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## Double Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*

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### Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's unique perspective on what it means to live as an immigrant in the United States has influenced most of her work. To most of them, America is a land of opportunity, providing them with a new life, and a way of escape from the dominant factor. The dominant factor can be anything which an individual thinks to be a different one. Each culture is different but human experience such as desire, pain and joy are universal. Divakaruni's novel *One Amazing Thing* helps us to understand human experience as a combination of complex cultural forces operating in each of us. The characters in the novel are from different cultural background but they have one thing in common- domination by a superior force. The present paper while discussing the different consciousness that operates in general within an individual focuses especially on how these consciousnesses has put the characters in dilemma. The idea of double consciousness from postcolonial theory is taken and a textual analysis has been made.

### Keywords: Double Consciousness, Gender, Race, Religion, Culture.

In the period of globalization, migration is a common phenomenon. One of the emerging trend in literature is to present the dilemma of immigrant self which includes issues like gender, race, religion, education, language, codes of behaviour and cultural practices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a distinct South Asian writer with a well established position in literature. She belongs to the group of Indian writers who focus on postcolonial diasporic identity. As a writer, she has represented many genres such as poetry, short fictions, novels and essays. The experience of the immigrants in the United States forms the core of her fiction. Divakaruni stresses upon the concept of double consciousness in *One Amazing Thing*.

The term, "Double Consciousness" was first used by W.E.B. DuBois in his book, *The Soul of Black Folk*. It is an individual's feeling of having more than one social identity, which makes him/her difficult to develop a sense of self. Originally DuBois used this term in order to explain the minds of African-Americans living in the Southern United States. Today critics and researchers employ this term to bring out the in-between state or 'two-ness' felt by the characters. It is a study that promotes human understanding. Kulkarni quotes a passage from

Lois Tyson to bring out how “Double Consciousness” is a feature in postcolonial Diaspora writing.

Double Consciousness and Unhomeliness are the two features of postcolonial diasporas. Double Consciousness or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the diaspora this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness.

The uniqueness of Divakaruni’s fiction *One Amazing Thing* lies in her bringing together the people from different cultural background and making them share their experience. The setting of the novel is an Indian visa office in America, the event that makes people from different culture to stay together is the earthquake and the process through which they come to know about one another is storytelling. It is through Uma, the protagonist that readers are introduced to the different sects of people. The group includes Jiang, a Chinese grandmother and her granddaughter Lily; a Caucasian couple – Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett; Tariq, a young man of about twenty five and an African American in his fifties. Other members of the group include the visa officers, Mr. Mangalam and Malathi. Uma is not surprised at this different group. She says, “It was not uncommon, in this city, to find persons of different races randomly thrown together”(4).

Human behavior is induced by the received customary belief. This is what we call culture. The fact how we view ourselves and others are mainly from these precepts. When people are displaced from their home, they face conflict in their consciousness. Malathi is from Coimbatore, South India. She has come to America to escape from the fury of a rich Indian woman, her customer in the beauty parlour. She is a young girl of marriageable age. She maintains her tradition by wearing sari and marking her forehead with a red dot. She dislikes Uma for her jeans and “American impatience” (18). Though she is very much conscious about her Indian tradition, she indulges in a secret love affair with her officer, Mr. Mangalam. She is well aware that he is a married man and is forty five. Her duality comes to surface when she realizes that the earthquake has come just as she has come out of the room in his office after allowing him to pull her towards him and not protesting when he kissed. Her mind being colonized by religious ideology informs her that it is her karma. Uma is a second generation Indian immigrant. Her parents have brought her up in a traditional way, sending her to Bharathanatyam classes and allowing her to be within the Indian circle. As a teenager now she remembers her mother, “who had watched out for her with a hawk-eyed vigilance”(101). Her mother while in America has pictured India as a place of heat and dust. Now her parents are back in their hometown, Kolkata. When Uma questions, her mother replies that all has changed, “It’s a different India now, India shining! (5). She imagines how her parents will be walking hand in hand; such things are now accepted in India. She is happy that they are together. In America most of the couples of this age lives a separated life. Uma faces the cultural shock when her father called her over the phone and informed that he is going to have a divorce. Unable to understand such a change in her father, she behaves like an American, allowing herself to drink, smoke, play the role of a truant and date. At some point she lies to her friend Jeri. Her childhood

ideology informs her that withholding something is a worse kind of betrayal. She says, “I didn’t realize — until this earthquake, until today — that my withholding was a worse kind of betrayal, a betrayal of the self” (206). Parental ideology has dominated the individual selves of Malathi and Uma.

