

Debjani Chatterjee

Mosquito

‘In the fullness of things, you and I are mere mosquitoes. In fact, we are all mosquitoes!’ The monstrous head with its compound eyes nodded persuasively.

I was in no mood for such maniacal philosophy – least of all from my unwelcome intruder. ‘We are all mosquitoes’ – what nonsense! It may please some poets to grandly declare that the world is a stage, and we are all actors in it. Some, with a spiritual bent, claim an exalted kinship – ‘we are all children of God,’ they say. Hah! Such generalisations irritate me with their imprecision.

My Biology finals loomed large in the morning, but it looked as though I would get no sleep tonight. Earlier I had indulged myself with an hour of watching TV; cricket is compulsive viewing for me – and India was playing Australia, so how could I resist? It was too bad of the exam-wallahs – this was hardly a civilized time to hold exams! The Aussie batsmen had started well but I did not think their luck would hold; India had some formidable bowlers. Ricky Ponting was batting, but soon it would be Dhoni’s turn to bowl - and the tall Jharkand bowler was sure to take a scalp or two.

Perhaps that was when my nightmare began – a stupid mosquito kept buzzing in my ear, drowning out the commentary. After I repeatedly waved it away, it even had the effrontery to settle for a moment on my hero on the well-lit screen. I rolled up my *Times of India* into a makeshift baton and – splat! – I dispatched the scoundrel to kingdom come! But I had hardly settled in my wicker chair again than disaster struck. The electricity flickered and then went altogether! I groaned. It was a blazing summer – traditionally a time for frequent load-shedding. But our economy was said to be making great strides these days; there was no excuse for such scarcity of energy.

There was no way to tell how long I’d have to put up with being in the dark. I looked out of the balcony and noted that the whole neighbourhood was plunged in darkness. That mollified me a little – it’s a strange kind of togetherness when we are all in the dark and alone! So, I lit my torch, always kept handy for such occasions, and prepared a very simple vegetarian dinner on my one-

ring gas stove. The meal consisted of throwing in some rice and lentils in a pan. I diced a potato and a couple of carrots into small pieces for boiling in the rice; then washed and tore some spinach leaves for adding at the end. I call this my bachelor dinner. Afterwards I poured myself a drink of coconut juice and sliced an over-ripe mango for afters. I lingered over the middle segment, sucking the oval seed clean and dry, in the hope that the electricity would come back soon. When it did not, I called it a day and went to bed. I did not particularly fancy revising by torchlight for my exam. Besides, I was as prepared now as I could ever be and should not risk having the torch-battery run out on me.

My bed was a grand affair in an otherwise somewhat bare apartment: it was a creaky four-poster, so I could easily have tied a mosquito net if I had such a thing. I was already wearing comfortable pyjamas and a vest, but I now discarded the loose handloom kurta that I invariably wear like a Gandhian uniform. Almost at once, my ears were assailed by the monotonous drone of a mosquito. On my way home tomorrow, I would buy a tube of foul-smelling Odomos, I promised myself. How I hated the tiny, winged blighters!

For a long while I lay in bed and listened to the drip-drip-drip of a bathroom tap and the other familiar noises of the city at night. No electricity meant that the ceiling fan could not blow the hot air in my room, and I dared not open a window as mosquitoes would be queuing up outside to launch their determined onslaught. In spite of the heat, I kept myself well wrapped in a cotton sheet for I knew that exposing the slightest part of my anatomy meant an invitation to mosquitoes to come and feast.

Actually, swaddling myself at night was a habit that I had got into in early childhood. Older cousins would tell me bedtime stories that were anything but conducive to relaxed sleep: tales of the ghosts of star-crossed lovers who had committed suicide in remote dak bungalows; stories about the dreaded *nishi* who stalked the streets at night in search of innocent souls to capture in their earthen pots; cannibalistic demons that appeared from nowhere and disrupted the ordinary activities of people, even having the audacity to interrupt the meditations of sages and hermits, as I well knew from stories in *The Ramayana* epic; and of course female vampires that inhabited certain trees, spoke to people in a whining nasal twang, and stretched down their long legs to strangle any

unsuspecting passersby who were foolish enough to walk beneath the branches at night-time. So, I would repeat empowering mantras for my protection – the main one being a little Bengali ditty that went: *'Bhoot amar poot, petni amar jhee; Ram-Lokkhon bukey achhey, korbi amai kee!'* It translates as: 'Ghosts are my slaves, she-demons are my maidservants; Ram and Lakshman are in my heart, so what can you do to me!' In winter I also wrapped myself in blankets and quilts against the ghoulish creatures of the night, and in warm weather I sheltered under light sheets - I took no chances.

