

# Childhood Experience - the Building Blocks of Life: A Psychoanalytical Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction *One Amazing Thing*

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T. Uma

Assistant Professor, *Quaid-e-Millath Government College for Women, Chennai, India*

## Abstract

*Some people cannot love even their family members, while some seemingly normal people have few paradoxical qualities. Is there a connection between their strange behavior and their childhood experiences? What is the role of childhood in the character development of a person? The psychologists consider childhood experiences as the building blocks of a person's personality. Freud believed that the child's bond with the parents is the key to his/her psyche. Erikson divides a person's life into eight stages of development. Every child faces a crisis or a challenge at each stage. The resolution of the crisis would lead to the acquisition of virtue, while failure caused maladaptive. Karen Horney also puts forth similar views. If the child's basic need is not met, he/ she would either move towards people or move against or move away from people. This article examines the portrayal of children, their challenges, idiosyncrasies, and impact of their experiences on their psyche in the fiction **One Amazing Thing**, written by famous Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from a psychoanalytical perspective. She has written a few children's novels also. A master storyteller, she weaves reality, imagination, and psychology together and creates both adult and juvenile characters who are true to life.*

**Keywords:** Childhood, building blocks crisis, Maladaptation, idiosyncrasy

A filial relationship is the first and foremost of all relationships a person forms with different people during his / her life span. Normally, the bond between the child and parent is natural and powerful. A child trusts and loves his/her mother and father completely. The parents also love their children.

"The childhood of today is the manhood of tomorrow," says an anonymous quote. Most of the psychiatrists attribute immense importance to childhood. According to Sigmund Freud, the Father of Psychoanalysis, the child's bond with his/her parents is the key to his/her psyche and character. Childhood experiences define a person's life. Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of Analytical Psychology, believed that social archetypes and future aspirations also play important roles in a person's life apart from his/her childhood experiences.

Freud believed that many people have some urges and desires which are not acceptable by the society. Their efforts to rein in such urges cause anxiety and guilt. Their psyches push those urges, unpleasant incidents, and memories into their unconscious mind. This process is called *repression*. Many children also repress some unpleasant experiences and emotions, which leads to maladaptations in their behavior.

Eric Erikson, a pioneering Developmental Psychologist, in his theory of Psychosocial Development, identifies eight stages in the development of human beings, out of which five stages span 18 years of childhood and adolescence, and the final three stages cover the adult life. Every person faces a psychosocial conflict in each stage. He/she must face the conflict and attempt to resolve it to adjust well to the environment.

The outcome of this struggle affects him/her directly, either in a positive way or a negative way. If the person can resolve the crisis and complete the stage successfully, he or she acquires a virtue or strength. It helps him/her develop a healthy and positive personality. Failure results in the development of a negative quality or trait in the person, which may hamper his future development and turn him into an unhealthy personality. However, the unresolved crisis can be solved successfully at a later stage of life.

Karen Horney formulated her theory of Children's Psychological Development. She says that the children from a secure atmosphere, where their *basic needs*, i.e., food, love, and safety, are fulfilled, grow up to be confident individuals with a healthy self-concept. They are better equipped to handle personal and professional relationships. However, a large number of parents or caretakers fail to provide their children, even basic needs. Horney defines parental indifference and lack of care as *basic evil*. *Basic Evil* includes abuse, neglect, and preference shown to one child over the other, etc. *Basic Evil* creates psychological wounds in the minds of the child, which leads to the development of *basic hostility*. Some children display their anger and disappointments toward their parents openly, whereas the majority of them redirect it on some other people.

The children exposed to *basic evil experience basic anxiety* and develop maladaptive patterns of behavior. If the child's need for the unqualified love and warmth of parents is not fulfilled, then he/ she abandons its real self and progresses neurotically *moving towards people* or *moving against* or *moving away from people*. Some children have an intense need for love and appreciation, and to get them, they go to any extreme. Some try to manage their basic anxiety by *moving away* from people. They become indifferent and detached from the others. A small number of children *move against people* and express their hostility in violence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a renowned Indian American poet and novelist who has many novels, collections of short stories, anthologies of poems, and a few prose works to her credit. A distinguished member of the Indian diaspora, she is famed for her

sensitive portrayal of immigrant experiences and women's issues. *The Mistress of Spice, Queen of Dreams, One Amazing Thing, etc.*, are some of her famous novels. Divakaruni has written a few novels for children. She has thrown light on childhood experiences and its influence on the person's psyche and life.

