

ANITA MONEY

A LIFE IN POEMS

Shanta Acharya. *Imagine: New and Selected Poems*. HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2017. pp. 250. ₹ 399/-. ISBN: 978-93-5264-165-9.

Shanta Acharya. *What Survives Is The Singing*. Indigo Dreams Publishing, UK, 2020. pp. 80. ISBN 978-1-912876-21-1.

Shanta Acharya's journey as a poet spans several decades; her debut collection was published in India in 1994, but her poems had appeared in major journals by the time she arrived in Oxford in 1979. *Not This, Not That* contains poems published in *Acumen*, *Chapman, Delhi London Poetry Quarterly*, *New Welsh Review*, *Poetry Review* and *The Rialto* in the UK and in the *Journal of South Asian Literature* and *Contemporary Indian Poetry*, published by the Ohio University Press, in the USA, and in major Indian journals, the 'Acknowledgements' page of her poetry collections are testimony to her extensive publication history.

Imagine: New and Selected Poems brings together poems from Acharya's first five collections. Arranged chronologically, beginning with *Not This, Not That* (1994), *Numbering Our Days Illusions* (1995), *Looking In, Looking Out* (2005), *Shringara* (2006), and *Dreams That Spell the Light* (2010), the identity of each collection is preserved, ending with a generous selection of new poems under the title, *Imagine*, that doubles as the main title for the book. *What Survives Is The Singing* was published in 2020. Together, these two books represent a substantial body of work, each collection introduced by quotations from other poets and writers, serving as subtle introductions to each and an acknowledgment of the interdependence of all artistic endeavour.

The poet K. Satchidanandan has remarked on Acharya's "uncannily poetic way of relating to reality that is deeply Indian without being insular." Like so many other Indian writers and poets for whom English is a second mother tongue, she grew up with a dual cultural heritage. Acharya's doctoral thesis at Oxford, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, reflects this as does her poetry that draws freely from both cultures. Though primarily a poet, her novel, *A World Elsewhere*, was published in 2015. She is writing her second. Acharya is rare among poets to have been commissioned to write books on investments. Having worked for several years in the City and London Business School, she has an informed perspective on the political and economic realities of the world.

Instinctively drawn to the paradoxes of metaphysical thinking and to mythology that reflects the linking patterns in cultures, she is at home with those profound questions on life, death, and nature that have always exercised humanity and feed into the perennial wisdom filtered from different religions and philosophies.

There is no sense of contradiction between her grounded and practical understanding of life and her more complex perceptions. She has a distinctive tone of voice – never inflated, often ironic and humorous, using natural rhythms and forms rather than straining after virtuosity. There is plenty of experimentation in her work from longer sequences such as "The Night of Shiva" (*Not This, Not That*) or "Ashoka" (*Imagine*), and others like "Infinity of Red" (*What Survives Is the Singing*) where Acharya plays with space and ideas using a collage of images that define 'red.' Her strong visual sense and interest in art are apparent both in the subject matter of many of her poems as well as in her use of imagery to describe complex thoughts.

Home understood in its widest context is the major theme in Acharya's work; it includes both family and faith and a quest for equilibrium in facing the challenges of existence.

The 'You' she addresses on familiar terms is a consistent presence. These lines from *Imagine* exemplify a constant search if not an awareness of a presence beyond: "When I was lost you came to my rescue. / I wanted to thank you, but could not see you. / Not knowing what you looked like, I called you – / by all your names, the ones I knew" (208). In "Homecoming" (*What Survives Is the Singing*), she continues the conversation:

Don't know why I presume you might listen
more carefully to my entreaties in a foreign land?

I am the one on holiday, not you –
such are the limitations of the human mind.

Talking to you, sharing my thoughts, I keep thinking
you will respond, talk to me through your silence. (27)

The poem ends with:

My loneliness has led me back to where I'd begun.
I've nowhere else to go, don't turn me away
on another journey of self-discovery for I am done. (28)

In "Somewhere, Something" (*Dreams That Spell the Light*), she asks: "Surely there is somewhere, something / that justifies our coming and going?" (66). In "Communion" (*Dreams That Spell the Light*), the role is reversed. It is the Divine addressing us:

I find infinite ways of reaching out to you daily
through innumerable acts of kindness.