Mosquito nets may seem protective, cocooning one, as they do, within a rectangular structure. But after a distant visiting cousin from Gaya told me of a haunting in their sprawling old ruin of a house, I became vigilant against all manner of mosquito nets. It seems her brother had come home from boarding school in Nainital for a summer vacation and went to sleep in an upstairs terrace room. He woke up in the middle of the night, to find the net being tugged and heard the quavering voice of an old ayah who had died some years ago; the voice addressed him with a nickname that he had long outgrown: 'Shona baboo, here's a glass of nice hot milk for you!' Not surprisingly, he had refused to sleep in that room again.

My eyelids now drooped with exhaustion. I was on the point of falling asleep – or maybe I *was* asleep – at any rate I was in that limbo state when one is neither awake nor asleep. That was when I was suddenly jolted awake. I had felt the faintest sensation of someone lifting the sheet where it covered my feet. A cold wet tickle on the sole of my right foot made me draw back my foot. Just then, the buzzing sound acquired a loud and frenetic note. And, *yes*, it emanated from a mosquito alright, but an insect unlike any that I had ever seen. Saliva dribbled from its mouth and I realised with horror that the wetness on my foot must have been the effect of its licking me, as though I were a tasty morsel! The bug-eyed apparition was huge – at least as tall as me, and I am 5' 9", which is tall for an Indian! Its many eyes were large, reptilian and all seemed to reflect me – I could see myself as I now sat up in bed, my hair was ruffled, and fear blazed sickly white on my face. I was in every one of its bulging eyes – almost as though the monster had captured me. Its slender body was in three sections and was a disgusting greyish beige throughout. Its long stick-like limbs were segmented like a crane-fly's and bent at every joint: I counted three pairs of limbs protruding from the abdomen and one of them reached a bedroom wall on which it performed a

strange balancing act (it must be a formidable acrobat, some detached part of me noted), but there was also a long and threatening fourth pair that emerged from the thorax and was directed at me. A pair of wings fluttered with dizzying rapidity. A cold sensation held me in its grip, yet perspiration beaded my face and my mouth felt dry.

It was the proboscis that frightened most. Long and cruel needle-like antennae, the size of javelins, jutted from the head and were directly pointed at me – it was weird to see them swaying a little in the stifling airless room. The creature seemed to be testing my bedroom air with them before letting fly its vicious needles. As I shrank back against my pillows, the bed creaked, and I swear there was a leering expression on the insect's face as it leaned in ominously from the foot of my wooden bed. I remembered the mosquito that I had killed just before the electricity went. Was I now being haunted by its ghost? Or was this perhaps some strange mosquito god come to punish me?

That was when the thing spoke to me – somehow that in itself did not seem strange: if it could be such a monstrous size, then it seemed natural enough that it could also talk. I did not see any mouth moving, but its voice was a stilted tinny sound in my head. It reminded me of the evil daleks, a race of robots in the Dr Who series on television. The daleks had wanted to take over the world and only the intrepid Doctor stood between them and cosmic annihilation. I half expected it to announce: 'Ex-ter-mi-nate! Ex-ter-mi-nate!' The world that I knew was already taken over by mosquitoes; they needed only to spread themselves and to multiply. But to insist that we were both mosquitoes? Surely not! I could not accept that I was the same as the blood-sucking harpy fluttering about in my bedroom. 'No!' I protested, 'you and I are certainly not the same. I am human while you are a mosquito, a titchy bit of nothing, easily squashable – you deserve to be squashed!' 'Ex-ter-mi-nate! Ex-ter-mi-nate!' echoed in my brain.

I did not understand this nightmare. Why was I even talking to the demonic beast? 'Yes, I am nothing,' nodded the mosquito, 'but so are you. Think about it: your few decades of scampering for life on this planet – how are they so different from my life-span of four to eight weeks? If you think in terms of centuries, there's no difference at all.'

It was a bizarre scene, but, in spite of myself, I could see what it meant. I remembered some lines by Shakespeare – the bard had just the right quotation for every situation under the sun. He had said that we humans were like flies to the gods who ‘kill us for their sport’. Flies or mosquitoes, we were just the same, I reflected – and both were dirty vermin. My night visitor had pressed a button of deep cynicism and I wondered if either of us mattered to our Creator. If I viewed the creature as a disgusting predator, for all I knew I too might appear thus to the mosquito – and perhaps also to our Creator. Wasn’t it sheer arrogance that my imagination clothed the Deity in human garb? Perhaps the mosquito too saw God in its own image. If the Divine existed, perhaps it was indeed as a mosquito. Or perhaps a fly, a spider, a cockroach, a scorpion, a slug, a shark ... my imagination ran riot. ‘Get a grip on yourself!’ I bade my cowering self. I could not – would not – accept that I was the same as an annoying bug. After all, I had the advantage of many thousands of years of evolution on my side, over an irritating pest that merited extinction.

