

**Episteme: an online interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary & multi-cultural journal**

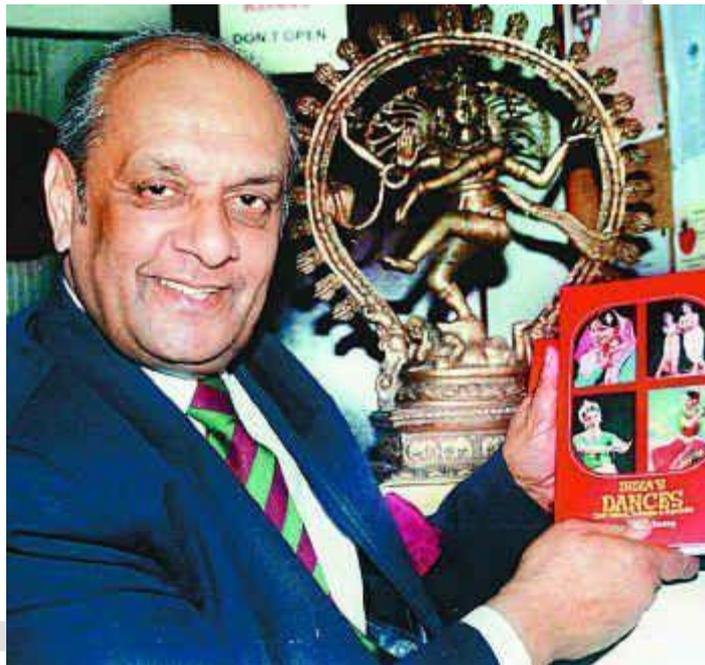
**Bharat College of Arts and Commerce, Badlapur, MMR, India**

**Volume 4, Issue 2**

**September 2015**

***REGINALD MASSEY INTERVIEWED AND PROFILED***

**By DebjaniChatterjee**



Reginald Massey holding a copy of *India's Dances: Their History, Technique And Repertoire*



An archive photo of Reginald Massey presents his book *The Music of India* to Pandit Ravi Shankar, who had written its foreword

#### **About REGINALD MASSEY**

Reginald Massey is a name that is respected in literary circles, but deserves to be much better known to the general reader, especially in South Asia. An eclectic writer, he is an authority on classical Indian music, dance and culture; a historian; a fiction writer; a critic; a columnist; and a poet. He wrote and narrated the BBC's well known documentary on Kerala's ancient dance drama - Kathakali. He also wrote and produced a travel-documentary, *Bangladesh I Love You*, starring the boxing celebrity Muhammad Ali. He has written for leading British papers, e.g. *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent*. He is a critic for *The Dancing Times* of London and regularly writes on books and authors for *Confluence* e-zine and Pakistan's leading newspaper *Dawn*. He is Consultant Editor of the Welsh magazine of history and art, *PenCambria*. Massey has also contributed to several encyclopaedia entries on Indian music and dance.

He was born in Lahore in British India on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1932. When his family migrated to India at the time of Partition, 15 year-old Massey witnessed terrible massacres along the way. Interested readers can access his story at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) › Exhibitions › Panjab 1947: a heart divided - recorded for an online exhibition with Britain's National Archives on the Partition of the Punjab. In the early 1960s, he migrated again to England, via France where he studied Comparative Literature and Journalism at the Sorbonne. He now lives in Llanidloes, Wales, since 1988, with his actress wife Jamila Massey, with whom he has co-authored three books.

Massey is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of the Society of Authors and of the Royal Overseas League. He was Writer-in-Residence at Wolfsberg Chateau, Switzerland. He represented India in the Commonwealth Poetry Conference held in Cardiff, Wales, in 1965. In 2006 he was Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Himachal Pradesh University in India. He has been a keynote speaker at major international literary festivals, including the Taj Festival in India and the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. In 2013 he was awarded the Freedom of the City of London, and received a Word Masala Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2015.

**Selected Books by Reginald Massey**

***LAMENT OF A LOST HERO AND OTHER POEMS*** (Writers Workshop, Calcutta)

***THE SPLINTERED MIRROR, a collection of poems*** with SomParkashRanchan (P R Macmillan, London)

***THE IMMIGRANTS: a novel*** with Jamila Massey (Hind Pocket Books, Delhi)

***INDIAN DANCES: THEIR HISTORY AND GROWTH*** with RinaSingha (Faber and Faber, London; George Braziller, New York)

***THE MUSIC OF INDIA*** with Jamila Massey and a foreword by Ravi Shankar (Kahn and Averill, London; Abhinav Publications, New Delhi)

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***THE DANCES OF INDIA: A GENERAL SURVEY AND DANCERS' GUIDE*** with Jamila Massey (Tricolour Books, London)

***ALL INDIA: A CULTURAL TRAVEL GUIDE*** edited and mostly written by Reginald Massey (Quintet, London and Quarto, New York.)

