

## **A World Full Of 'Johns'**

Arji Manuelpillai

My full name is Arjunan Anthony Manuelpillai. I am British-born but Sri Lankan, half-Catholic, half-Hindu, Tamil and in that middle-aged period when I am not living but dying slowly. My poems have come to reflect this, some would say obsessively.

My debut pamphlet *Mutton Rolls* is due out soon. Poems in which I find myself straddling the identity borderline; clumsily I might add, carpet burns up my groin, holding on for dear life, asking the same questions and receiving the same blurry answers.

The other day, the publisher asks me, 'Are you sure you want to go as Arji Manuelpillai?' and suddenly I feel this cold draft rise. Am I? Who am I? What is a name? This could be the start of a beautiful transcendental crisis.

Growing up in England meant using the name Arji. Pronounceable, slick, simple, a name I coined with a helpful rhyme: *Arji like Arji Bhaji!* Even after I realised that was the name of the Indian restaurant in *EastEnders*, I stuck by it. Over the years, kids teased me: *Onion Bhaji, Arju, Orgy, Arsey!*

Then, in my teens, I became more self-conscious and started switching it up to my middle name – Anthony, sometimes Tony. I couldn't be bothered with the long awkward introductory elocution lesson that Arji engendered, followed by, 'Where does that originate from?' To this day, I book restaurants with the name Anthony. It's easy, understandable and, most importantly, spellable. But recently I have felt this to be a questionable decision.

I've kept Arji for performing. Once, at an event, a Tamil girl told me I was turning my back on my culture by defacing my name. It upset me at the time, perhaps because there was some truth in it. I love my full name –

Arjunan – a hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the subject of a thousand myths. So why was I cutting it short?

Perhaps my true name feels almost too Asian for this country; makes people uncomfortable, makes them stutter. I find myself being called 'mate' or 'bro' – my name just too challenging for the English palate.

It reminds me of a trip to Cambodia in which every tuk-tuk driver we came across called themselves John. After about 25 tuk-tuk rides, I asked one driver, 'How are there so many Johns out here?' and he replied, 'Our names are too complicated for foreigners, so we just say John.' Suddenly I felt tainted with that foreign ignorance. These drivers reside on a borderline between themselves, with their own names, and the people we want them to be – Johns. They know tourists will not be interested in the task of pronunciation, so they reach for an easy one. Have I done the same thing with Arji, Anthony, Tony?

If so, the next time someone asks me my name I will answer, 'Anthony seems just too English but perhaps we have not come to Arjunan yet, perhaps we still have a way to go before I can rely on the people in this country to pronounce Arjunan with the vigour and courage it deserves, perhaps in ten years I will be Arjunan Manuelpillai and no one will cringe or laugh or giggle. But for now, I shall be Arji.'

To which the barista at Starbucks will reply, 'Well, I will let you know when your coffee is ready.'

## **Arji Manuelpillai**

Arji Manuelpillai is a poet, performer and creative facilitator. He is the 2019/20 Jerwood/Arvon Mentee. His poetry has been shortlisted for the Burning Eye pamphlet prize 2018, The Oxford Prize 2019, Wolves Poetry Prize 2020 and The Live Canon Prize 2020. He was runner-up in the Robert Graves Prize 2020. Arji's debut pamphlet *Mutton Rolls* was published with Out-Spoken Press. **[www.arji.org](http://www.arji.org)**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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