.....
Do you not notice miracles in the seasons,
in the sun and the moon moving in their circles,
in every blade of grass shuddering in the wind;
can you not feel my love for all creation? (59)

The question of Belief and existence of a higher being preoccupies us all and is one that Acharya, in particular, pursues through her work. If the so called Dark Ages were seen as a period of superstition and the Renaissance followed later by the Enlightenment introduced a more open cultural view and rediscovery of science, Darwin's theory of evolution and later Dawkins' *The God Delusion* placed the mysterious workings of science for some people as a possible replacement for the mystery of God. Acharya, in "Of Magic and Men" (the title a twist on Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*) from *Looking In, Looking Out*, observes how easily the rational can be stumped by a deep seated human instinct.

In a Hindu world of fantasy and fable,
myths, legends, gods and demons,
irrationality appears reasonable –

The clear light of day obfuscates while chaos enlightens.

.....
... tough Seshan's degree in physics does not free him.
Sai Baba bends his mind with a *navratna* ring;
out goes his hard-headed, Harvard training!

Both sides remain united in the struggle.
God's in heaven and all's wrong with the world –

except miracles unfurl daily to the faithful
not impervious to the mystery of the universe. (19)

As an extension of the question of rationality and superstition, it is worth taking note of the following lines from “Lives of Others (On reading *The Bhagavad Gita*)” from *Dreams That Spell the Light* where we are reminded how significant and influential our wishes are: the harm that can be inflicted through evil thoughts and the power of good thoughts to heal and flourish:

A wish, a thought, a desire,
for good or evil, fulfils its purpose
in seeking, finding a home –
as mighty oaks grow from acorns. (38)

There is the yearning for ‘home’ as a higher reality. In “Wishes” (*Dreams That Spell The Light*), having listed a humorous list of rituals – tossing coins in rivers, tying strings on trees, lighting candles in church, kissing icons, fasting on different days – she says:

I have learnt that wishes are milestones
on our journey back home.
Nothing disappears without a trace,
only our pilgrimage transforms as we learn
to celebrate our brief passage with grace. (64)

This idea is developed in “Home” (*What Survives Is the Singing*), where she speaks of home not as a geographical location, but a state of consciousness:

Home is not a country or postcode,
more a state of mind, keeper of the map of my world –

offering a hint of the distance between myself
and the silence out there, the way life reaches

for light, and rays leaning like ladders against the sky
invest my journey with meaning. (71)

This awareness springs from the reality of her two cultures and her need to hold them together. In “Loose Talk” (*Numbering our Days Illusions*), she reminds us:

My mother tongue is Oriya –
mysterious as Chilika, lyrical as Konarka.
I grew up in English, inhabiting words
from a distant island that took me home.
How can I keep my worlds apart ... (*Imagine* 53)

This tension underpins her poem “My Good Luck Home” (*Looking In, Looking Out*) where sacred objects from around the world protect her in her London home – an Egyptian scarab, Chinese cats, Ganesha, seven gods of luck from Japan, a marble turtle god among others:

leaving us with the legacy of an understanding –
the knowledge of what it means
to carry a whole household in oneself,
to be so perfectly self-contained, poised
at the centre of all manner of creatures unsheltered. (62)

In “Return of the Exile” (*Dreams That Spell The Light*), there is an acute sense of loss: “Gone is the mansion, the garden I grew up in, / gone are my people, landscape of my childhood” (31).

Kavya Bharati 2021

Imagine is dedicated to her parents and *What Survives Is The Singing* to her mother for her 85th birthday. Family bonds and heritage form part of the overarching theme of Home.

The poem “On First Reading the *Bhagavad Gita*” (*Shringara*) opens with: “From an ancient land we came, / a continent vast as Memory” (41). In “Coconut Milk” (*Shringara*), a collection dedicated to her father, she remembers him as she is cooking:

Moving to the rhythm of old Hindi film songs
you loved to hear, I savour your presence, father.
The sun retires behind
trees that sway to the *raga* and *rasa* of living –

I see that like the sun, moon and stars
you are always there, though briefly revealed. (23)

“Relationships” and “Find Your Level” from *What Survives Is The Singing* use the image of water as a glacier or a stream finally reaching the ocean to represent heredity and motherhood: “flowing from the same glacier / head of the soul mountain to a drop in the ocean” (37). Or “The memory of her mother’s songs echoes/ in her veins as she flows into the sea ...” (40). The image of a river entering the sea and these lines of Acharya return me to the title of this collection and remind me of that famous line from Auden often misunderstood because pulled out of context:

For poetry makes nothing happen, it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in: it survives
A way of happening, a mouth.

