

# All fall down

## One Amazing Thing

By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni carries a reputation, somewhat disagreeable for an Indian origin writer of English fiction, of selling a redoubtable mash of dishy and *desi* exotica wrapped in a clever, bare-bone style of storytelling. But that has not come in her way of mastering a following in her adopted country, the US. She has also been able to marshal a fan base in India, the country of her birth, a readership with a high constituency of women, who are sophisticated enough to go beyond the sophomoric youthfulness of the Chetan Bhagat genre and yet not keen enough to bite into the weightiness of an Amitav Ghosh. Established and comfortably ensconced in her zone of reception, Divakaruni churned out her brand of novels, short stories, tales for children with untiring prolificacy. Until she decided to turn sombre with her previous novel *Palace of Illusions*.

*Palace of Illusions* re-tells the story of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Panchali, wife of the Pandavas. Stripped of the epic style, and contemporised with random sprinkling of populist feminism, *Palace of Illusions* found favour with a wider audience than her fan base. This is because Panchali's story gave Divakaruni the opportunity to combine her dose of periodic exotica with the unique power play of the *Mahabharata*. However, she is not exactly original in her depiction of the latter. In its execution, *Palace of Illusions* appears suspiciously close to a sub-genre of brilliant Bengali writing which has sought to read the epics from perspectives other than those already entrenched in them. Shaonli Mitra's play *Nathoboti Anathboth* (loosely translated: *one who has multiple husbands and is yet without one*) is one of the most iconic of these texts. Unless it's an inexplicable coincidence, Divakaruni borrows handsomely from the complex underpinnings of sexuality, conjugality and power play from Mitra's work without going deeper than the skin, thereby making *Palace of Illusions* read like a foreigner's guide into the life and opinions of the *Mahabharata*'s most enigmatic and charismatic woman.

The same could be said to be true her new novel *One Amazing Thing*, in which the East usually Divakaruni's favourite direction whenever she is looking for the elixir of exotica, is given a miss in favour of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* remains the most famous example of the portmanteau form. This is one in which a series of different stories with different characters and settings are recalled by different individuals who are bound only by a single event, time or setting.

*One Amazing Thing* is set in the office of an Indian consulate in an unnamed American city. In the course of an otherwise ordinary, busy day, a motley group of people assemble for a passage to India, waiting with various degrees of anticipation for the office staff to take up their case. Sometime around mid-day, a powerful earthquake devastates the city and nine people, seven visitors to the office and two visa officers, are caught in the main hall of the visa office.

It was as though a giant had placed his mouth against the building's foundation and roared. The floor buckled throwing Uma to the floor.

The giant took the building in both hands and shook it. A chair flew across the room towards Uma... People were screaming... (Above her) the ceiling collapsed in an explosion of plaster. Beams broke apart with the sound of gigantic bones snapping. A light fixture shattered... Rubble fell through the blackness. (p.9)

The imagery here is powerful and shows how effectively Divakaruni can hold her readers in thrall. The rest of the novel describes the travails of the trapped, who have to spend several forced hours in each other's company trying desperately to cope with the seemingly interminable ordeal of being caught at the bottom of what increasingly appears to them to be a giant heap that the earthquake has turned the city into. On the one hand these survivors are unable to escape while all the while expecting

themselves. If not for anything else, it is for keeping her narrative sharp, focused and cleverly limited to the scene of destruction that *One Amazing Thing* is a far better read than most of her work.

Going back to Chaucer and his portmanteau style in the *Canterbury Tales*, Divakaruni sets up a quake-ravaged room in an office where her motley cast of characters, unable to unchain themselves from their fated roles as character-in-waiting, decide to tell each other one of the most amazing stories of their life, some of which turn out to loosely share a connection to India. This is, again, a plausible move given that they are all at the Indian consulate. The stories told in this catastrophic situation turn out to be, as expected, luminous and life affirming for the characters in Divakaruni's novel. For readers not placed in a waiting chamber, however,

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to be rescued. On the other, they see doom closing in on them and every defence, tangible and intangible, against its inevitable progress peeling off, like the walls and ceilings that appear to be gradually giving in to the weight of greater collapse above.

