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**“SEEKING, FINDING A HOME”: CONFIGURATIONS
OF TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY
IN SHANTA ACHARYA’S DREAMS THAT SPELL THE
LIGHT (2010)¹**

Keywords: *difference; dislocation; globalization; identity; metamodernism; other(ness); relocation*

Abstract: *Dominated by an intensely competitive globalisation that encourages the dissipation of borders and backgrounds, lifestyles and aesthetics, the contemporary world is imposing a growing need to define identity in terms of cultural and affective attachment. Numerous women poets in Great Britain debate issues of affiliation in original discourses revealing instances of typical postmodern hybridisation. Shanta Acharya is such an instance of kaleidoscopic personality: born in India, she was educated in her home country, the United Kingdom and the United States; she worked in all three countries as an economist, literary critic and poet, having published books on asset management, as well as poetry articles and collections. Acharya’s latest collection, *Dreams That Spell the Night* (Arc Publications, 2010), is a perfect illustration that globalisation is a cultural formula that reconciles the fractions of the metamodern self by placing it in a mutually accepting and absorbing environment where all differences are erased. Her poems create a space where the poet can assert her heterogeneous identity, capturing its transpersonal and transnational dimensions in perpetual intellectual versatility and emotional metamorphosis that generates a multitude of meanings to relevant moments and reference points.*

Dominated by an intensely competitive globalisation that encourages the dissipation of borders and backgrounds, lifestyles and aesthetics, the contemporary world is imposing a growing need to define identity in terms of cultural and affective attachment. Born and raised outside, but educated or residing and working in Great Britain, numerous women poets debate issues of affiliation in original discourses revealing instances of typical postmodern hybridisation.

Shanta Acharya is such an instance of kaleidoscopic personality. Born in India, she was educated at St. Joseph’s Convent School and Ravenshaw College in her hometown, Cuttack, where she completed her Master of Arts in English. In 1979, she won a scholarship to Oxford and was among the first women admitted to Worcester College, where she completed her doctoral thesis, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*. She was a recipient of the Violet Vaughan

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Morgan Fellowship at Oxford. Between 1983 and 1985 she was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University.

In 1985, Shanta moved to London and joined Morgan Stanley Asset Management. She was a Portfolio Manager with Swiss Bank Corporation in London, where she built up the Bank's largest equity portfolio, Asiaportfolio. At Baring Asset management, she was a Senior Portfolio Manager when the firm was the largest foreign institutional investor in South Asia. Subsequently, Shanta worked as a Senior Client Services Manager at Bank of Ireland Asset Management in London. Between 2002 and 2008, Shanta was an Executive Director, Initiative on Foundation and Endowment Asset Management, at London Business School. In 2006 she co-founded, with Elroy Dimson, the *Foundation and Endowment Asset Management* (FEAM) programme at London Business School; it was the first professional development programme for managers and investors in the philanthropic sector in the United Kingdom and Europe, and ran until 2008. For her contribution to the field, she won a major collaborative award from the Charities Aid Foundation.

She is the author of three seminal books on asset management: *Investing in India* (Macmillan, UK; 1998), *Asset Management: Equities Demystified* (Wiley, UK; 2002), and *Endowment Asset Management: Investment Strategies* in Oxford and Cambridge, with Elroy Dimson (Oxford University Press, UK; 2007). She has written monographs and reviews for FT-Pitman Publishing and Times Higher Education Supplement, and her articles and interviews have appeared in various international publications. Shanta was featured in The CFA Institute Member Magazine for Investment Professionals, in *The MOST* Issue, November/December 2005, among the three individuals selected to represent the "Extreme Career Change" category.

In the realm of poetry, Shanta has also carried out prestigious activities. Her five books of poetry are *Not This, Not That* (Rupa & Co, India; 1994), *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* (Rockingham Press, UK; 1995), *Looking In, Looking Out* (Headland Publications, UK; 2005), *Shringara* (Shoestring Press, UK; 2006), and *Dreams That Spell the Light* (Arc Publications, UK; 2010). Her poetry is published widely in literary journals and anthologies worldwide. She is regularly invited to give poetry readings and talks and has read at various institutions, festivals and poetry reading venues in Great Britain, United States and India. She is the founder director of Poetry in the House and is responsible for hosting monthly readings at Lauderdale House, London, a role she has undertaken voluntarily since June 1996. Shanta has also served on the Development Board of the Arvon Foundation. She was among the Founder Members on the Board of Trustees of the Poetry School, and was a Member of Council of the Poetry Society. She remains a Life Member of the Poetry Society. She was elected to the Board of the Poetry Society, UK, in September 2011.

