

Storytelling as a Means of Survival: A Thematic analysis of *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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<p>Received: 23 Jan 2026; Received in revised form: 21 Feb 2026; Accepted: 24 Feb 2026; Available online: 28 Feb 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)</p> <p>Keywords – natural disaster, survival, storytelling, humane values, diaspora, identity.</p>	<p>The celebrated Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has chosen different subjects for her novels but none so interesting as <i>One Amazing Thing</i> in which she puts the characters in a dangerous even life-threatening situation and makes them overcome this crisis especially by means of storytelling. It follows the path laid by several literary classics like <i>One Thousand and One Nights</i>, <i>The Decameron</i>, <i>Panchatantra</i> and most importantly <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>. Trapped in the underground office of an Indian consulate the characters connect with each other and forge a group which actually helps them to survive the crisis until they are finally rescued. The narrative thus provides us with invaluable lessons on empathy and the insignificance of societal prejudices based on caste, creed, gender and the riches which amount to absolutely nothing while facing a crisis. Therefore, the novel not only entertains and educates the reader but psychologically prepares us to embrace the notion of universal humanity. This paper probes how the author successfully makes us aware of the limitations in life even for the affluent and how genuine care for each other can help us tide over such nearly unimaginable difficulties.</p>

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an author of Indian origin with nineteen novels to her credit has often impressed the global reading community with her creations which delve deep into human psychology, societal traditions of the east as well as the west and Indian cultural and mythological traditions. In the novel, *One Amazing Thing* published in 2009, she brings to the fore a unique theme of survival in the aftermath of an unexpected natural disaster with the help of storytelling. This harks back to the established literary traditions of the world like Indian or Arabic whose literary outputs provide us with umpteen such examples of stories to overcome

life's crisis. The novel, in addition, presents a layered narrative which transcends the immediate and pressing necessity of physical survival to pose fundamental questions about human connections, redemptive power of storytelling and the universality of the human experience. Set against the backdrop of a catastrophic earthquake that traps nine strangers in the basement visa office of an Indian Consulate, the novel chooses to dwell upon issues of identity, mortality and the transformative potential of shared narratives. This paper aims to highlight how the thematic architecture of the work in contention reveals Divakaruni's deep understanding of how a

crisis is also imbued with the potentialities of turning into a blessing in disguise by stripping away societal hierarchies and creating space for honest human communion for the sake of survival.

The novel is premised in the Indian consulate office located in an unnamed American city. We are introduced to nine people waiting for their interviews in order to obtain the Indian visa. They would be heading to India for different reasons altogether. However, all of a sudden, in a devastating earthquake, the building collapses and these nine characters are helplessly trapped inside. After the initial shock the motley group decide to fight for their lives but the act of fighting here assumes an allegorical as well as a broader significance because they choose to comfort each other by sharing anecdotes from their lived experiences. This redemptive function of storytelling occupies the philosophical core of the novel and also connects the narrative form with its thematic content. One of the characters viz. Uma, a graduate literature student carrying a copy of Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, suggests that the trapped group share stories of "one amazing thing" from their lives. With this initiative she sets in motion, a process that transforms collective panic into a collective effort to survive. A serious reader would definitely note the re-employment of Chaucer's frame narrative structure here as well; much like the medieval pilgrims who journeyed toward spiritual salvation both by means of their pilgrimage and also through storytelling, Divakaruni's characters undertake an inner pilgrimage through mutual testimony that in the process binds them together and focuses upon the positive aspects of life even when their existence in itself is mired with unforeseen difficulties. The process of storytelling creates virtual spaces which are free from any kind of judgement. They function as cathartic spaces where untold truths are divulged all of a sudden, allowing characters to unburden themselves of decades of regret, guilt, and unspoken longing.

An interesting aspect of the novel is how it emphasises upon the almost mystical capability of stories to dismantle prejudice and restore human dignity. As the nine survivors share their narratives infused with self-revealing aspects of love, loss, betrayal and self-discovery—the "ubiquitous walls dividing the novel's characters on ethnic and racial

grounds" gradually collapse. Tariq, a Muslim young man who has been subjected to much vilification due to his biological identity as a fallout of the 9/11 is filled with justifiable rage at the beginning of the novel, but he also undergoes a complete transformation and articulates it explicitly: "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." This statement alone succinctly sums up the vision of the author. We recognise that the power of narrative operates not just through intellectual argument but also through emotional recognition—the visceral understanding that human pain transcends cultural, religious and racial boundaries adds a definite distinctive layer into the story.

