

DREAMS THAT SPELL THE LIGHT

by Shanta Acharya

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These are poems of intense joy, where the author is completely at home with herself, and at one with the natural world surrounding her

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This is Shanta Acharya's fifth collection of poetry, the four earlier ones being *Not This, Not That* (Rupa and co, India, 1994), *Numbering Our Day's Illusions* (Rockingham Press, UK, 1995), *Looking In, Looking Out* (Headland Publications, UK, 2005) and *Shringara* (Shoestring Press, UK, 2006). She has said (in an interview of 2008) that each publication brings together poems which were written over a long period of years, and published separately in various journals.

Each anthology is arranged meticulously, with what is almost a narrative thread running through, but with surprising turns and bends.

Dreams That Spell the Light begins with two well-known quotations, which stand as epigraphs, one from T.S. Eliot, and one from Marcel Proust, which point up the compelling themes of the anthology: exploration, voyaging, discovery, arrival, returning. The cover design—always, also, chosen by Shanta Acharya for her books—further stresses these themes, consisting as it does of a photograph (attributed to her brother) of a small fishing boat, returning ashore, possibly in Kerala. The light suggests that it is early morning, or possibly dusk, and the perspective of the landscape makes it almost dream-like. The visual thus links with another set of images suggested by the title: dream, dream-time; the title itself is taken from the last poem in the collection. So this anthology, too, has the special kind of internal and inter-textual coherence we have come to expect of Shanta Acharya's work.

The collection begins with a number of poems which are located in distant places, ranging across Italy, Lahore, China, the Sundarbans of Bengal, Kabul, and St Petersburg. These poems are full of sharply observed detail and wry touches of humour: 'pagoda shaped cypresses', 'Translucent like jade... the leaves of the plane tree', 'washing, bright and colourful, waving in the warm sun', 'dinner/is soup of snake followed by dove, with turtles/ legs, stir-fried frogs, snails, crunchy green vegetables.' It is, though, the connection she makes between cultures (the abundant richness of an Italian cathedral; the stone temples of Orissa) or across time (between Kalinga, the birthplace of the Buddha in Orissa, and the sacred relic of his tooth carried in revelry and procession in modern, lately war-torn Sri Lanka), or the sudden shift in perspective, as in 'Bryce Canyon' where the mists recall childhood games of make-believe, but now also stand for 'the tenuous/ bond between brother and sister' which make these poems explorations and discoveries; reflections of a poet who is not necessarily rooted in a place or a home, but is, nevertheless, grounded within herself.

Central to this initial group of poems is the long sequence

called 'The Sundarbans', named after a place familiar to readers through the wonderful novel, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. Quite unlike the other places explored, this region fascinates because 'here are no boundaries/ Keeping freshwater from salt, river from sea/ land from water, island from island.' The islands shift, 'World on the move, moving worlds' (the words 'move', 'moving' are poignant, and come with different senses). The changing habitat becomes the home of different birds, animals, fish at different seasons: the floods, the receding tides, and then the drought. And finally there is the possibility that the River Ganges may yet one day dry out, the Sundarbans itself may disappear. The place itself becomes a parable and warning, calling into question the concreteness of places.

Counterpointing this group of poems which are reflections on places, linked by the notion of travelling, there are the poems which take up the trope of a journey in search of a home. 'Dispossessed' is narrated by refugees, willing to give up everything except their children, their future:

*Our country is closed in; our days clouded by war
At night fear rose like the moon
spreading its shroud over death and hunger*

*We came here believing in freedom,
believing if we wished it long and hard
our dreams would turn into truths.*

The illusion of home is followed through in the poem which is placed next, narrated by one who, after years of wandering returns 'to this strange place, the home I left', only to be left with uncertainties and unanswered questions.

Shanta Acharya, as a poet and a woman who has chosen to live alone in London, yet with close ties with family members in Orissa where she grew up, understands acutely, and with compassion, what it is to be uprooted. One of the most startling lines in the collection comes from 'Easter message', in her description of a refugee from Eastern Europe, crazily muttering to herself, and travelling endlessly on the London Underground. Acharya writes, 'her direct gaze into my eyes remind me of my mother.' Similar to this is the moving 'Boxing Day', when, after hearing the excited voices of her little nephews and nieces telephoning from India, she concludes, 'Christ, Krishna or Ganesha are as much my endowment/ as all the children who sleep hungry tonight.' 'Endowment': how rich that word there, in that cross-cultural and transnational context.

One begins to notice how often the notion of dreams, (hopes, aspirations, desires) as motives for the journey resonates through the poems, and it is indeed taken up as the main theme in 'Lives of Others' (On reading *The Bhagavad Gita*):

Defined by our dreams are we humans -

*our deepest desires dispersed
like waves scattering debris as they strike shore.*

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

The poem ends, however, by transferring all such wishes and hopes into the lives of others, moving out of the self.

Positioned later still in the collection are the three poems, 'Aspects of Westonbirt Arboretum', 'A Place for all Seasons' and 'Highgate Woods', which are set in contrast to the earlier poems of searching, travelling, dreaming, questioning. These are poems of intense joy, where the author is completely at home with herself, and at one with the natural world surrounding her. Trees arching upwards are always important images in Acharya's poetry. Here, the landscape described cannot but be England in spring, 'bluebells waist-high, a purple haze on the woodland floor' or in autumn, with 'mosaics of maples in bronze, copper and ochre'. Yet the sentiments that underpin these particular poems have their source in the Advaita philosophy of Hinduism:

*If you can listen to the sound of acorns falling,
worship the Japanese maples in crimson, gold and ruby,
flaming lanterns against the sombre yew at dusk,
you will be one with the universe, free.*

*To be able to travel afar and yet be centred, to be free: these are
the goals the poems reach toward. As the poem 'Going Home'
has it:*

*Having known many homes, many dreams
you learn finally to live with the freedom of a spirit
heart like a prairie field, open—*

The poems that end the book suggest that dreams, hopes, wishes are very much part of the journey. Shanta Acharya writes in the poem, 'Wishes', '...wishes are milestones/ on our journey back home'. 'Dreamers' acknowledges that 'Dreamtime beings defined the world/ populating it with dreamers.' This suggests that a dream is itself a journey, a dreamer an explorer. And in the last poem, the 'dreams that spell the light' are offerings of prayer. Indeed the last lines, ending the poem and the book are the beautiful Irish prayer, 'May God hold us always/ in the palm of his hand...'

Although the poems in the collection vary in tone, and include the satire and tongue-in-cheek humour we have come to expect of Acharya, on the whole they are thoughtful: poems to linger over and savour.

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