying a Chee-nay heathen. Later Jiang’s father added :

A woman I won’t be ashamed to introduce to
Calcutta society as my daughter in law. (75)

Divakaruni elaborates the problems due to religious discrimination between two lovers. Mohit and Jiang’s relationship breaks due to Indo - China war in 1962. People stopped patronising Chinese business. Jiang had to close her shop and let the employees go. She didn’t know what would happen to her property and to her. That time the condition was so terrible that she called Mohit Das for help. But Mohit advised her to get out from Calcutta. Mohit was afraid of his family, so he refused to help Jiang, “Forgive me, he said. I love you, but I can’t fight a whole country”. (76) In this way Jiang’s world had ended. Later on Jiang’s father gets her married to Mr. Chan, a middle aged stocky stranger without even asking her opinion. Divakaruni shows how racial discrimination prevails in the matter of marriage.

Malathi, the second protagonist unfolds the story of Ravi and Nirmala. Ravi is the son of Mrs. Balan, a rich lady. Nirmala is the maid with whom Ravi exchanges kisses and gets caught by his mother. Ravi threatens his mother that he would return to America if she fires Nirmala from her job. Mrs. Balan is forced to allow Nirmala to remain there. When Mrs. Balan enquires Ravi secretly if he wants to settle Nirmala in a flat where he could visit her without disrupting the peace of the household, Ravi replies that he has no such intention of taking advantage of Nirmala. Divakaruni has given message through Ravi, “the rigid class boundaries are bane of Indian society and should be broken down.” (112) Due to religion and racial discrimination, the love stories of Jiang and Mohit and Ravi and Nirmala resulted in fiasco. Divakaruni herself has commented, “we want to survive, but not at the cost of losing our humanity.” (At Google Talk, 2010) Divakaruni's immigration to America narrates her experience of struggle to survive on foreign land.

One another character of *One Amazing Thing* Tariq unfolds his story of religious and racial discrimination. After September 2001 attack on US by the terrorists the people were treated as criminals. Tariq’s feeling is the feeling of displacement and loneliness. Tariq was a muslim so he was made the victim of unjustified suspicion and distrust. Because of this, his father’s once flourishing business suffered loss and his father along with his assistant manager was arrested without a reason and was detained for days together for questioning. This transformed him as an outsider and were humiliated. He suffered with his

predominant identity as an American. Tariq felt insulted and betrayed by the nation which he had called his own. He cannot even think of leaving US. He thought,

Apart from lifestyle differences, there was another issue - This was my country. I was an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage. (*One Amazing Thing*, 131)

Due to Muslim religion, he was targeted in America as a terrorist. It was a bad time for Muslim in America. Tariq's story was very painful; he suffered a lot because of his beard appearance. Like Tariq's story, *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa the novel starts with this sentence, "My world is compressed". Even Shauna Singh Baldwin responds to a question from Tehelka on October 2004, American Sikhs and Muslims have suffered a lot. She says that each of is given the ability to create or destroy – I opt to create.

One Amazing Thing also deals with the issue of marginalizing the people just on the basis of their race and religion. Divakaruni by projecting the inherent fear and distrust in the minds of the people and later by pointing to the futility of it has tried to spread a message to rise above the narrow conservatism and together fight the injustices. The way the characters in *One Amazing Thing* come together to accept their differences and brave the challenges posed by an earthquake is an illustration of the need to dissolve boundaries. Most of her novels try to suggest compromises, forgetting and forgiving as the solutions to overcome the problems which project her humanistic attitude.

Like *Queen of Dreams* and *One Amazing Thing* Anita Desai's *Bye -Bye Blackbird* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* revealed how racial prejudice against Indian in the UK of 1960's isolated the character and deepen their sense of displacement. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* show the racial violence and religious discrimination through character. There is a big issue like religious discrimination and racial intolerance in Indian Diaspora writers. They explore the cruel realities of human life. Through *One Amazing Thing* and *Queen of Dreams* Divakaruni has given message to us to understand and create the bond of brotherhood and sisterhood between nations to fight the challenges. The famous song of 'Refugee' emphasizes on every human nature :

Panchhi, nadia, pawan ke jhoke...
Koi sharhad na inhen roke...
Sharhad insaano ke liye hai...
Socho...
Tumne or hamane kya paya insaan hoke?
The birds, the rivers, the breeze...
No border can stop them...

SUNITA KUMARI

Borders are for men...
Just think...
What you and I have found...
As human being...

Just like this song Divakaruni tells us through her novel that it's time to dissolve boundaries of religion, racial and gender discrimination.

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