Women are different from men. But this doesn’t mean that they are inferior to men. Human society, right from the early days, more or less has always been male dominated. Girase writes, “Progress of human civilization seems to have perpetuated the male dominance and female subservience and marginality. The situation is not very different whether it is East or West”. Malathi is very conscious about the secondary position of women. While in India she has seen how her sisters were ordered around by their husbands and decided not to follow their footsteps. Lily as a child has faced gender discrimination. Her parents have shown much attention to her brother Mark. This forces the girl to do wrongs, refusing to go to Chinese language class, missing the school bus, coming late for dinner, dressing in black and drinking cough syrup. Her parents thought it to be teenage angst combined with evil American influences. But they are wrong. Lily says, “I wanted to be just sufficiently disobedient to force my parents to notice me” (139). It is her talent as a flute player that supports her to attract the attention of her parents. The problem with Mrs. Pritchett is her subordinate position. Mrs. Pritchett has lost her identity after her marriage. Her actual name is Vivienne. After seeing a lovely old couple in a restaurant, she tries to search for the happiness within her. She comes to a conclusion that though Mr. Pritchett has been good to her, she has only listened and obeyed him putting her desires aside. This realization of being remaining dutiful to him and suffering from loneliness has forced her to take sleeping pills. She concludes, “my husband did not love me the way I needed him to” (167). Being a victim of earthquake she is hurt. She tries to have a sleeping pill. Mr. Pritchett tries to stop her. Malathi being aware of patriarchy shouts at him, “you have no right to treat her like that just because you’re her husband” (59). Mr. Mangalam pulls her arm and warns her not to meddle in another people’s live. She voices out, “Don’t you touch me. Don’t you tell me what to do. What do you think you are?” (59).

Jiang has grown up in the China Town of Calcutta. The Chinese idea about women is not different from those of the Indians, “a girl child was expected to help in the domestic work and marry within the community to a man selected by her parents, bear children and look after the household” (Girase). She is in love with a Brahmin boy, Mohit. Her family is against this. She says, “Father is against it. Can fish love birds? (73). Brahmins, the supposed high class society threatens Jiang’s family. The main issue here is due to class consciousness. The Indo China war of 1962 has forced her family to arrange her marriage with Curtis Chan. She has come to live in America with Mr. Chan. The riot in India against China has forced her brother to move to Australia. She is not to love him with a whole heartedness. Mr. Chan has sensed this and thought that she has had a boy friend. When Mr. Chan is nearly dying, she found herself saying him, “I love you” (85). Now after so many years, her brother from Australia has written her a letter standing that he is planning a trip to Calcutta. She has written him back conveying her desire to meet him in the city of her youth. Though not very obvious what lies within Jiang’s story is her childhood secret, her struggle due to the conception of the class system and caste system.

The dichotomy between the rich and the poor seems to detect the life of Mr. Mangalam. As a small boy he has been aware of his poor family background. He has done well in his school education and has received a scholarship to continue his studies in Delhi. He is placed. He is

aware that two of his sisters were still unmarried, “with every passing year their chances of finding a husband shrank- unless we could dangle a substantial dowry as bait” (154). He saves money and sent it to his family in South India. He happens to be in parties thrown by rich people. He meets Naina, daughter of a rich politician. They love one another. The girl gets the consent of her father and marries him. Mr. Mangalam is given a good job. The clash comes between the couple when the rich lady is not able to understand his parent’s desire to come and see his new flat and new wife. It reaches its zenith when Mr. Mangalam has developed his affair with the lady assistant in his office and announces that he is going to divorce his wife. The lady assistant is arrested on a false charge. In order to take revenge on his rich wife, he has made it a point to flirt with Naina’s friends. Now he compares his action with Malathi as a result of his false notion on revenge. This realization talks of his divided thought. Another such class distinction is seen in Malathi’s story about Ravi’s love for his mother’s servant girl.