With this novel Divakaruni admittedly pays a tribute to many other literary gems especially of the east. It implicitly refers to the literary precedent of *One Thousand and One Nights* where Scheherazade saves her life and that of many other young women like her through storytelling. Perhaps this is the greatest ode to the art of storytelling anywhere across world literature. Written centuries ago, this classic piece of Arabian literature continues to inspire authors across the globe. Similarly, the characters' stories function as psychological rescue mechanisms in an existential emergency. Academic analysts have noted that much 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. This aligns with Divakaruni's own stated artistic intention of the novel as a literary genre being fundamentally "about the power of stories to heal us, make us laugh, and comfort us in the most difficult of circumstances."

It is interesting to note how the author employs a natural phenomenon to convey divergent significances simultaneously. The earthquake actually functions as more than just a plot device of being a disaster which traps people in unforeseen circumstances. It operates as an existential catalyst which forces the characters to confront the ultimate fear of human kind i.e. mortality. Enconced in the privileges of a comfortable lifestyle we tend to forget that life is bound to come to an end despite the well-known philosophical treatises on the ephemerality of it. Thus, when confronted by such a calamity in which life hangs by a thread human beings extract meaning

from their finite existence. Natural disasters, as a critic rightfully observes, are "ruptures in the basic functioning of society" that "create important opportunities to empower people and potentially bring about deeper changes." Much like the technique usually noted in the short stories, the novel also ends ambiguously and the readers are left to wonder about the fates of these nine survivors. It also brings the reader face to face with the deeply ingrained fears of death and provides a lesson on the way in which it can be overcome successfully. This underscores Divakaruni's thematic commitment to explore the notions of mortality not as a narrative resolution which overpowers every other emotion but as an ultimate existential truth. It can therefore be safely asserted that the author draws upon the Indian wisdom as espoused in *Srimadbhagbatgita* which advises that upon death only the body dies but the soul remains immortal. By embracing the inevitable notion of mortality, the novel transforms into a deep meditation on the significance of life. The very title *One Amazing Thing* encapsulates a philosophy that all of us, in our lives, regardless of circumstances, must have found one such experience which defines our existence. The author's truly egalitarian vision of significance stubbornly refuses to privilege wealthy characters like the Pritchetts or educated ones like Uma; instead, it insists that beauty and meaning inhere equally in Jiang's forbidden love story, Malathi's courageous defiance of her employer, and Cameron's desperate search for redemption through adoption. The novel suggests that recognition of life's fragility paradoxically makes authentic connections possible.

In keeping with the traits of any acclaimed work of literature, the novel also transcends the fault lines of caste, creed and racial identities thus donning a universal hue. It explicitly addresses natural and deeply entrenched prejudice in two ways. The characters' initial mutual suspicion of each other and broader themes of Islamophobia, ethnic discrimination and xenophobia which surfaced in the American society post 9/11 are also taken into account succinctly. Meanwhile, its thematic core complicates simplistic celebrations of diversity. The narrative does not put forward any such assumption that recognizing cultural differences automatically generates understanding; rather, it highlights that

vulnerability and shared narrative germinate the ideal conditions for transcending psychological barriers and coalescing into a single entity.

If we go back to the initial pages of the novel, we would find that the characters enter the consulate marked by their socially recognised identities which they have effectively internalised, for example, Cameron, a celebrated war hero, carries military trauma within himself; Tariq is justifiably angry because of the atrocities he has to face due to his Muslim identity in a post-9/11 American society; Jiang carries the weight of Sino-Indian geopolitical conflict; Uma navigates hyphenated Indian-American belonging. The earthquake brings them close to each other both physically as well as psychologically. When they begin to narrate their intimate experiences, these barriers dissolve, categorical identities become secondary to their common struggle with love, family obligation, guilt and the search for meaning. The visa office itself operates as a microcosm of the proverbial American "melting pot," where people of different nations and religions converge and the physical collapse of the building metaphorically represents the breaking down of constructed social barriers. In this context, it is also quite interesting to note that Divakaruni refuses to resolve these prejudices through moral exhortation in the form of lectures. None of the characters are seen to deliver a lecture to the other characters. Instead, the prejudices collapse organically from the recognition of shared human fragility, an inherent weakness which is common to all. When characters hear each other's stories especially vulnerable moments of loss and regret in particular, the psychological scaffolding that sustains prejudice dissolves. This suggests that abstract concepts like "diversity" and "inclusion" gain ethical weight only when embodied in specific human witness.

Being an American author with roots in Indian tradition, Divakaruni subtly brings in the elements of diaspora experience. The novel engages deeply with diaspora theory and the specific trauma of displacement, particularly for immigrant and second-generation characters navigating dual identities, they can neither let go of their roots nor can fully adapt into the American lifestyle. Uma, born in America but raised with Indian consciousness, is nearly shocked with her parents' decision to return to

Kolkata after two decades and her sense of home is irreparably ruptured. Owing to her upbringing in America she does not have any emotional attachment with India and therefore her parents' decision delivers her a rude jolt. She feels displaced from her homeland and this displacement is not merely geographical rather it represents a profound identity crisis in which the assumed stability of origin and belonging crumbles.