***ASIAN DANCE IN BRITAIN*** (NRCD, University of Surrey)

***INDIA'S KATHAK DANCE: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE***(Abhinav Publications, New Delhi)

***INDIA'S DANCES: THEIR HISTORY, TECHNIQUE AND REPERTOIRE*** (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi)

***AZAADI! – Stories and Histories of the Indian Subcontinent After Independence*** (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi)

***INDIA: DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS*** (Hansib, London)

***SHAHEED BHAGAT SINGH AND THE FORGOTTEN INDIAN MARTYRS*** (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi).

REGINALD MASSEY INTERVIEWED ON 22<sup>ND</sup> AUGUST 2015

**DEBJANI:**

You have played many successful roles in a distinguished life: columnist, critic, poet, script writer, broadcaster, director, producer, lecturer and activist. Which of these has been the most satisfying for you? And the least? Are there any unfulfilled ambitions?

**REGGIE:**

In life a man plays many parts, said the Bard of Avon. I have played too many roles and that perhaps has been a problem. In the first movement of my *Lament of a Lost Hero* are the following lines:

*I have lived tempestuous years  
Drained them to the dregs, as you might say,  
Have had my fill of bread and wine  
Played both Prince and Fool, in turn, each day.*

However, I have no unfulfilled writing ambitions. I am now in a position to write what I believe in. I do not have to write what editors or grasping publishers want me to write. But, having been through the mill, I know that writers starving in garrets have to sometimes make compromises and accommodations. Lord Byron and Count Tolstoy could write what they wanted to, but what about poor Clare and Keats? Hunger does not spur poetry. Even poets must eat.

**DEBJANI:**

Indeed, 'even poets must eat'. It leads me to ask, do you work on two or more projects at the same time?

**REGGIE:**

I work on many projects at the same time. And, as a good old journalist, I always deliver my copy on time. At the moment, I am writing my Memoirs, apart from reviewing dozens of books that various publishers send me. There was a time when publishers did not want to know me. The Capitalist system is extremely odd. When you need the money no bank will give you an overdraft or loan. When you have the money and do not need it, your bank begs you to have a loan on very good terms. In other words, nothing fails like failure and nothing succeeds like success.

**DEBJANI:**

Your Memoirs will indeed be something to look forward to. In the meantime, in your collection, *Lament of a Lost Hero*, you write of many places: Lahore where you were born, London, Delhi, and Bombay; but I note a special feeling for Simla (today's Shimla), in whose 'hallowed spots', 'poems, and poets, are made'. Can you explain what it is about Simla that inspires poets and poetry?

**REGGIE:**

Simla is a British creation. A Cheltenham in the Lower Himalayas. We Indians who lived in Simla were blessed. Simla had apples and strawberries, English roses and sweet-peas. The sunsets were amazing. They would arouse anyone to scribble poetry.

Also, in Simla was the Gaiety Theatre, the paramount theatre in the subcontinent. It is still operating, thanks to Virbhadr Singh the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh (a Bishop Cotton School boy). At the Gaiety, I saw the Shakespeareana Company, headed by Geoffrey Kendall. His daughter married Shashi Kapoor, son of the great Prithvi Raj Kapoor. I acted on the Gaiety stage with Prem Chopra, a famous 'villain character' in Bollywood films, and with Priya Rajvansh, who was tragically murdered in Bombay. But that is another story. Too long to detail here.

**DEBJANI:**

I am glad you refer to the spectacular Victorian theatre that is part of the Gaiety Cultural Complex and which you mention in 'Lament of a Lost Hero'. For well over a century it attracted celebrity performers like Rudyard Kipling, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor and K L Saigal. Your poem 'To the memory of Kundan Lal Saigal' is a fine tribute.

**REGGIE:**

Saigal was a great singer. He sang in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali. For years he worked as a typewriter mechanic with Remingtons in Simla. Mr Chohan, Jamila's father, knew him well and often heard him sing at private *mehfils* and at the Kali Bari. Simla had a lively Bengali community in those pre-Partition days. I never met Saigal but heard his voice on gramophone records.

**DEBJANI:**

Saigal's Bengali pronunciation was superb. He was the first non-Bengali to be permitted by Rabindranath Tagore to record his songs.

Reggie, I believe your wife Jamila hails from Simla. Has she inspired your work? Your readers will be interested to know.

**REGGIE:**

Jamila is a FIRST CLASS Editor, a Latin Classicist, and I always refer my work to her. I, on the other hand, am an insane Romanticist.

**DEBJANI:**

Collaborating with another writer in writing a book has its complexities. Your writing partnership with your wife Jamila Massey is a well-known and successful literary phenomenon in your fiction and non-fiction. What would you say have been the challenges and the benefits of such collaboration?