‘You are not welcome in my house,’ I said, with what sternness I could muster. ‘Go away! Go away at once!’

‘I won’t!’ said my audacious trespasser. I swear there was a jeering smile on his face and it fanned my rage. ‘I don’t need anyone’s permission – I go where I will and there is no fortress that I cannot infiltrate. Besides, ours is a blood relationship!’

It was infuriating that it could crack a joke at my expense. ‘You are less than nothing to me and I’ll swat you out of existence without a second thought! You will not have my blood.’

The thing withdrew about a foot away and cocked its horrid head to one side. I was glad that my words had made an impact, but wondered if I was really strong enough to fight it. I sat up straighter in my bed and my covering sheet slipped off my shoulders and cotton vest, exposing my neck and arms. The segmented javelins waved in a frenzy. I quickly pulled up the sheet to cover myself again.

‘Why do you fear me?’ The voice was serious now, and placating. ‘Is it such a heinous crime to want a drop of blood? It won’t hurt you in the least: you have so much of the red stuff to spare.

And you must know from all the blood tests you have had that your body will replace the blood lost in no time at all. You have had your blood taken so often – full test tubes of the stuff; you never objected. All I want is a drop. What is a mere drop to you? You would not even miss it, whereas for me it is life and death.’

‘You are a thief! You steal into my home, and you suck blood while people sleep. You are shameless! And how dare you cover my foot with your disgusting spittle!’

‘Alas!’ said the shameless one, ‘my motive for secrecy is a kind one – I strike at night in your sleep so as not to disturb you. My needle would only be the tiniest pin-prick – it is nothing compared to the pain that large syringes give you. Yet I would save you from feeling even this miniscule sensation. That is why I came in secret as you slept. It is a pity that you woke up, but one way or another I will have your blood. As for my saliva, I will tell you the truth – why should I prevaricate! Human blood is a sticky substance and I need it to run freely; my antennae are both sensitive and delicate – a miracle of Nature! I cannot have them getting stuck in your blood; that is why I first prepare your skin: my saliva contains an anti-coagulant. Why not consider that I am simply here to give you a small injection. Doctors and nurses also first prepare your skin: they wipe the area with a bit of cotton wool soaked in antiseptic. You see, I do know what happens.’

‘Get lost!’ I said. ‘You can’t compare your bite with blood tests and injections! Those were done in my interest: to cure me or to prevent illness. You, on the other hand, spread disease with your pin pricks. Many of your victims have even died. You are a spreader of epidemics and a murderer to boot!’

My visitor sadly shook its head. ‘Your talk of murder and epidemics is an unfair generalisation. I have caused no epidemics in my short life on earth. On the contrary, my mission here is life-enhancing: a response to a biological need that is ingrained in every form of life, a duty to perpetuate my species. Drinking your blood will let me lay eggs – the lives of my future offspring depend on it. Your blood is urgently needed; believe me, that is the only reason I am here. I humbly beg you for the gift of your blood.’

‘You may be carrying a thousand offspring, but what are they to me? I have no intention of helping to perpetuate your kind!’ In reality I was not confident that I could swat such a gigantic mosquito, but I spoke out confidently: ‘I’ll kill you if you don’t leave – and, believe me, that will give me immense satisfaction.’

The monster edged forward an inch, wings beating at an incredible pace. ‘How violent you are! Haven’t you learnt about ahimsa? Isn’t this the land of Mahavira? Is not Mahatma Gandhi one of your heroes? Don’t you think that such deliberate murder would be a grievous sin? How would you sleep at night!’

‘My conscience is clear. And I’d sleep soundly without your droning racket,’ I replied rudely. ‘Your talk of the Mahatma is like the Devil speaking of God! It does not become you.’

‘Well, if ahimsa means nothing to you, let me raise the matter of reincarnation. Don’t you think it is possible that you and I are blood brothers – that our lives are linked by ties that we cannot even fathom? So should we not share what we have?’

‘Blood brothers? God forbid!’ I said. ‘We’re nothing of the kind! You are here like a leech to take my blood; I don’t take yours.’

‘Yes, blood brothers’. The creature nodded its ugly head.

‘No!’ I said. ‘Blood brothers share in a way that you never can. They cut open their palms and then join their bloodied palms together.’ I had seen the rite in movies about cowboys and Indians.

‘Well, we are many mosquitoes strong. If I don’t take your blood, another assuredly will. Who knows? – It may even infect you with its sting. But I approach you openly; I tell you my intention truthfully, for our lives are indeed connected. And I don’t only take; I will give you something in return for your blood.’ The creature was persistent.