The characters collectively embody different dimensions of diaspora's psychological landscape. Jiang carries in her heart unresolved longing for a love prohibited by geopolitical circumstances; Malathi experiences the alienation and precarity of economic displacement; Tariq suffers the specific post-9/11 trauma of racial suspicion within the country of his birth; Mangalam drowns in the debt and servitude of his marriage to his patron's daughter. The story of each character illuminates how migration, displacement and cultural transition germinate profound alienation and fragmentation of identities. Divakaruni's treatment of the diaspora experience suggests that it is not simply a geographical condition but a psychological state characterized by perpetual negotiations simultaneously taking place at many levels i.e. between the past and the present, origin and belonging, authentic self and assigned identity. The earthquake, in trapping these diaspora characters, forces them to confront the ghosts and traumas buried deep within their psyche and the stories shared by them become a handy tool to heal these repressed psychological issues.

While the diaspora experience as found in the novel encapsulates both the men and women characters, we find that the female characters are accorded prominence in the narrative. Hegemonic narratives usually position women as fragile or passive during crisis, Divakaruni's female characters viz. Jiang, Lily, Malathi, Mrs. Pritchett and Uma, however, display remarkable resourcefulness in dealing with the crisis and moral complexity. Uma, the young Indian lady engrossed in reading *Canterbury Tales* suddenly brings the tale alive by suggesting this technique of telling stories to cope with their precarious situation. Thus, she catalyses the entire survival process through narrative intervention. In contrast, the elderly Jiang's story reveals a woman who maintained love across decades

of separation vis-à-vis institutional prohibition. Malathi acts with bold defiance against exploitation by strategically burning her employer's hair. But despite advocating stronger women characters the novel cannot be termed a simplistic celebration of female strength. Mrs. Pritchett's story reveals the profound costs of self-sacrifice; she abandoned her dreams of owning a successful confectionery business to become a dutiful wife and the debris of her frustration accumulates across decades. By releasing her pent-up frustrations to this motley group, she is finally able to attain emotional equilibrium. In order to survive, Malathi has to hide and serve the beauty parlour owner. Thus, these narratives evidently suggest that women's resilience often emerges not as unidirectional triumph against all odds but as negotiated compromise with patriarchal systems. The novel further seems to insist that women's survival stories deserve to be assessed with sympathy and dignity especially when they reveal compromise and suppressed agency.

But while the stories shared by these characters forge newer mental connections, the physical situation steadily deteriorates, water level rises, the survivors can smell leaking gas and oxygen supply dwindling to worrisome levels. At this crucial juncture, Divakaruni brings in another element of nurturing a community which would bring together this disparate group to tide over the looming crisis. The novel emphasizes that survival in this situation would require the characters to depend on and help each other. Cameron is initially positioned as the authoritative leader owing to his military past but he gradually weakens due to his asthma and is unable to guide the group physically, however, other characters assume the roles of caretaker and protector in his stead. This change of roles happens without any worded instruction. This shifting of responsibility is entirely in contrast with the rules of an established social order where hierarchies are based on physical strength, wealth or authority. Since everyone here is most concerned with survival so no one actually cares about these traditional hierarchies and roles are transferred seamlessly. It highlights how a difficult situation can actually help to build a community. The community that emerges in this process is however, not organic; it must be deliberately constructed by working around vulnerabilities and employing

negotiation while fostering mutual care. Characters share their food supplies which albeit meagre help to sustain them for the time being, tend each other's wounds and eventually provide Cameron with emotional sustenance as his physical power fails. The novel insinuates that a community, in the true sense of the term, is not created through shared identities of caste, race and religion but through interdependence. It is a formal recognition of the fact that survival in a hitherto unforeseen and dangerous situation requires each one's effort and contribution.

As the characters are rescued and all of them live to see another day, a final thematic aspect is brought to the fore; it is the paradox of achieving universality through particularity in which Divakaruni adroitly succeeds. Despite each of the character's stories being deeply embedded in specific history, cultural context and personal circumstance these stories also reveal issues like the ache of forbidden love, the guilt of parental betrayal, the shame of exploitation, the desperate hope of redemption which are quite common across the world. Divakaruni suggests that the path to understanding "what it means to be human" runs not through abstraction but through intimate encounter with specific human consciousness across difference. The novel employs a narrative technique of nestling nine stories within one overarching frame narrative which formally executes the author's vision of starting from a particular point of view and achieving universality by expanding the readers' psychological horizons. The author admittedly drew from sources like *The Panchatantra*, *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. While going through the individual stories readers might not be able to adopt a magnanimous view of universal humanity and therefore, they are made to move through the subjective world of each character, experiencing their particular grief and desire before recognizing its resonance with other human experiences. This structure refuses easy cosmopolitanism in favour of the harder work of sustained attention across difference.

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