

# Shanta Acharya:



## Being a bit of an outsider is no bad thing

IRA MATHUR

This Sunday Guardian's Bookshelf takes us to the work of Indian-born writer and investment banker Shanta Acharya, the author of 12 books spanning poetry, fiction and literary criticism of finance. Born and educated in Cuttack, India, Acharya is the first woman from the Indian state of Odisha to win a scholarship to Oxford and among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College in 1979.

A National Scholar and a recipient of the Violet Vaughan Morgan Fellowship, she was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1983, after which she was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University.

Acharya also worked in investment banking at the American investment bank in London in 1985, investment management in the city and the London Business School.

Living on the edge of several continents, Acharya said in an interview with the Sunday Guardian that she is "comfortable in a state of permanent exile, of unbelonging ..."

"Exile is a state of mind. One can be exiled in the place of one's birth. As both the place of my birth and my adopted homeland keep changing, there is no home I belong to."

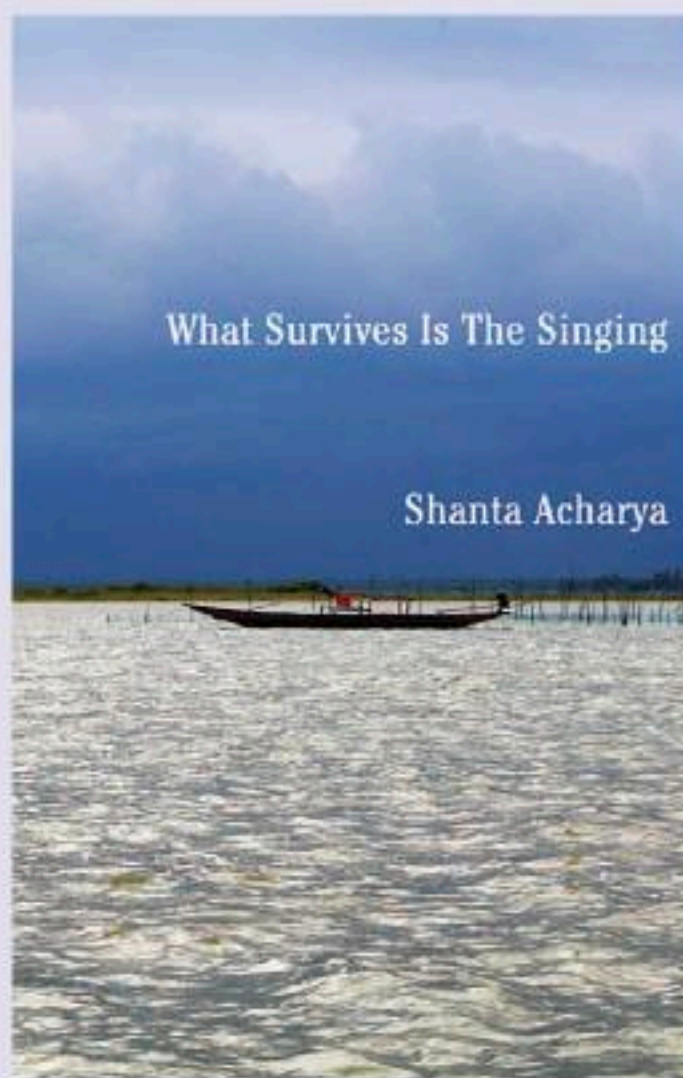
Acharya believes our search for identity and sense of belonging is "individual" and not tied up with a country but part of our shared humanity.

Acharya's creative work explores "identity and the self, which keep changing, reflecting our struggle to 'be' whole. Defining ourselves through words, this search for self is a continual process as we never feel at home, except in the reality we create."

