

## Opposites attract

Debjani Chatterjee

Born in India, brought up in several countries due to my father's work in the diplomatic service, and residing presently in the UK where I have lived for longer than anywhere else, I do have a sense of several 'homes' and find myself moving between different cultures and languages, often within minutes. Prominent among the many aspects of my life that have impacted on my writing is this 'movement' back and forth. An early poem, 'Voice and Vision', from my first full collection *I Was That Woman* (1989), celebrates this plurality:

I speak in many tongues, my friend...  
Languages are my inheritance.  
I move in many cultures, friend –  
Of necessity I make them mine,  
Lightly treading in so many worlds.

As a poet, writer, and storyteller, I have grown up with tales from many cultures, but principally from the lands where I have lived. This too is happily reflected in my writing, in books like *Nyamia and the Bag of Gold* and *The Message of Thunder and Other Plays*. Among the genres in which I have engaged are traditional stories from around the world that I have retold or adapted, sometimes as narratives for contemporary children, and sometimes as plays and sketches.

Cultures and languages are not the only 'worlds' I inhabit as a writer. Light and shadow must both be embraced, as must creation and destruction. A favourite god is Shiva the Destroyer. His cosmic Tandava dance of

destruction is an essential prelude to the creation of a new universe. In my poem, 'Tandava', the cosmic serpent Vasuki asserts a role as 'the churning rope of gods and demons'. It refers to a myth I encountered in childhood, about how gods and demons, though antagonistic, must, at times, cooperate in order to achieve mutual gains that not only win them such fabulous treasures as Kalpavriksha – the wish-fulfilling tree, Uchchaisravas – Indra's winged horse, or a jar of Amrita – the nectar of immortality, but also create order from the primeval ocean of chaos. Order and chaos are both necessary; each of us is both god and demon. The *devas* or gods in Hindu mythology, although good, often have flaws or human failings, and the *asuras* or demons, though mainly bad, will often exhibit human virtues. Humans, who take up a space between the gods and demons, also have a dual nature, reconciling opposing forces. Writers and artists have a vital role in acting as a conduit; they are Vasuki, the rope that connects the gods and the demons.

Later, as an undergraduate at the American University in Cairo, I recall a charismatic lecturer talking about the contrasting deities, Apollo the sun god and Dionysus the god of wine and revelry, both sons of Zeus, and the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy that they represent in human affairs. The world needs both, she emphasised: Apollonian rationality, calm and orderliness, but also Dionysian passion, abandon and creativity. This was also the time when I binged on E. M. Forster's short stories, novels and non-fiction. He replaced Sir Walter Scott as my favourite British novelist, and when I read about how he had befriended another of my literary heroes, Mulk Raj Anand, helping him to find a publisher for his iconoclastic novel *Untouchable*, I determined that I would visit the author in Cambridge just as soon as I could go to England for post-graduate studies. Forster's 'Only connect' became my motto; 'only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in

fragments no longer' (*Howards End*). I agreed with Forster that 'Nonsense and beauty have close connections.'

Indian mythology is rich in allegorical stories. One story that fascinates me is of Surya the sun god and his two wives, Sanjana and Chhaya. The two wives are actually one and the same because Chhaya, meaning 'shadow', is in fact Sanjana's shadow-self. Unable to tolerate the scorching heat and blazing light radiating from her husband, Sanjana asks her shadow to substitute for her, while she herself flees. It is interesting that for a while Surya remains unaware of the deception, and accepts Chhaya as his wife and the mother of his children. But Chhaya cannot sustain the deception for long, and when he finally learns what has happened, Surya must also recognise his own nature and achieve a compromise by shaving off a portion of his brilliance in order to win back his wife Sanjana. Light and shadow are clearly both needed and inter-dependent.