‘Our lives are in no way joined,’ I protested. ‘There’s nothing that you can offer me, nothing that I want from you. Go away!’

‘Ah, but there is!’ said the diabolical thing, fluttering at the foot of my bed. ‘I will gladly oblige you with my departure – once I have what I came for.’ Its voice was sly and wheedling. ‘What if I tell you that I know your family secrets over many generations? – that I know them for they are also mine? Secrets of past lives that are wiped clean from your memory. But it is my karma to have this insect body and retain the knowledge of my human past. Why do you suppose that I chose *you* to visit this night when the entire populace of this sleeping city is mine to prey upon? There are crowded homes with many more targets for me to practise playing at darts. Can’t you believe that a karmic bond must exist between us? – I tell you, it is one that stretches from generation to generation. You still owe me a gift of life; kill me at your peril. If I die at your hands, our interchange must continue into the next life. So you may as well accept reality!’ The creature was warming to its subject and its tinny voice now carried an ominous warning.

‘You are man’s enemy,’ I muttered through gritted teeth. ‘That is the only truth I need to know!’

‘You hold me in such contempt! For whatever deeds and misdeeds I am imprisoned in this shell, but you of all people may not judge me. What if I said that I am your ancestor? Would you lift your hand to strike your own flesh and blood, to kill your own forebear? Think what a heinous crime that would be!’

‘No, I don’t believe a word of this! No ancestor of mine can be a mosquito!’

‘Then let me tell you that you too were a mosquito once! No, no, I don’t mean a metaphorical mosquito – I mean a real one!’

‘I don’t believe it! And I’ve had enough of your hypothetical far-fetched flights of fancy. You’ve had fair warning – I see you as a pest to be destroyed, so go away!’

‘So? I see that I must spell out the bond of debt between us. There was a time when our roles were reversed; it should not surprise you to know that you were the mosquito then and I was the one who heedlessly swatted you. It is how the Law of Karma works, as well you know.’

‘No, I know nothing of the kind!’ I shouted. ‘You are a liar and a mother of liars!’ I searched under my pillow and lifted a plastic fly-swatter in triumph.

‘Stop, stop!’ said the mosquito, backing away and inexplicably shrinking in size. The creature was still trying to appeal. ‘Think about it – would I truly stay here and have this long conversation with you, if we had no ties of blood? I tell you, I am your ancestor from another life. A mosquito’s life is very brief, as it is. So why take the trouble to swat me? Why burden yourself with the sin of slaying your ancestor? You know that you would have to pay a price for such sacrilege – if not in this life, then in the next. Besides, the world is big enough for us both to co-exist. If I and my kind were entirely wiped out, think what could happen to the eco-system!’

Seeing it retreat to its end of the room, emboldened me. I stood upon the bed and shouted: ‘Earth’s eco-system does not need you and you are no ancestor of mine. In fact, you aren’t even a mosquito! Lowly insects don’t talk to people. You are a hallucination, you don’t exist!’ I aimed and let fly my swatter at the grotesque creature that was now cowering on the floor. Splat! The swatter made contact and that was the end of my night-time visitor.

I woke up, feeling exhausted after the night’s strange happenings. The electricity must have returned at some time during the night because I found that my ceiling fan was on. I examined the wall and floor opposite my bed, half expecting to find the dead mosquito there, but everything looked normal. There was my kurta, hanging on a clothes peg behind the door. My jeans were lying folded on a chair. My shoes were by the bed and my cotton socks were rolled up in them. Everything looked as it should. In the ordinary light of day my dialogue with the giant monster seemed very much like a remote nightmare. I wished I could go back to sleep now in the safety of

daytime, but it was, of course, my Biology exam day. So, I had a quick bath and some half-burnt toast with marmalade and a semi-boiled egg, washed down with a mug of sugary tea.

My bicycle was in readiness outside and soon transported me to the exam hall where I joined another fifty or so students.

The invigilator was old Miss Diana of the eagle eyes and beaky nose. She wished us all luck and then instructed us on when we could start writing. At a signal from her, we all opened our copies of the question paper. The very first question carried 30% marks. I smothered a shriek, turning it into a cough, as I read: 'Describe in detail, and with diagrams, the four stages in the life history of the *Anopheles* mosquito'! My stomach churned. All eyes in the exam hall shifted to me for a moment.

Debjani Chatterjee is a poet, writer, and arts psychotherapist. Awarded an MBE for services to Literature in 2008, and an honorary doctorate by Sheffield Hallam University, she has had over 75 books published, including eight poetry collections, most recently *Laughing with Angels* (2022). Former Chair of National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council's Translations Panel, she is an RLF Associate Fellow and a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature. She has been called 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and 'a national treasure' (Barry Tebb). Find Debjani on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debjani_Chatterjee