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LIFE ON THE MARGIN: CAMERON IN DIVAKARUNI'S  
ONE AMAZING THING



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ABSTRACT:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *One Amazing Thing* tells the fascinating tale of nine people gathered in the Indian visa office in certain American city when earthquake devastates the building leaving them trapped in the basement of the building. In the course of its development the novel reveals their ordinary yet highly absorbing lives as they tell about one amazing thing in their respective lives. Cameron, an African American ex-soldier is one of them. He is a man of fifty and a tortured soul. The paper focuses on the character of Cameron and attempts to analyse his character to find out the causes and effects of his lifelong suffering which hint at his marginalized and tribal background.

KEY WORDS:

Cameron, tribal, marginality, otherness,

INTRODUCTION:

An Indian American, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the well known writers hogging limelight in recent years. She writes



Darbarsing D. Girase

novels, short stories, poems, columns and book reviews. Her books have been translated into many languages, including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese. She is also an activist and works for *Daya*, *Pratham* and *Maitri*, the non-profit organizations that work for the betterment of disadvantaged and abused South Asian women

and children. Here her novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010) has been taken up for study which tells the story of a group of nine people

"...trapped in the visa office at an Indian Consulate after a massive earth quake in an American city...As they wait to be rescued—or to die—they begin to tell each other stories, each recalling 'one amazing thing' in their life, sharing things they have never spoken of before. Their tales are tragic and life affirming, revealing what it means to be human and the incredible power of storytelling".

(Divakaruni, 2010: inside of front page)

In the course of its development the novel reveals the inner lives of the characters belonging to variety of cultures, ethnicities and religions,



thus presenting a rich picture of cultural and dispositional multiplicity. However, the final picture that emerges is that of a sense of awareness of what it means to be human, it is the picture of solidarity and friendship in the face of odds. Notably, it is not just mere fear of death that forges this unity but the talking, understanding and sharing of mutual concerns that does it.

The novel is based on the premise that every individual life is unique and has an interesting tale to tell which not only makes up a "highly original" (Divakaruni, 2010: rear page) premise but also allows the author to bring in characters having multiple cultural affiliations and project the universality of essential human values through their different life experiences. As the characters come from different cultural backgrounds, the study of their lives offers a fascinating picture of cultural multiplicity marked by variety and complexity, difference and universality, collapsing "...the walls dividing characters and cultures" (Divakaruni, 2010: rear page) in its final effect. Bringing together people belonging to different socio-cultural and racial-religious background is deliberate ploy of the novelist to explore the possibilities of peaceful coexistence and rational way of dealing with differences. In the course of its development the novel throws light on different aspects and values of various cultures like Indian, American, Chinese, Eastern, Western as also universal, tribal, refugee etc. The present paper however, limits its scope to the analysis of Cameron's life and his unfortunate background. Of the nine trapped people one is Cameron, an African American who comes from tribal background and it is he and his story that demonstrate various facets of tribal culture in the novel. The paper aims to analyse the character of Cameron with this end to explore the nature, reasons and complexities involved in the 'otherness' of Cameron owing to his tribal background. The interest of the paper also lies in finding out if his tribal background has something to do with his 'otherness' and marginality.

#### DISCUSSION:

Cameron in his story tells about his tragic affair with Imani in his younger days that haunts him throughout life, and his attempts to either run away from that or at expiation. The tribal background defines not only the nature of this relationship but also the failure of it. Cameron lost his parents at the age of twelve and grew up in a black "ghetto" (Divakaruni, 2010: 183) surrounded by poverty, squalor, violence, crime and drugs. He was good at studies and aspired to do well in life. Meanwhile he was infatuated by Imani, a girl of his own community. The romance went on for some time. And just when he was hoping to obtain scholarship and get admission in some prestigious college Imani informed him that she was pregnant. The conflict in Cameron-Imani relationship is based on this intricate issue of Cameron wanting to get out of the ghetto and Imani trying to hold him into it. Imani doesn't find anything wrong with her surroundings, with her people but Cameron thinks otherwise. To him "...the mess he saw everyday around him was not his people, and he wasn't alone in wanting to get away". (Divakaruni, 2010: 183) When Cameron suggested abortion and offered to pay for it, Imani was horrified at the thought of his wanting to kill their baby just to get away. The two stopped seeing, and one day Cameron learned that Imani had had an abortion. Thereafter, Cameron joined college but could never concentrate on his studies and complete his education. Painful memories kept haunting him. To escape, he joined army, hiding his asthma, but in vain. The last desperate days of Vietnam War in which he was thrown into as a soldier could do nothing to make him forget his painful past. His troubled past "...was like a scab that he couldn't help picking at" (Divakaruni, 2010: 180) and it followed him wherever he went. Cameron's volunteering at the local hospital and his adopting an Indian orphan girl named Seva were the means of his expiation. It is his way of dealing with the guilt feeling that has haunted him throughout life for being responsible for the death of his unborn child.

Cameron is a tortured soul whose life is haunted by guilt and sense of regret and his desperate

attempts throughout life to negotiate with the complexities of his life. He lost his parents in an accident as a child and grew up orphan with an aunt. Cameron is in his fifties and Imani is a single woman in his life whom he met during the second year of high school, fell in love, got "...initiated...into the mysteries of female body" (Divakaruni, 2010: 182), but could not marry because of his desire to educate himself and get out of the black ghetto. Imani took his refusal to marry as a betrayal of trust, cursed him and aborted the baby. The affair ended then and there but somehow Cameron could never throw Imani out of his system, filling his days with "decisions he regretted" and nights with "insomnia" and "nightmares...The worst was that of a tiny child afloat in an oval room". (Divakaruni, 2010: 187) Curiously, due to health issues, lack of concentration, Cameron could never complete his education, and left to live a life haunted by guilt and regret. Even today "From across the years he could hear Imani's voice, so clear..." (Divakaruni, 2010: 180) cursing him and see his unborn baby looking at him "...without reproach". (Divakaruni, 2010: 187) Here the attitude that appears is that of a transparently honest tribal who could never selfishly free himself from his responsibility in the whole affair. Hypocrisy, pretence and blatant self-certifying attempts to free oneself of guilt, and blame others are not his cup of tea being a true tribal.