(“In Memory of W.B. Yeats”)

The singing is about the human capacity for suffering and celebration, for lifting the mortal spirit above desolation, and this life affirming capacity is what the poet voices on behalf of humanity.

Acharya is acutely aware of world problems, natural and man-made disasters, economic disparity, racial injustice, war and corruption and has written many poems that reflect on these issues with a notable balance and perspective. In “Remembrance Sunday” from *Sbringara* while sympathizing with the war veterans’ commemoration she notes:

The pomp and circumstance
is no more than an empty spectacle to the army
of unemployed youth watching enviously
the older generation parading across Whitehall
on other people’s TV,
failing to win ten quid in the National Lottery. (30)

In “London 7 July 2005” (*Sbringara*), empathy makes her step into the persona of a victim of the London bombing. In *What Survives Is The Singing*, there are several occasions where she speaks as the victim of rape, or of murder or a witness to atrocities that women regularly experience in India and elsewhere. Generally, her sense of empathy and sympathy for others is expressed in her own voice, whether seeing a migrant on the tube (“Easter Message”) or commemorating Charlotte Salomon, an artist deported to Auschwitz (“Life? Or Theatre?”), and Miklós Radnóti, a Hungarian poet, one of the most important poetic witnesses to the Holocaust, shot in 1944 (“Bori Notesz”) or in recalling the Indian mathematician Ramanujan (“Knowing Infinity”) who faced professional disbelief from both Indian and English mathematicians, survived prejudice, loneliness and ill health in his short life. His words – “An equation

for me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God” (209)
– is the epigraph to Acharya’s poem.

This sympathy can extend to an abandoned umbrella, where it becomes a symbol of rejection and loneliness, representing the human condition in “The Umbrella”:

Bent, broken, it skulked like a skeleton
behind the door – an extra, never chosen to feature
centre stage, no opportunity to show off its strong,
supple skin, open up, let itself take wing – (35)

In “Remembering Gandhi” (*Sringara*), Acharya uses a subtle refrain while the horrors of partition become a quiet question mark.

Turning the other cheek, you got the upper hand;
with *Swadeshi* and *Satyagraha*, coined your brand.

Ace architect of freedom, the deconstruction of a nation
transformed you into a saint, to a shrewd politician.

You marched all over India to touch the Untouchable,
called them the Children of God, and declared Home Rule.
.....
What price we pay, in perpetuity, for the partition of our
homeland,
the splintering of a subcontinent, giving birth to a wasteland?
.....
In the end a Hindu fanatic reaching for your feet,
lodges a bullet in your heart the moment your eyes meet.

Your life, a journey of self-discovery overcoming illusion,
transformed you into a saint, to some a shrewd politician. (40)

Acharya questions her sense of self or many selves and the feeling that she is an actor playing a part in a life that is not as she imagined, while also searching to find her true self. “Parallel Lives,” “Self Portrait” and “The Best Is Yet To Be” (*What Survives Is The Singing*) are about self-discovery, identity and finding your own voice. In “Self Portrait,” she questions her image: “There’s someone in the mirror smiling at me, / the image is mine but who is that person?” In “The Best Is Yet To Be,” identity and creativity are intrinsically linked:

Takes a lifetime to be oneself, translate the world
in one’s own language. Creativity does not

come easily, cannot be bought or sold.
It’s a skill to be honed, a gift to be earned. (49)

In “Parallel Lives,” she reminds us:

What sacrifices are you willing to make to live in your dream?
You offer blood, sweat, tears, the best of yourself, yet they seem

not quite enough to swap one illusion with another.
If lucky you forget your dream ... (29)

Acharya’s need to write as a vocation and sense of relief in finding the words for a poem is revealing. She has written poems both light and serious about poetry, but in “Words,” she is speaking of herself and the sense of connection with the world. She celebrates the creative impulse, hoping the poem will travel the world and reach out to others.