Divakaruni has employed the Indian folklore narrative technique of *Panchatantra* in her novel, *One Amazing Thing*, which contains stories within a story. An odd group of nine people is trapped in the waiting hall of a Visa office by an earthquake. They wait for the arrival of the rescue team. To relieve the stress, each of them tells a tale 'one amazing thing' from their lives. Mr. Pritchett narrates his childhood. He is a product of a broken family. His mother, a single parent, struggled hard to take care of the boy and herself. The father is not at all mentioned. One can infer that the father is either dead or has deserted the family.

Mr. Pritchett's mother, employed in a restaurant, was usually dog-tired after the work. She did not cook or wash clothes regularly. Yet Mr. Pritchett loved his mother 'loves her so much that he feels breathless.' He knew how to brush his teeth and how to dress. At the tender age of five years, the boy had learned to fix his lunch. Occasionally, her mother would sing a song or read a story to him, and the boy would be very happy. "Is the boy unhappy? No, when you've known only one thing in your life, you accept it as natural" (Divakaruni 89).

The boy was so lonely and love-starved that he started loving mathematics. To make the matter worse, the mother got herself a boyfriend Kevin who started living with them. The boy was further isolated as the mother had no time for him. The boy, too young to understand, resented Kevin. Alva Mrydal and Viola Klein rightly point out:

Although deficient understanding of the children's need at each age level may itself cause emotional and social and perhaps also intellectual underdevelopment, and although a feeling of 'rejection' occurs now and then for reasons which have to do with a mother's personality . . . the risk exists that ambitious mothers may more often cause their children to feel willfully neglected. (130)

He found a stray kitten and wanted to keep it. But his mother would not allow it as Kevin did not like cats. Finally, the boy kept the kitten in an abandoned fridge at night and would keep a wedge in the door so that kitten could breathe. One day, the boy found the kitten dead in the fridge as the wedge had been removed. The boy believed it to be the work of Kevin. He was very pained, and he did not talk about it to anyone, even to his mother. "From this time on, he speaks to her as little as possible" (98). His mother made few efforts to engage him in conversation. When the boy did not respond, she got angry. "She does not have time for this nonsense, this sulking without reason when she's knocking herself to provide for him" (98). Earlier, the boy hated Kevin alone; now, he wished his mother was dead. Later, when his mother died, the boy felt very guilty. "Guilt will press down like a ball of iron on his chest no matter how much he rationalized it..." (97). Mr. Pritchett's mother is a negligent parent who failed to provide even *basic needs* to him. As an abandoned woman with a low paid job, she cannot be blamed for their poverty. However, she could have been more affectionate towards her son.

Carl Jung believed that the neurotics behavior of parents had a direct impact on the psyche of the children.

What influences him (the child) most is the peculiarly affective state, which is unknown to his parents and educators. The concealed discord between the parents, the secret worry, the repressed hidden wishes, etc., all these products in the individual a certain affective state which slowly but surely enough, through the unconsciously, works its way into child's mind producing there in the same conditions and hence the same reactions to external stimuli. (Asch 128)

Mr. Pritchett's childhood is a sad saga of neglect and lack of love. It affected him so deeply that he could not love or trust anyone, even his wife. He developed negative symptoms of withdrawal and mistrust. He 'moved away from people' to avoid getting hurt. He turned towards mathematics and devoted himself to numbers because "they will never abandon him, unlike his mother" (99). He also repressed his unpleasant memories of neglected

childhood. The repression and the consequent withdrawal stopped him from forming a positive and loving relationship with his wife. He couldn't love her for fear of rejection or abandonment. Mrs. Pritchett felt that the husband did not love her enough though he provided her all comforts. She wanted to leave him. Mr. Pritchett's act of revealing his childhood heals his psyche by bringing the repressed memories to his consciousness. His wife now understands her husband and feels sorry for him. She decides to stay with him.