One intensely rewarding aspect of the novel is that not for a second does the author leave the scene of the collapse. Many other writers would have given in to the allure of stepping out of the building and taking their unfortunate readers on a tour of the blasted city. But here Divakaruni like an invisible survivor, remains 'at home' with other survivors, as if she were listening to their stories and sharing their morsels, moving with them from one wobbly, skeletal edge of room to the other, looking upwards in despair at the suspended ceiling or wistfully beneath at the rising level of water. This gives the book an edginess, urgency and sense of foreboding, lacking in her other works. The book also ends on a similar note: the author knowing nothing more or less about the fate of the survivors than the survivors

reactions to these stories may be mixed—revelatory and ironic and at worst irritating and jejune. Revelatory and ironic because of the realisation that humanity, when faced with the gravest of situations, look only within themselves for redemption. Irritating and jejune because the hope of finding redemption more often than not results in a self-attestation of stereotypic virtues predictably relating to the colour and culture of Divakaruni's characters. This is where, in spite of the vigour of its narrative, the novel might be said to fail to deliver on its promise. There is too much cognitive dissonance here for a reader to be genuinely moved and transported by her characters' tales.

Among Divakaruni's nine survivors, for example, is Uma, an Indian-American University student whose parents have moved back to Calcutta to try and catch a vanishing way of life by the tail, and whom she is on her way to visit in a state of confused adoration. Then there is Mrs Pritchett, being accompanied to India by Mr Pritchett after a moment of delirium following a clumsy suicide attempt, in which

she 'feels' a mysterious healer inviting her to India. The African American Vietnam veteran Cameron who takes charge of the post-apocalyptic proceedings in the ravaged hall of the Indian consulate is planning on visiting Seva, his adopted daughter in an orphanage in the Himalayas whom he is yet to meet. Cameron is seeking atonement for abandoning his pregnant girlfriend while he jumped fences on his way to making a career.

Obligatorily, it appears, Divakaruni's assembly also includes the born-again devout Muslim Tariq, permanently damaged, angry and hurt in post-9/11 US after his father is rendered disabled after a dubious arrest; Tariq offers the reader a chance to engage with a textbook case of confusion between civilisations. Then there is old Chinese immigrant Jiang who was ejected from her family and sundered from her lover after the Sino-Indian War of 1962; Jiang is hoping to join her brother who is contemplating retiring to Calcutta, the city of their birth, after a full life abroad. Jiang is accompanied by Lily, a talented young flutist who after the typically wild ways of American teenagers had finally found a resting place in Beethoven and Bach's sonatas. Finally, there are the two visa officers, Mangalam, the man in charge of the office and Malathi, who reports to him. Mangalam and Malathi are on first pages of an adulterous affair when the quake intervenes to dramatically foreclose their 'Book of Love'. Unlike the seven who have linked India to their future, theirs is an escape from a past that was India, the man from his marriage and forbidding wife and the woman from the punishment she had invoked after a shocking act of revenge on one of her amoral clients at a beauty parlour.

Divakaruni deserves much credit for presenting us with such a wide range of stories and characters, each with a personal history entrenched in contemporary social reality—from the white suburban America of broken families, hidden kittens and lemon tarts to the defeatist African-American ghettos that proscribe ambition; from the straightjacket world of Chinese and Indian immigrants in far-flung American cities caught between dreams of free will and the pulls of birth and the secretly rich lives of Chinese immigrants in erstwhile Calcutta to the severely repressed life of America's haunted Muslims, not to mention the small world of privileges, perverse riches and corruption of high people and offices in India. These stories offer us passing glances at ordinary lives across the world. For this imaginative departure from her previous work, Divakaruni is to be greatly lauded.

If, in the final analysis, none of the stories recorded in *One Amazing Thing* have the kind of redemptive power that we find in the classic masterpieces of the ancient art of storytelling from the *Mahabharata* to the *Canterbury Tales*, nor, seemingly, the will to that power, it is perhaps just as much a result of the imaginative failure of our times, which seem no longer able to offer those final bulwarks against impending doom that were the gift of an earlier age, as a flaw in any individual author. In this book, Divakaruni has, at once admirably and unfortunately, been true to her ambiguous location, historical placement and specific readership with all the inevitable limitations that such a positioning implies. ■