Cameron had a desire to come up in life by getting himself educated and prosper in life. In fact he "...wanted to be doctor. He had guarded this fragile dream jealously..." (Divakaruni, 2010: 181) Such a desire for betterment and aspiring for things high is natural. But this attitude of Cameron is in conflict with Imani's. Imani does not find anything wrong with the kind of life Cameron calls mess. She interprets his higher aspirations and desire to go away from his own people as betrayal of his own community. She reproaches him "*You already decided you going to leave, so you can't see nothing good even if it up and smack you in the face*". (Divakaruni, 2010: 180) Cameron felt furious and terrified at her accusations. "The ghetto seemed to be closing in on him." (Divakaruni, 2010: 183) If he sees marriage and domestic responsibilities at such young age as a hindrance in the path of his progress, then she takes his refusal as a deliberate act of snapping ties with his roots and his people. These differences of attitude not only create complexities in the life of Cameron and lead to the subsequent tragedy of his life but also appear symptomatic or representative among the marginalized sections of society, something which ironically leads to perpetuation of marginality and peripheral existence which is seen across the world dividing people and communities on different lines.

The story also takes a sarcastic take on the attitude of the so-called charity efforts and attempts to help develop and bring the poor, downtrodden and backward to the mainstream of society. After his schooling Cameron was hoping to get admission in some good college and secure scholarship. "His grades were excellent; his recommendations enthusiastic...he had taken care to stay out of trouble...volunteered regularly at local hospital." But Cameron felt angry and humiliated when his counsellor declared with a patronizing attitude that all these credentials added to his "...unfortunate background—impoverished, orphaned, first-generation college applicant—would probably snag him scholarship" (Divakaruni, 2010: 180), suggesting in the process as if his credentials were not enough. What Cameron felt angry at was the counsellor's attempt to "...to turn the painful truths of Cameron's existence into advantages" (Divakaruni, 2010: 181), not realizing the sense of hurt and humiliation it causes to the sense of self-esteem of the intended beneficiary. It is also seen that more than his present it is Cameron's past that reveals his subaltern and marginalized position as a tribal.

The marginalized and subaltern position of Cameron is further highlighted when he went to college. With the painful past behind, the conditions at college added to his woes.

"In class, where he was often the only black student, he fell dull and unprepared. The privileged kids with their smart answers intimidated him into silence, which his teachers took as indifference...By



the time he understood that he should have gone to a large state college where there would have been more of 'his people', his grades had plummeted...Ashamed...he quit...joined the army—and was plummeted into the last desperate days of Vietnam War." (Divakaruni, 2010: 186)

This background of Cameron makes it clear that academic failures of first generation learners among tribal students has lot to do with their socio-economic circumstances and marginalized background than their real intelligence levels. The true reasons of Cameron's academic failure can never be fully understood without the sympathetic understanding of his subaltern status and marginalized background which is very often the case with first generation learners among tribal students.

Cameron represents a slice of life of African American society which has shared history of unfortunate and impoverished background. But the socially and economically backward sections of the society also have the younger generation which aspires for progress, improvement, betterment and wishes to prosper through education, and Cameron represents that urge. In his intense desire to get out of the mess that he sees around him in the form of life of poverty, scarcity, ignorance, violence, crime, drugs and filth he represents the higher aspirations of Afro-American youth. If Cameron represents the desire for change, betterment, advancement and modernity of tribal societies, then Imani represents the exact opposite of that desire, the desire for status qua and traditionalism. Therefore, she reproaches Cameron for wanting to go away from their own people and for failing to see any good in living with them. In so doing she represents those forces of rigidity and traditionalism in tribal society that want to hold back the forces that want change, betterment and modernity.

#### CONCLUSION:

The conclusions drawn from the above discussion are as below.

- It can be said that much of Cameron's suffering emanates from his transparent honesty as a tribal that does not allow him to selfishly escape the responsibility and guilt in the whole affair of Imani for hypocrisy, pretence and blatant self-certifying attempts to free oneself of guilt, and blame others are not his cup of tea being a true tribal.
- The attitudinal difference he faces only leads to spiraling of that suffering and creates complexities in his life leading to the subsequent tragedy of his life which also appear symptomatic or representative among the marginalized sections of society, something which ironically leads to perpetuation of marginality and peripheral existence.
- The attitude of the so-called charity efforts and attempts to help develop and bring the poor, downtrodden and backward to the mainstream of society ironically prove counterproductive in the case of Cameron for they play with his sense of self-esteem and self-worth alienating him more.
- It is seen that more than his present it is Cameron's past that reveals his subaltern and marginalized position as a tribal.
- It is also clear in his case that academic failures of first generation learners among tribal students has lot to do with their socio-economic circumstances and marginalized background than their real intelligence levels. There is a need of sympathetic understanding of the subaltern status and marginalized background to understand the true reasons of academic failure, not just of Cameron's but of the first generation learners among tribal students.
- The forces of rigidity and traditionalism among the tribal communities are also to be blamed for the perpetuation of marginality.

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