Cameron, the Afro-American in the group is an ex-service man. In his early days, he has loved Imani, a girl from his community. At the close of his school studies, he has gone to her flat and has made love to her. This has resulted in her pregnancy. When she informs him, he tells about his desire for higher studies and abandons her, asking her to go for an abortion. The girl has cursed him, “No matter where you run, you be ending with ashes in your mouth” (183). Although his life he suffers from breathing problem and thinks it to be the consequence of his wrong doing to Imani. He is guilty and confesses to the holy man, Jeff. He suggests sponsoring an orphan. Thus he is now helping Seva, an orphan girl living in Kashmir. His health consciousness makes him feel inferior, since shame is dominating his consciousness. Certain notion which waves through our mind controls our action. The colour of Cameron frightens Malathi. She is from the brown race whereas he is from the black. When she is caught in the debris, Cameron extends his hands to pull her up. She cries, “Krishna Krishna Krishna” (14). She remembers the warning given by her relatives as she is leaving for America, “... stay away from black men, who were dangerous ... stay away from White men who were lecherous, and Indian-American, who were sly” (14). Her dilemma in deciding whether to accept his support or to decline brings out the idea of race consciousness, blacks considered to be inferior and dangerous.

Tariq’s problem is mainly due to his Muslim identity. The 9/11 incident has made it a bad time for Muslim’s in America. Some years back, he had gone around without a beard, resulting in his mother’s worry that her son is not respecting his religion. But she boasts to her friends that her son has become westernized. This dual feeling is one of the common features of diaspora. Farah, her friend’s daughter wants to have her higher studies in America. Farah’s widowed mother is afraid, “had been terrified that American dorm life, ruled as it was by the unholy trinity of alcohol, drugs and sex, would ruin her daughter” (30). Ammi, Tariq’s mother assures her safety. Tariq sees this girl and likes her. Once he has been in bed for few days down with flu. Farah touches his forehead to check his temperature. She has noticed his sprouted hair on his face and has commented, “Looks good” (31). He has stopped shaving after that and it is a secret code of his love. It is nearly two years since Farah has left for India. Ammi is not able to understand the change in her son. This is really a bad time for Muslims. His father has been arrested. He plans to run back to India. But his uncles and aunties tells him that it will be difficult for him to live in India. He says, “They felt I wouldn’t fit in in India after having been raised here. I have the same doubts” (131). His doubt/realization that he cannot adjust with life reflects his in-between state.

The most interesting thing in the novel is the story of Mr. Pritchett. It reveals the life style of the European culture. His mother represents the typical White woman, who smoke, drink and date. She is a divorced mother living with her small boy in an apartment. He remembers how he will be dropped at Mary Lou's when his mother is off before a date. But when Mary Lou has a date, too, he and his friend are put in Mrs. Grogan's apartment. His mother's boy friend Marvin has come to live with them. Marvin scares the boy during the day, smoking and drinking with his friends. The boy wants to have a kitten, mother protests on the ground that Marvin hates animals. At this stage the boy becomes conscious about how his life is being controlled by these people and inside him earns for their death. He puts the kitten in a box, "He hunches beside the box, trying not to cry, shivering, hating Marvin, wishing he would die. Alongside Marvin, he hates his mother – this is a first- and wants her to die, too" (96). The story suggests the domination of one by another.

People from the East faces double consciousness in terms of their language. English is the language of the colonizer. In almost all the culture English is considered to be the superior one. Divakaruni through Malathi brings out the issue of how people feel uncomfortable when their communication in English is poor. Malathi before coming to America has gone for English training classes. When she wants to tell her story, she feels sorry because her English is poor. She requests Mr. Mangalam to translate her stories from Tamil to English. Jiang does not like to expose her childhood to her children and grand children and has kept herself within the boundary of her community. Lily after hearing her grandmother's story wonders how her grandma has fooled them pretending not to understand English, "Grama really fooled us all these years, pretending she didn't know what we were saying, forcing us to speak Mandarin! (82).

Human mind works in such a way that it always looks at the difference. Certain ideologies are imprinted in the subconscious mind as an individual grows in a society. As it comes in contact with what it has learned/noticed it differentiates the opinion and it affects the behavior pattern. Thus resulting in dominant culture/colonizer and subordinate culture/colonized. When both these ideas clash, there comes double consciousness. The need of the day is to accept changes and see an individual as he/she is. The insights provided in this paper will be an eye opener to view the different dimension of consciousness working within us. Divakaruni is a writer who writes to promote human understanding and compassion.

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