**REGGIE:**

**Writing in collaboration is a difficult business. There has to be immense mutual respect and 'give and take'. If it works, it is successful. However, it is a very difficult equation.**

**We used to spend a whole hour arguing over a single word or a single comma.**

**Let me tell you what Oscar Wilde wrote: 'I am tired today. I spent the morning putting in a comma and spent the afternoon taking it out.'**

**Writing is both an art and a craft. A carpenter works with wood. We writers work with words. My study is called my 'Wordshop'. You and I must discover the weight of words and the colour of the syllables.**

**And Wilde was a master of prose. Few know, as I do, what a great poet he was.**

**DEBJANI:**

**Your collaboration resulted in several important books.**

**REGGIE:**

**Yes, Jamila and I have collaborated on three: *The Immigrants* (a novel), *The Music of India* and *The Dances of India*. Sunil Dutt was interested to make the novel into a film but the project fell through because Waris Hussein, the director he wanted, was unavailable.**

**DEBJANI:**

**Your poems mention many writers, including: Shakespeare, Shaw, Chaucer, Vikram Seth, Ghalib, Taslima Nasrin, Sahir Ludhianvi, Paul Claudel and Auden. Which writers have influenced you the most - and in what ways?**

**REGGIE:**

W B Yeats too. But my master is Thomas Stearns Eliot, the Boston Brahmin who became a *pukka* Englishman. He has influenced me immensely, in both poetry and prose. His great poem *The Waste Land* ended, as you know, with:

*Shantih Shantih Shantih*

**DEBJANI:**

Would you like to say – in what way? For instance, your poems contain occasional allusions to Eliot's verse ('We measured out our lives with coffee spoons'). I must say, he was a major discovery for me too, when I was a young writer in my teens.

**REGGIE:**

TSEliot has had a profound influence on Indian poets writing not only in English but in the various Indian languages. *Azad Shairior* 'liberated verse' in India was much influenced by TSE.

As he memorably wrote, there is no such thing as 'free verse'. Verse is never 'free', it has to be worked for and earned because it is a perilous and dangerous raid on the inarticulate. Even the great Faiz wrote *azadshairi*.

In movement 3 of *Lament* I wrote:

*And so in India's coffee houses  
Far, far from London, Vienna, Paris, Rome,  
We measured out our lives with coffee spoons  
Believing, beyond a shred of doubt, that poets had no home,  
Knew no nation, recognized no border.  
Hence the entire earth was theirs,  
And they were the sons and heirs  
Of the new world order*

*Resurrected from chaos and disorder.*

**DEBJANI:**

I find a deep strand of faith that runs through your work. In 'I Reiterate...' you speak of 'the presence of God / In mosque, synagogue, temple and church / And in all places sacred', and you find God also in Nature, in a baby's smile and in home-baked bread. In 'Colours of Anguish' and elsewhere, you yearn for 'the coming of an anointed saviour'. Is spirituality important to you - and why?

**REGGIE:**

Spirituality *is* important to me. But I reject all rituals and organised religions. All organised religions are an insult to Divinity.

**DEBJANI:**

Your *India: Definitions & Clarifications* is a marvellously readable book. Do you have a personal favourite from among the many memorable stories that you have included?

**REGGIE:**

I have presented the results of my research, no 'stories'.

**DEBJANI:**

A final question, Reggie. Scholars and critics often see a need to categorise a writer. If pressed to accept one or more labels for yourself, what label(s) would you choose - and why?

**REGGIE:**

While mere labels do not worry me, I do not wish to carry them. I am a writer. I live in Britain and am a British citizen; I was born in UNDIVIDED INDIA.

**I tell my readers to buy my books on AMAZON and to read my books if they are interested. I think that I have much to say about South Asia and about South Asians in Britain. I landed in the UK in 1961 with just £4 in my pocket, but with a bagful of hope. I am grateful to Britain.**

**DEBJANI:**

**Thanks, Reggie, for this interview. It's great to reflect on all that you are even now doing, as an octogenarian writer. You are an inspiration to many.**

**Bio:**

Delhi-born **Debjani Chatterjee** was educated in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt and England. She has a PhD from Lancaster University; an honorary doctorate from Sheffield Hallam University 'for outstanding contribution to Literature, the Arts and community service'; an MBE for services to Literature; and a Word Masala Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry. She was selected in 2012 as an Olympic Torchbearer in the Arts and Culture category.

An acclaimed writer and translator with over 65 books for children and adults, she has been called 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and 'a national treasure' (Sixties Press). Recent books include *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* and *Songs of Choice*. She has edited numerous anthologies, including: *Let's Celebrate! Festival Poems from Around the World*, and *Generations of Ghazals*. Her *Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* has been described as recording 'a seismic shift in British culture'.

An Associate Royal Literary Fellow, Patron of Survivors' Poetry and a double cancer survivor, she founded the Healing Word support group for cancer survivors and carers. A founder-member of Sheffield Interfaith, she is particularly interested in spirituality in writing. A Life Member of the Poetry Society in both India and the UK, she has served as an elected member of the latter's Council. She is a former Arts Council of England Adviser and Translations Panel Chair, and Chair of the National Association of Writers in Education, with work published in over 200 anthologies and syllabi. Debjani has taught Creative Writing for the Arvon Foundation, the Workers Educational Association, the Ministry of Culture in

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Mauritius and Ondokuz Mayıs University in Turkey. She has held important residencies, including at Sheffield Children's Hospital, Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum and Gallery, York St John University, Leeds Trinity University, and Ilkley Literature Festival.

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