In many respects, my intimacy with my adopted home, Britain, grew as I fell in love with, and eventually married, Brian D'Arcy, an Anglo-Irish academic whom I first met as a PhD student at the University of Lancaster. Brian's father, William D'Arcy, had served in the Royal Air Force and died in India during World War II. During our honeymoon in 1983, Brian and I were the first members of his family to visit his military grave: 'a square / of the Raj, meticulous forever', and in sharp contrast to the next door 'native and unkempt' Christian cemetery where 'wild weeds straggle expansive / in a blasphemy of tall grass' (from 'A Square of the Raj' in *A Little Bridge*, 1997). So, an India-Britain connection was already there for us both. My maternal grandfather had visited Britain a few times, my uncle and several cousins had also come here for higher studies, and an aunt had settled in Croydon.

Britain's influence on India was especially strong in Bengal since the East India Company had first settled there, and Calcutta (now back to its original name of Kolkata) was the first capital of the British Raj. And Bengal too reciprocated with a wealth of its own influences, ranging from mulliga-

tawny soup to a host of Bengali words that crept into the English language, e.g. 'jute', 'chutney', 'pukka' and 'cot'. Brian and I discovered that we had significant experiences and interests in common. There were also many differences. 'Opposites attract', they say. For us, the differences often seemed intriguing and they rendered each of us exotic in the other's eyes. The great value that Brian gave to privacy, for instance, meant that he would never open my mail:

You'd never open my mail,  
a 'principle' with you  
– one that makes no sense  
to me in marriage;  
your English otherness.  
...Were we not two  
who made a greater one?

(From 'When the Telegram Came' in *Albino Gecko*, 1998)

So, in January 1989, when my sister was dying of cancer, and he opened a telegram that we were expecting from India, even though it was addressed to me, the gesture was very special:

You slit it open  
– you wished to spare me  
its wrenching opening.  
... you spared me  
the unknowing knowing.

(From 'When the Telegram Came')

Marriage to Brian and long sojourn in the UK meant that I not only found, and still find, my husband deliciously exotic, but I could view my 'Indian' and more specifically my 'Bengali' self through a 'Western gaze' and so appreciate the remarkable strangeness, wonder and charm in many instances. No doubt my perspective also gave him new insights into his own Anglo-Irish heritage. In Bengali language and culture we rejoice in many quaint peculiarities that often have an inverted logic. For instance, I was taught at an early age that when bidding goodbye, I must never say that I am going; it was more courteous and hopeful to say that I am coming! Words are powerful, and there is a sense of finality about 'goodbye', so we do not wish to tempt Fate by pronouncing the words 'I am going' unless we genuinely do not wish to return. No wonder Bengalis appreciate the French 'au revoir', which seems far more polite and positive than the English 'goodbye'.

Perhaps even more interesting is what happens when Bengalis run out of food. Rice, a Bengali staple, is important in some Hindu rituals (it denotes fertility in Hindu weddings and many Christian weddings too make a similar use of rice) and we consider it an auspicious item that also symbolises Annapurna, the gracious goddess who bestows food. So, one should take care that the home never runs out of rice, and if the amount of grain is nil or has fallen below an acceptable level, one should never say that there is no rice, or even that we are short of rice; the correct etiquette is to say that we have 'an abundance of rice'! Of course, there are elements of superstition, tradition and historical famine also at play here.

Brian introduced me to elements of Western music that he loves, e.g. the poems and songs of Leonard Cohen, country and western songs and Irish folk music. But I could not interest him in my favourite music: Shyama

Sangeet (Bengali devotional songs to Mother Kali), Rabindra Sangeet (songs composed by the great Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore) and qawalis (Muslim devotional songs). Some things are obviously an acquired taste. We introduced each other to some items of food and drink, too. Brian now loves rice, especially with curries and dal, almost as much as he does potatoes. Wine-making was one of his creative hobbies, so, from being a teetotaler, I graduated to imbibing the occasional celebratory glass of wine and, mindful of my uncultivated palette, Brian took to making sweet fruit wines like apricot and peach.