The dynamics of children's relationship with their parents change when they become adults. As an adult, they have certain views and opinions about life and issues which do not match with that of the aged parents. This results in clashes between the adult children and their parents. One of the important causes of contention is marriage. In India, a large number of parents choose a life partner for their grown-up children and arrange their marriages. In these kinds of marriages, social status, money, community, and religion are the important factors that are considered while choosing the bride or the groom. Nowadays, many youngsters choose their partners and get married. But most Indian parents do not accept the love or love marriage of their children. For them, *family honor* is more important than their children's happiness.

In another story, Mrs. Balan, the wife of a business tycoon and a seemingly nice lady, is a schemer who does not allow her son to choose his partner. She does not have a fulfilling bond with her husband, who is too busy chasing young women staff at his office. She is very attached to her son. Carl Jung says, "A mother who deliberately keeps herself unconscious so as not to disturb the pretense of a 'satisfactory' marriage...unconsciously will bind her son to her, more or less as a substitute for a husband. The son is..... compelled to modify his choice in a way that is contrary to his true nature..."(78).

Mrs. Balan is at logger's heads with her son Ravi who has returned from abroad recently. Ravi takes a fancy for a maid servant Nirmala. Mrs. Balan cannot accept a maid servant as her daughter-in-law. Initially, she tries to reason with her son. All her efforts come to naught. Finally, she schemes the events in such a way that Nirmala becomes the

girlfriend of a rich man. Later, Mrs. Balan chooses a rich young woman - daughter of a business baron- as a bride for her son. She, usually an indulgent mother, hurts him by destroying his love. Thus, many parents thwart the love affairs of their children, destroying their chance of finding happiness in their lives.

In another story, Lily, a Chinese girl, appears to be a spunky youngster with pierced eyebrows. Her story reveals her craving for the parent's attention. As a child, she was obedient and a 'pleaser.' She was overshadowed by her brother Mark - 'a perfect child.' Her parents poured their love and attention on him. Her parents failed to give equal attention to their children, and she felt left out. Lily's *basic need* for parental love and attention is not met. So she started *moving toward people* and devised a new way of attracting the parent's attention. She started doing small acts of rebellion – refusing to go to a Chinese language class, creating problems at school deliberately, etc., She began donning only black costumes and got her eyebrow pierced. Lily loved her parents very much; however, she deliberately did things that would annoy them. Her rebellion is her desperate cry for parental love and attention. But her parents misinterpreted Lily's act of defiance, which was just her attempt to get their attention, as bad behavior. They took away her iPod and cut her allowances. Fortunately, her brother understood her better and channelized her attention to music. Lily also became very much interested in music and gave up her 'bad ways.' Her parents were happy to notice the change in her. They arranged music classes for her. Finally, Lily succeeded in getting her parent's love and approval.

Her brother Mark went to a prestigious university. The parents did not check on how he was managing at the university as they had complete faith in their son's ability. Once they got a call from the university. The parents were shocked to learn that their 'perfect' son had fallen into bad company. He had become an alcoholic and had failed in the exams. His advisor told them, This sometimes happened to the kids from strict and traditional homes. They cannot handle the sudden freedom. Lily's parents are now trying their best to help their son come out of his 'evil ways.' This story brings up the difficulty faced by the parents in bringing up their children in

modern times. The 'good' child going astray is also a common happening in the society.

Childhood is an important stage in the life of human beings. Most psychologists believe that childhood experiences have a direct impact on the human psyche. Many types of neurosis or maladaptive behavior of humans have their roots in their childhood. The parents should provide at least *basic needs* for the children. Their unconditional love will help the holistic development of the children. They should give their children freedom in the choice of career and love. Any interference or thwarting would only cause wounds in the children's psyche. Divakaruni depicts the psyche of children in her works artistically, which helps the readers understand human nature better. They can deal with their own 'unresolved psychic conflicts' (if any) and guide others. Carl Jung correctly points out; If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it, and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in us (121).

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#### **Author Details**

**Mrs. T. Uma**, Assistant Professor, *Quaid-e-Millath Government College for Women, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India*,  
**Email ID:** [umavelankt@gmail.com](mailto:umavelankt@gmail.com).