Shanta Acharya's latest collection, *Dreams That Spell the Light* (Arc Publications, 2010), is a perfect illustration that globalisation is a cultural formula that reconciles the fractions of the metamodern self, i.e. the self that moves between – and beyond – opposite poles, a repositioning between universal truths and

relativism, an “oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment,” “situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism” (Vermeulen and van der Akken 2), according to cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Globalisation places the self in a mutually accepting and absorbing environment where all differences are erased and, as the poet wrote in our 2014 e-mail interview, one is “free to lose/find oneself in whatever identity one aspires to.” (Acharya interview)

Shanta Acharya’s poems create a space where she can assert her heterogeneous identity, capturing its transpersonal and transnational dimensions in perpetual intellectual versatility and emotional metamorphosis that generate a multitude of meanings to relevant moments and reference points. Knowing that nothing emancipates the human spirit more than contradiction, her poetry embarks upon a never-ceasing fight against the patterns of the pre-established scheme which she harshly criticises in ‘Beware’, an irony-imbued poem that proposes a parallel reading of its two parts. The imperative in the title and the beginning of the first line are a powerful warning against the risk of living in two distinct dystopian environments – two different countries, whose brief descriptions may possibly hint at India and England, two extremes governed by “no Freedom of Information” (Acharya 34:3) and “no real Freedom of Information” (Acharya 35:16), respectively. However, while one country’s “massive experiment in progress” (Acharya 34:4) aims to establish connections between individuals, the other’s equally “massive experiment in progress” (Acharya 35:17) defers any kind of possible relationship.

In one case, inflexible authority can be undermined by active involvement devised to fully express the particular identity of “the people [who] are simply super-intelligent, psychic, lateral thinkers who excel in problem solving/and instinctively know how to figure things out” (Acharya 34:7-9). In the other, it annihilates any desire to act or react, for “people lack intelligence,/always in need of nurture; someone to hold their hand/as they remain illiterate and incapable of figuring things out.” (Acharya 35:20-22)

In one country, the nation is stimulated to dispel the lack of personality and communicate in order to discover alterity in identity, and identity in alterity, and develop positive mutual understanding in “intelligence gathering/as individuals ferret out ways of bartering information.” (Acharya 34:10-1) In the other, machinery-addiction nurtures a silent community of loners who avoid any kind of openness and “any form of self-knowing/engaged perpetually in information processing.” (Acharya 35:23-4)

Shanta advances a critical comment on contemporary society, withdrawn into extreme privacy and self-centredness, which explains the gradually disintegrating spirit of the individual. In the end, it is all a matter of personal sense of direction, meaning, scope and, implicitly, of courage to expand one’s own universe. If, in one country, people seem to build their destinies winding continually without a clear direction, in the other they are guided by the illusion of spatial coherence and self-control. The poet intensifies the irony by adding the adverb “coolly”, since the unaffected outward opening to the world and self-balance are illusory.

Many poems by Shanta Acharya display an obsession with migration and location as contexts providing a sense of belonging. Topology, even though temporary, validates the social self and assigns authority to the individual: thus, identity becomes a continuum, with the culture of origin at one extreme and the host culture(s) at the other, for the specific purpose of character-building.

‘Somewhere, Something’ is another poem expressive of the cosmopolitan individual who knows that location remodels the ego through dislocation and relocation since the ontological movement from one place to another on a temporary basis triggers inevitable changes in personal and social identity, for there is something more profound than the simple movement to a specific reference point: “We travel not to explore another country/to return home fresh, bearing gifts.” (Acharya 66:1-2)

The voyage of discovery enhances mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis, simultaneous dislocation and relocation, placelessness and ubiquity that place the self on a border where all differences are erased, reconciling parallel worlds within abstract coordinates rather than concrete attachment to time and space. Perpetual replacement and re-identification is the core condition of the multicultural poet who knows that unmediated interaction perpetually alters, modifies and constructs personality without converting its true essence:

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. (Acharya 66:3-6)

Premeditated displacement activates deeply concealed reserves of selfhood, for the new adventures test – and contest – the previous knowledge about the unity of identity. By claiming unexplored territories, both inwards and outwards, one may detect a paradoxical reciprocity, finely revealed by the French feminist Julia Kristeva in her 1991 *Strangers to Ourselves*,

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva 1)

Shanta imagines self-evolution as a necessary component that shifts perspectives between the familiar and the unknown since any change in personhood pre-supposes “something/that justifies our coming and going” (Acharya 66:7-8), a spiral of possibilities for constituting a self-image. The quest for spiritual and emotional identity revises the politics and polemics of self-mapping in terms of a continuous process of constructing infinite realities that reveal possible selves.