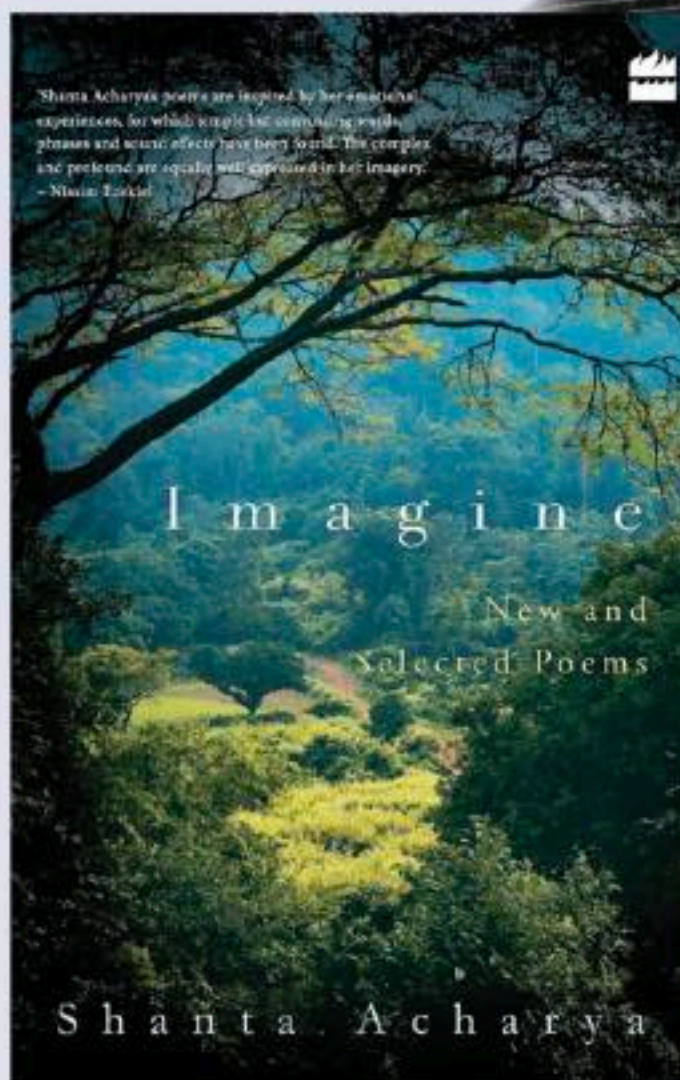
Acharya believes being "a bit of an outsider everywhere is no bad thing. It lends one perspective. The nature of exile and the role of language in defining a new personal identity are common among creative writers, perhaps more so among self-exiled ones."

Although Acharya believes creative writing is both an act of self-exploration and a way to "understand others and connect with them ... For writers in exile, this connection is as important as breathing; without it, we perish. It is how I explore fundamental questions like: Who am I?"

The following poems are published exclusively in the Sunday Guardian with the author's permission.



### The BookShelf



Shanta Acharya

#### IN SILENCE

*When fate deals you a losing hand, play in silence.*

*Luck favours those who mend themselves in silence.*

*Remember precious lessons learnt in defeat – pearls of experience purchased in silence.*

*A game of chance, nothing in this world is real, our stories shadows passing in silence.*

*Be the flame of a candle to what blows you – life is the greatest gift bestowed in silence.*

*Days are restless until your heart finds a home, a sky where you can be yourself in silence.*

*Earth's grand gardens may beckon you in your dreams,*

*love's a patch of green that flowers in silence – a shade that shelters you in times of crises,*

*a place you keep returning to in silence.*

*To hold, be held the Beloved eternal – believe in the splendour of grace in silence.*

*Silence is the keeper of keys to secrets –*

*Shantih that passes understanding in silence.*

**(What Survives Is The Singing)**

#### WORDS

*They wake you up, your bed of words, without warning – wild, wicked words, whirling through waves of astonishment, a world-without-end ecstasy – quickening the pulse of your being, breathing!*

*into things, making the ordinary extraordinary, and you feel the exhilaration of walking in a field of light gifted with insight, life's contradictions temporarily reconciled, imagine your creations rising like suns on the shores of continents of strangers, networks of neurons connecting the universe. The joy is all yours, nothing's the same anymore – not the past, present, not even the future.*

**(From What Survives Is The Singing)**

#### THE FLY AND THE BEE

*I am equally at ease with the sacred or the profane. I can sit indifferently on sacramental offerings or on things most foul to beings, at home in both, bearing the good with the evil, hankering for neither. I have that rare option. The fly boasted to the bee with some exaggeration. I can only sit on blossoms ready for pollination,*

*sucking the nectar of flowers or in my honeycomb dreaming of perfumed stalks. Lamented the bee, acknowledging its limitations with graceful candour.*

**(From Imagine: New and Selected Poems)**

#### SOMEWHERE, SOMETHING

*We travel not to explore another country, but to return home fresh, bearing gifts. Our lives the airports we fly from, our bodies and souls, maps and compasses – days the journeys we make, past the continents we leave behind. Surely there is somewhere, something that justifies our coming and going? Isn't that why we seek a sign from each other of experiences worth dying for as we commune with love under starlight brittle with frost and the sharp taste of blood? Let's fly free, not nailed to a mast; see the universe with new eyes, not blinded by shadows that light casts.*

**(From Imagine: New and Selected Poems)**

Shanta Acharya is a life member of the Poetry Society in the UK. The latest of her seven poetry collections include What Survives Is The Singing (2020), Imagine: New and Selected Poems (2017), and Dreams That Spell The Light (2010).

IRA MATHUR is a Guardian columnist and the winner of the non-fiction OCM Bocas Prize for Literature 2023. [www.irasroom.org](http://www.irasroom.org)