

Of Tongues and Amazons

By Debjani Chatterjee

Elocution class at the convent
was a heart-thumping ordeal for us 'native' girls.
Miss Rhondo would stride in,
a dark and miniscule dinosaur
who froze the grey matter in our brains
and delivered a vicious lockjaw
to cause our tongues to slither and stutter,
and our sweaty red-socked feet to shuffle
in white-chalked canvas shoes.
We rose in uniform drudgery
and greeted her with a singsong
'Good afternoon, Miss Rhondo' of shabby hypocrisy.
It irked her from the start
and she'd have us practise standing up
and sitting down with pathetic
time-wasting rows of 'Good afternoon'.
The crowd-saving distraction of 'the Mexican wave'
was not yet invented, but ripples of frustration
erupted and died.
Gita was surely a native too, but with attitude -
the one we looked up to with horror
and mounting excitement. No one knew
what she'd do on any given day
to break the regimented monotony.

She was a dusky native, but not like any of us;
she was an Amazon – tall and strong,
hockey Captain of our class.

‘How dare you, Girl!’ Miss Rhondo
thundered. ‘You disgust me
with your native English.’ But Gita’s eyes
would dance mischief as she tossed
plump pigtails in the air.

She was always punished but she didn’t care.
Amazons were from another world.
They belonged with Greek myths,
opium-eating Quincy’s essays
and *Lamb’s Tales From Shakespeare*.

In Miss Rhondo’s elocution class
our Babu English weighed us down
with centuries of mangling
by sepoys and government clerks,
and we mutinied without meaning to.
Our wilting tongues, like orphaned Oliver,
asked for more. Miss Rhondo rattled
the marbles of sarcasm in our Indian mouths
with native tongues colliding:

Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Gujarati ...
tongues that won us punishment
when overheard on the playground.

‘Please, Sister Katherine, Usha used Hindi
five times today.’ ‘Kamala is cursing
in Punjabi, Mother.’ Only the mother tongue
knows the enchantment of cursing.

And how can we tell a friend a story
that does not end: '*Amar golpoti phurolo*
– noté gaachhti murolo ...'?
We ratted on each other like Nazi collaborators
and strangled our ancestral tongues
till they rose to haunt us in nightmares.
I was an 'assassin of the Queen's language',
Miss Rhondo said. There was blood
on my barbarous tongue. I looked at it
in the mirror – it was a 'native' tongue
that I had to use as a pummelling bag;
I had to tongue-punch it daily.
It was the protean dough of roti
for routine squeezing and thumping,
the gum that had to be sucked
and chewed and blown up into a bubble,
like igniting a hydrogen bomb.
Do not ask me which is more my own -
I shape the tongue as best I can
and language made me.
Gita was one of us 'natives', and yet one of a kind.
One summer's day with the ceiling fan blowing
Miss Rhondo's hot words around the room,
our tongues wilted, browbeaten into grinding submission.
Then Gita whistled! How she whistled!
No lady ever did that.
But Gita didn't care to be a lady and we knew
that Amazons live by different rules.
Miss Rhondo could not believe her ears.

‘Who made that dreadful noise?’ she asked
and we all knew but no one snitched.

She punished us all – we stood on benches,
holding up our schoolbags and feeling fools,
though for once we didn’t care.

Honestas ante honores – ‘honesty first, then glory’,

Miss Rhondo reminded us. Our national motto
said it too in a still more ancient tongue:

Satyameva jayaté – ‘Truth triumphs’.

The truth was that Gita shrugged her shoulders
and we decided to join her that day

- we couldn’t do what she had done

– we all aspired to ladyhood

– but we could join her for just one lesson

in standing on the benches, we would all

be punished as natives together,

though our mutiny could not last.

Gita, we knew, was an Amazon;

while we could only pretend,

she lived by other rules.

Note: ‘*Amar golpoti phurolo – noté gaachhti murolo ...*’, meaning ‘My tale has ended – the plant has wilted’,
is the

beginning of a nonsensical rhyme that traditionally ends a Bengali folktale.

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Bio

Debjani Chatterjee 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 was born in Delhi and grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong and Egypt. She has attended seven schools and five universities, specialising in Comparative Literature, Religious Studies, Education and Counselling. Her 60+ books for children and adults include *Animal Antics*, *I Was That Woman* and *Namaskar: New & Selected Poems*. She has edited prize-winning books, e.g. *Barbed Lines*, *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* and *Rainbow World*. A former Chair of the National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council of England's Translations Panel, she is also a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Leeds Trinity University. A two times cancer survivor who believes strongly in the therapeutic power of reading and writing, she is a patron of Survivors' Poetry and founded the Healing Word support group. She has had numerous writing residencies, including at Sheffield Children's Hospital, Ilkley Litfest and York St John University. Her work has won major awards, including Sheffield Hallam University's honorary doctorate 'for outstanding contribution to Literature, the Arts and community service', and an MBE in the Queen's New Year Honours list 2008. She was selected, in the Arts and Culture category, to be an Olympic Torchbearer in 2012.

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