Hence the urge, “Let's fly free, not nailed to a mast;/see the universe with new eyes/not blinded by shadows that light casts.”(Acharya 66:13-5)

Travelling is a way of establishing some external connections between the essence of things otherwise impossible to reach. Detachment from the world of shadows imposed by an obscure life is a triumph over inertia. Individual freedom proves its full measure only in action – and action means a restless wandering in quest of identity, forever refusing the return to illusion.

Constantly moving from one place to another becomes a way of testing the limits of the self, thus reconciling geographic with personal space in a rhythmical play of self-identification. With Shanta Acharya, real identity is a way to re-depart, to restart, to cross borders, to live in the present and not to return to the past. This seems to be her poetic creed, expressed in the poem ‘Never Look Back’: “Never look back, never live in the past./Anchor yourself in the present/live each day as if it is your last.” (Acharya 39:1-3)

Dissolving the past, one acquires a better understanding of the present that may condition the functioning of the future. The essential factor that alters individual perception and discernment is conscious presence, the here-and-now that shapes the mental and affective structures of the self: “Never look back at the path not taken,/never give up the future you've earned/never squander the present in indecision.” (Acharya 39:8-10)

Free will activates inner knowledge, different layers of personal perception, depending on time and place. Mobilisation of inner resources is the only appropriate response to the condition of living in the contemporary world, in order to forge a particular sense of self-reliance, in the Emersonian acceptance of the phrase. Like Emerson, Acharya's visions of the self create solitary rebels who refuse the chains of conformity and wander on unknown paths. Her lonely personae are visionaries of other worlds than the ones they live in and know that the great questions of the world must have other answers than those already known. In search of the alternative, these romantic idealists break with tradition outside by turning to the inside, knowing that progression, like progress, is not possible without a liberated consciousness: “Never look back, never go looking/for some one or some thing/out there. All the truth you need is within.” (Acharya 39:11-13)

Freedom from the past translates into liberation from an inflexible ego in order to submit it to the power of the present – and presence, since a voyage awakens the spirit and keeps the senses alert to new thoughts and emotions. Unfeigned participation in synchronicity releases the potential energies of the self whose reaction transforms old patterns into unprecedented forms of self-expression. And again, Shanta Acharya professes autonomy based on self-knowledge as a way to formulate different possible futures of identity since, she says,

The concept of ‘Know Thyself’ evolved in response to the question posed by Life itself – how to lead a life that is good, harmonious, wholesome, self-aware? It was no mean achievement that the ancient Hindus grasped this fundamental need and appreciated the sheer diversity of human nature. This is best illustrated in their definition of God, Divinity, Reality – ‘neti, neti’ – which translates to ‘not this, not this’. Such an idea is liberating; the infinite variety of Reality enables us to posit as many gods to suit our individual preferences because in the final analysis God is

without attributes. As mere human being however we need to define ourselves, and interestingly enough we often resort to the ‘other’ to define our own self – quite similar to *neti, neti*. (Acharya interview)

The Hindu “*neti, neti*” philosophy accommodated by Shanta in her poetry proposes a perpetually improvable identity that extracts its energy from the inside, contemplating itself, understanding itself and, eventually, finding resources to improve itself, to transcend the essence of one’s own being in order to reach the Truth. It needs intelligence, imagination and courage to free itself and to start anew, since identity is constantly construed in motion and individual freedom proves its full measure only in action.