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. (57)

Just as she wishes to share her poetry with others, so too does she wish to share in the creativity of other artists. A number of these ekphrastic poems are in *Looking In, Looking Out* – Anish Kapoor at The Hayward, The Vision of St John after El Greco, “Making Faces” after George Grosz, to name a few, and in different collections Damien Hirst at the Tate Modern or ‘Belshazzar’s Feast’ in the National Gallery. There are also poems that bring to life characters from literature and legend, for example, “Eurydice’s Story” where we meet both Isis and Krishna, one creation begetting another.

She has written many poems of place. In “Highgate Cemetery” (*Shringara*), she writes:

I wander among the dead in a cemetery town
exploring winding paths where angels carved in stone
direct me through green alleyways.
.....
When our friends start to leave it is time
to take stock of our coming and going ... (1)

In *Dreams That Spell The Light*, the long poem, “The Sundarbans,” opens with:

A strange, wild place fed by the Ganga,
sweeping across the plains of Bengal
to the Indian Ocean. Here are no boundaries

keeping fresh water from salt, river from sea,
land from water, island from island. (20)

And ends with lines that serve as a warning:

Ganga, the river goddess, may yet lose her power
failing to reach the delta of her dreams.

The Sundarbans may one day disappear,
leaving no man fit to take the measure of another. (25)

In the same collection, the “Mosque of Wazir Khan” speaks of
a world that has lost its values yet holds on to a sense of possibility:

Once a celebration of magnificence,
a thriving enterprise between commerce and learning,
the mosque has now lost its calling.

.....
I remove my chappals, cover my head out of respect,
as I step through the gateway into the forecourt,

Moving from one world into the next;
I enter paradise on earth, I am blessed. (12)

Acharya’s repertoire includes humour, wit, irony – techniques she uses in commenting on the state of the world. “Dear Tech Support” and “Dear Customer” (*Looking In, Looking Out*) and “Shaadi.com” (*Dreams That Spell The Light*) are entertaining *tours de force* using the language of technology and programming to satirize inflated demands for romance and marriage and the quick deflation of expectations as the system turns into an inflexible purveyor of

reality. Loneliness, a theme that reappears in various guises, is given a comic make-over in “Days Depart” (*What Survives Is The Singing*).

Days depart silent, marching solo solemnly.
Turning the key in my door absent-mindedly,

I enter. The alarm screams like a banshee.
I feed her with secret codes to keep her happy.

There is a phone message from a stranger.
1471 informs me the caller withheld their number.

As I switch on the radio, plug the kettle for tea,
My smartphone vibrates on the table in ecstasy. (30)

Poems that express personal disappointment and the trials of existence are balanced by poems celebrating an awareness of nature, of other lives and realities, and a more impersonal perspective. In “Spring in Kew Gardens” (*What Survives Is The Singing*) for example, she writes:

Under the spell of cherry blossoms,
verging on crimson-maroon to blushing white,

loneliness scatters like particles of dust in light.
I suck the honey of this delicious solitude.

Lifted on the wings of a warbler’s song,
a cuckoo’s ecstatic call carries me home – (43)

What Survives Is The Singing presents a landscape that is in many ways familiar and an extension of her earlier collections brought

together in *Imagine*, but there is a change of tone – something perhaps harder to read. For someone familiar with her work, this landscape feels darker, deeper, more reflective.

I would like to end by quoting from two poems which represent a particular and beneficial understanding of life. “The High Window” (*What Survives Is The Singing*) offers a musical sense of encouragement and faith in the mystery of the eternal.

An act of kindness never goes unnoticed,
the praise of prayer-wheels they say is heard from
the high window.

.....

Hearts like mirrors can shatter hearing music.
One day songs will soar, flooding the gods, out of
the high window –

my words one with the hum of the universe,
and the endless horizon glowing beyond
the high window. (65)

The ghazal, “In Silence” (*What Survives Is The Singing*), also affirms:

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.

.....

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

.....

Silence is the keeper of keys to secrets –
Shantih that passes understanding in silence. (64)