

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*: A Chorus of Multicultural and Multifarious Voices

Akhilesh Ahirwar

Research Scholar

Department Of English

Banaras Hindu University

Varanasi, U.P., India

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer known for the depiction of insightfulness in her writing. She has tried her hands in poetry, short stories and novels. Divakaruni was born on July 29, 1956 in Kolkata, India. She has completed her graduation in arts in 1976 from University of Calcutta while her post graduation and Ph.D. was completed in USA. She taught for twenty years in Foothill College and then moved to Texas with her husband and two children.

Keywords- *Fiction, Patriarchy, Feminism, Migration*

Divakaruni started writing poetry and then turned to short stories and fiction. Her major publications include four volumes of poetry; *The Reason for Mastanimms* (1990); *Black Candle* (1991) and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) and *Indian Movie, New Jersey*; two collections of short stories: *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of our lives* (2001) and seven novels; *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Lives of Strangers* (2005), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), and *Before We Visit the Goddess*, a novel- Simon & Schuster (2016). She has also edited three multicultural readers titled *Multitude* (1993), *We Too, Sing America* (1998) and *California Uncovered: Stories for the 21st Century* (2004).

She has experienced both the pre-immigration and the post-immigration conditions, touched and moved by the miseries of women in Patriarchal society and, also by the desire to preserve memory of the homeland. She has co-founded MAITRI, an organization for the South Asian women to deal with the cases of domestic violence. During her social work she encountered women of different cultures but one thing she understood is that, by one way or the other, each society has created a network for suppressing women's right.

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Critics have praised Divakaruni's capability of telling stories, use of evocative language and highly heartrending characterization. She has also proclaimed herself as a writer who is able to retell the agonies of immigration and portrayal of diverse lives of the marginalized in American society. Her interests are largely feministic. During her stay in America, she was able to understand the patriarchal structure of the Indian society better than before. Indian culture and traditions prevented her to see the exploitative nature of Indians and South Asian tradition against women. But it is not like that the American society was free from these vices. She found that double standards prevailed regarding women both in East and the West.

Divakaruni's writing covers a wide variety which includes Feminism, Transnationalism, Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism, with the notion of 'exile' and 'hybridity'. Myth and Magic also play an important role in her numerous narratives that allow her to broaden her dimensions. Even Susana Vega-Gonzalez in her article, "Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor's *Mama Day* says:

Despite their different ethno-cultural backgrounds and life experiences, Chitra B. Divakaruni and Gloria Naylor share more than their belonging to the group of so-called "minority" writers in the United States. In two of their most acclaimed novels, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Mama Day* (1988), they venture into the unfathomable world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence in the "patchwork quilt" that constitute the United States of America. (1)

The genre of novel in literature has provided various opportunities to women writers to explore and share their experiences. The remarkable progress of the South Asian Diasporic writers marked ineradicable impact on English literature. Divakaruni as a Diasporic writer managed to discover the immigrant women's psychology, an exploration of the niceties, friction and love in the bonds between them. According to K.S Dhanam:

Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions (...) she also contrasts the lives and perceptions of first generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos. Her writing course with her identification is with a brave new world forging to life. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia. (62)

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Divakaruni deliberately speaks and writes the language of women in her novels and this novel *One Amazing Thing* is no exception, but this time she has allowed herself to portray the inner shades of diverse culture by including people of different nationalities. Also she tries to balance the aspect of gender by including many male characters in it. This novel represents the real picture of multiculturalism. The fear, friction, affiliation, distinction, love, affection etc are depicted in this work. In the introduction of the book *Multicultural States*, David Bennet says:

Like contemporary ethno-nationalisms, however, multiculturalism is in many ways an epiphenomenon of globalisation, and since its coinage by a Canadian Royal Commission in 1965, the word itself has had a diasporic career, entering and inflecting numerous national debates about the politics of cultural difference, the 'limits of tolerance', and the future of the nation-state. (2)

The setting of the novel is in an unnamed city on the coast of the United States. It opens within the basement-level visa officer of the Indian consulate. After some time an earthquake strikes and nine people who are present at that time are trapped in the office. These people belong to different race, class, age etc-including African- American, Caucasian, Chinese and Indian, along with a multiplicity of beliefs, such as Islam and Hinduism.

Uma is a young student of English literature who arrives at the visa office of the Indian Consulate at an American city. Apart from Uma the others are two visa officers Malathi and Mangalam who are on the threshold of having an adulterous situation, Jiang an old Chinese lady and her endowed young granddaughter named Lily, Cameron an ex US army soldier, An upper-class Caucasian couple, Mr and Mrs Pritchett, whose relationship is disintegrating. And a Young (Muslim-American) man, Tariq, struggling with the aftermath of the tragic incident of 9/11.

The sudden break out of an earthquake shackles the minds of all these people present in the consulate. Fear of death overflows in their minds and recklessness and selfishness emerges in the acts of most of them. There is an ex-army official, Cameron who becomes the unofficial captain of the group. All the members come to a conclusion that his training skills can be helpful to stay alive. The first thing they have to share is the little food and water available to sustain as long as possible. And to induce calmness in the environment; Uma suggests telling of a story from their own lives and after some resistance everyone agrees to tell one remarkable incident of their lives.

The Chinese old lady is the first story teller among them. Her story is about her first love which she experienced when she was living in Calcutta (Kolkata) with her parents. Her parents owned a shoe shop where she also used to interact with the customers. There she meets a handsome Bengali gentleman called Mohit. Love sprung into their lives crossing the boundaries of nationalities but the Indo-china war became a great obstacle where she had to leave the country for her safety along with experiencing the withdrawal of Mohit's support,

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“Forgive me, he said. I love you, can’t fight a whole country” (76). In this story nationality becomes a hindrance to love.