Permanent quest defines the individual as human in the universe: through (self-) exploration, the individual turns towards its inner world, re-creating it and restoring harmony with the outer world, giving the latter new meanings, deciphering and subduing its mysteries. This dynamics generates a different mosaic of impressions that reconcile the self with its provisional temporal and spatial presentness for the purpose of permanent renewal and constant progress. Therefore, Shanta advises, “Never look back, never live in the past./Just let it go – fast,/live each day as if it is your first.” (Acharya 39:14-16)

Infused with Oriental wisdom, Shanta’s poems are ultimate examples of ubiquity, proposing multiple starting points as possibilities to achieve the wholeness of existence whose core is extreme personal freedom. The experience of becoming a global citizen, of perpetually changing places as assumed destiny, acquires a mythical aura since ceaseless departures and arrivals are opportunities to shape and re-shape the personal cultural code. At its core, however, there is always the desire to find home everywhere.

And, in a truly Renaissance manner, the sufficiency of the desired dwelling place is postponed as destination and is no longer a limited end-goal but perpetually extends to a planetary area – a cosmic home for a restless traveller like Shanta Acharya, an imaginary place restored in visions and dreams, a spiritual refuge that restores the balance between the self and the others, as in the poem ‘Lives of Others’:

Defined by our dreams are we humans –
our deepest desires disperse
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... (Acharya 38:1-6)

The deeply philosophical lines were inspired by *The Bhagavad Gita* (*The Song of the Bhagavad*), a sacred text of the Hindus. Asked about her religion, Shanta reveals that

Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life. Nor is it a way of life that is reduced to mere ceremonies. It is more to do with an inclusive vision of the world. I consider myself as being ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’. The open-mindedness of the

Hinduism I was brought up in was a real gift. Its philosophical base was centred very much on the individual. (Acharya interview)

In the last cinquain of her poem, Shanta paraphrases the sixth line in Chapter Eight, 'The Life Everlasting,' according to which the last thought before death directs the soul of the departing to its chosen final destination: "On whatever sphere of being the mind of man may be intent at the time of death, thither will he go." (*The Bhagavad Gita*)

With the poet, the traveller always longing for a dwelling place can only inhabit the home in the mind; moreover, whatever unfulfilled longing or unaccomplished desire one leaves behind, they will be taken over – and, hopefully, fulfilled or accomplished – by another human being, in a never-ending chain of instantaneous identification and simultaneous regeneration:

On what ever sphere of being
the mind of man is fixed at the time of death –
every death a birth, every moment
a chance to shape the universe, every desire a covenant –
is realised in the lives of others. (Acharya 38:8-12)

Impermanence and continuous motion define the individual in the universe. By developing complex relationships with time and place, the self opens to otherness, shaping and reshaping its identity, and thus overcoming self-division and discontinuity. As Shanta puts it,

As the individual grows in self-consciousness, the 'I' begins to include ever increasing circles of engagement with the world. The more self-aware you are, the more you are involved with everything around you. Hence, the 'I' at its highest level of achievement and enlightenment contains the entire universe. If you grow up thinking of the world, the human race, the universe as part of you/your family, your thinking is no longer fragmented. (Acharya interview)

Temporal and spatial presentness activate new meanings that go beyond narcissistic games towards self-achievement, with a willingness to discover the outer self (or the inner other) that assigns meaning to alternatives – just like poetry, whose committed mission is to reconcile the different sameness and the familiar strangeness as a condition of absolute freedom of the self. Poetry, in its pure form, creates signification by testing all possible limits for, in Shanta's words, "the act of creation frees the writer to assume different identities." (Acharya interview)

This is what Shanta Acharya achieves in her poems: in a truly metamodern manner, she turns to – and simultaneously departs from – herself in a constantly interchangeable play, connecting inside otherness with outside sameness. Externalising herself to new places and experiences, she transgresses personal boundaries, charting a complex and complicated map whose sinuous roads and many crossroads point to the protean human condition of the individual. Shanta incorporates this self-intricacy into her poetic work as the essential force emancipating the individual who transcends personal limits and achieves an endless disposal of imaginary selves since, she says, "I've always felt not just between two

but several worlds! How can I not? Yet, they are all me – and I inhabit all those worlds. Like Walt Whitman, I am many.” (Acharya interview)

Thus, perpetual metamorphosis permits the re-mapping of identity within an environment that creates symbolic structures expressing its real nature and integrates the self’s natural and personal values in order to achieve interaction and communication with the other. At the same time, this unsparing multiplicity of personal codes creates a space where the poet can assert herself repeatedly and repeatably; as the self becomes the locus of inspiration and inventivity, it assumes a definitive nomadic destiny in a cosmopolitan universe that erases all differences and allows identity to re-create itself continuously.

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