During the coronavirus pandemic, I have been following the news regarding lockdowns in different countries. An intriguing human interest story repeated in various international media was that of twins, a boy and a girl, born in India to a couple who decided to name them Corona and Covid! Again, using my 'Western' perspective, I might question why parents would name their children after a killer virus. Indians, after all, are known for giving their children names with beautiful and inspirational meanings – names that can sometimes be very hard to live up to. The great villains of Indian literature, Ravana from *The Ramayana* and Duryodhana from *The Mahabharata*, have names that are conspicuously absent among many generations of children, even though in true epic tradition neither villain is totally bad – they have some good qualities and saving graces to make them worthy opponents for the heroes. The mother of the twins explained to a reporter that the names Corona and Covid would remind them of the many hardships of lockdown. Moreover, although coronavirus itself was 'dangerous and life-threatening', the pandemic had also 'made people focus on sanitation, hygiene and instil other good habits'.

I reflect, too, that Bengalis invariably have nicknames, and these are the ones in daily use, not the formal names that carry weighty and grand meanings. And, as regards nicknames, there is a very different type of thinking behind their selection. Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'the Rebel Poet of Bengal', someone I admire immensely, was nicknamed Dukhu Mian by his parents. The name means 'Man of Sorrow', and it does indeed reflect the poet's extremely hard life, but this was not the intention. A Bengali saying goes that there must be as much weeping as there is laughter, and the choice of a name like Dukhu Mian points to an acceptance of this 'truth'. Nazrul's parents also named him Dukhu Mian in the same protective manner that many an Indian parent decorates their child's face with a black spot to ward off the evil eye, or tries not to praise their child too much. Nicknames are given with humour and affection. One of my first cousins is nicknamed Buri, meaning 'Old Woman'. When her marriage was arranged to a suitable young man, my aunt and uncle were delighted to discover that the groom's nickname was Buro, or 'Old Man'. The wedding invitation cards gave the couple's formal names, but my uncle, who had a great sense of humour, put up a huge banner across the road in front of their house – it read, for all the neighbourhood to see, 'Buri Weds Buro'!

The most important lesson for me as a writer has been the understanding that being between two sets of names, or two or more worlds, is a great and natural place for a writer. Just as I feel that every land in which I have lived is my own, in my micro-pamphlet, *Smiling at Leopards* (2018), my introductory poem, 'Choice', makes a definitive statement about choosing this in-between and all-embracing space:

## **Choice**

Every avatar must tussle with fate.  
How much is human? How much is divine?  
Even Buddhas battle with destiny.

Paradox is the human condition:  
to be born to die, and in dying live  
to go beyond 'To be or not to be'.

Not for me to choose between this and that:  
should I mime or sing, soft shuffle or dance,  
understand male, female and all between?

Should I embrace the solitary state  
or seek communion with the universe?  
Praise the hero's stance or the villain's dream?

Multiple personalities are mine,  
and Joseph's rainbow coat – and his brothers'.  
Both Rama and Ravana possess me.

Art for art's sake or for a higher end?  
Character or plot? Comedy or not?  
Our destiny is mapped, yet we have choice.

No! A rock and a hard place – both are mine;  
a fusion of Scylla and Charybdis.  
I am a poet, I choose to choose all.

And, in my choosing, I also choose to share.

### **Debjani Chatterjee**

Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL has been called a poet ‘full of wit and charm’ (Andrew Motion), ‘Britain’s best-known Asian poet’ (Elisabetta Marino) and a ‘national treasure’ (Barry Tebb). She grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt and Morocco, before settling in England. She studied at five universities: Cairo, Kent, Lancaster, Sheffield and Leeds. She has worked in industry, teaching, community relations and creative arts psychotherapy. An acclaimed international poet, children’s writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer and storyteller, her awards include an MBE for services to Literature, Sheffield Hallam University’s honorary doctorate, and Word Masala’s Lifetime Achievement in Poetry Award. A former Chair of the National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council’s Translation Panel, she is a Royal Literary Fellow and patron of Survivors Poetry. She has had residencies at Sheffield Children’s Hospital, Ilkley Literature Festival, Barbican Centre, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, and various universities. Her 70+ books include: *The Elephant-Headed God & Other Hindu Tales* – a Children’s Book of the Year, *Animal Antics*, *Namaskar: New and Selected Poems*, and *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* Her award-winning anthologies include *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* and *Barbed Lines*. [www.dchatterjewriter.simplesite.com](http://www.dchatterjewriter.simplesite.com)

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

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