Mr Pritchett is next. His story is about his terrible childhood. His mother was an alcoholic waitress who had no time for him though he loves her. His interest in numbers became a good time pass for him to forget his loneliness and pain. He brought a little kitten as a companion but his mother's boyfriend killed it and thereafter he is unable to tolerate any pet. The discovery of these facts helps Mrs Prichett in understanding her husband’s opinion for not allowing her to keep a dog. This story is full of misery and depicts the selfish nature of a woman towards her son.

Malathi begins her story next about her life in a small town in India. Being not very sound in education she took a job at a beauty parlour to avoid getting married. There she received the opportunity of encountering with the rich ladies of the town, of whom Mrs Balan was one. Mrs Balan’s son had an affair with her maid so she used mischievous means to get rid of her. Malathi became very angry about this and took revenge by using such degrading chemicals on her hair that the poor lady’s hair fell off in bunches. Well aware of the political power of Mrs. Balan, the owner of the parlour advised her to leave the city. She moved to Hyderabad and from there received the job at the Indian Consulate in America. Malathi chooses to narrate this story because she held that it was the only time she had done something bold.

Tariq remembers how his family was living a peaceful life but after the catastrophe of 9/11 his father was picked up for enquiry and released after four days. This incident caused great impact in their lives- ruining the family prestige, business etc. He became more inclined towards extremist Muslim activities. He was not sure whether Sarah, the daughter of his mother’s friend, would accept him with his new identity. Tariq represents the victims of the xenophobia created towards his community after the 9/11 disaster.

Lily has been very desperate to narrate her story for a long time and when her turn arrives she narrates how she was always overshadowed by the academic success of her older brother. She became fascinated with the flute and started learning it, gradually received great success in so many concerts and competitions but when the pressure to win rose, the sound quality of her flute became dull. The same happened with her brother. This story reflects the fact that extensive ambition of parents leads the children into great stress and sometimes they are unable to handle that pressure which spoils their life.

Mangalam narrates the story of marrying a girl of prosperous family to raise his own status. His marriage to Naina was a disaster. She didn’t like her in laws and also restricts her husband to visit them. This led him in an extra-marital affair with Latika. When he asks for divorce, Naina with the help of her father’s influence succeeded in parting them. This story exemplifies how the males in the society are also emotionally and psychologically ill-treated and with the idea of feminism ‘calling the shots’, such cases are made oblivious.

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Mrs Pritchett is the wife of a successful person. She has been very dutiful and supporting to her husband for her whole life so was her husband been kind to her. One day she sees a couple and realizes that something very essential is lacking in their relationship. She assumes herself to be in a subordinate position. The loss of her identity lead her to want to cease her life. This loneliness results in unsuccessful attempts of suicide. She concludes, “my husband did not love me the way I needed him to” (167), the story suggests the futility of the materialistic life. Love and affection are the prime needs of a common human being.

Now Cameron takes his turn and reveals his story. He was attracted to a girl, Imani, for her art of singing. Both of them engaged in a pre-marital sexual relationship and as a result Imani conceived Cameron’s child. In the meantime, he was offered a scholarship to study in a prestigious college. For the sake of his career he advised her to abort the child. The reply, ‘you want to kill our baby?’ and ‘It so important for you to get away from your people?’ (183), always haunts him and he later adopts a girl named ‘Seva’ from India to overcome from the guilt done to his girl friend and other atrocities he was involved as an army man in his career.

Uma is the last story teller of the group and shares the one amazing moment of her life. In the story, she describes how her parents lived a non- controversial life but one day she was informed by her father that, “All my life I’ve done what other people expected of me, ‘whatever time I have left, I’d like to live it the way I want. Do you have any questions?’” (197). He could have given divorce to her mother but later on he dropped this idea. Her parents were also uncomfortable of her relationship with Ramon. One thing that she feels a little tense is that she doesn’t disclose these facts to her mother. The story also unfolds the narrow-mindedness of some parents who still believe in ethnic values in terms of marriage.

Divakaruni opens up a window into the multicultural world of her characters and entertains a passionate desire to tell an honest and moving story. Each narrative unfolds to reveal the culture and personality of each member of the group. So this fact is also clearly seen with the advancement of the story. Every individual with its particular characteristic is mingled with his cultural background. The characters of Divakaruni’s novels make the present day readers to analyze and introspect themselves to fathom the basic concepts of life. The lines blur between fact and fiction as one recognizes this and so many other aspects one has read of in the novels. The novel is exceptionally moving, dramatic, and exquisitely rendered.

The way the characters in *One Amazing Thing* come together to dissolve their differences and face the challenge posed by an earthquake is an illustration of the need to disband boundaries. The distinctiveness of this novel is that she is able to bring together the people of different culture and allow them to speak their experience. Through the narratory contributions of the different characters, a combination of tales, lives, cultures, races and persona is formed leading to the birth of a chorus-like structure. The multi-facetedness yet unity of the stories to be a process to be a process to depict and express their experiential

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epiphany is what simalarises them. On the other hand, each of these stories though being unified for being resultant of an earthquake and various other causational aspects, are distinct in its own way.-attempting to portray distinctive features of the culture, society and human life in general. To conclude, Divakurni has effectively pointed out the multi-dimensional nature of the human life, its plurality as a whole and yet its capability to stand out individually voicing its singular appeal.

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