

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Pearly Shells Christine Williams

At my parents' grave last week, standing above their buried bodies – corpses, really they are, but I still think of them in vital visceral form – I asked them a question about love, asked from deep in my heart. Immediately, I saw in my mind an image of a shell, a spiralled conch shell. I was puzzled. The image was clear and strongly imprinted on my mind.

Today I view a documentary on numbers and their central role in describing the universe. I realise that as a consequence of humans gaining this descriptive knowledge comes an understanding that numbers must be central to its very construction.

I'm currently reading a fictional account of Galileo Galilei's life, hearing him exclaim again and again that God is a mathematician. The documentary program bears this out, showing illustrations of the exact geometric shapes on which Chartres Cathedral was built, guided by St Augustine's mathematical studies. The number π , for instance, plays a central role not only in the formation of circles but in other formulae, such as determining the normative in a range of statistical situations. A nautilus shell is displayed to illustrate the 1.08 progression, small to large, of the rooms or segments of its shell. In other words, as the sea creature grows, each chamber of its shell's growth is 1.08 times larger than the last chamber, creating a logarithmic spiral within the exterior of soft pink stripes on a cream background. A thing of beauty. As I watch the screen, I struggle to remember when it was that I'd received the image of a conch shell, a sea spiral, as an intriguing answer to my query about love ... and I recall my brief conversation with my parents, and then a silence, into which an image arose, almost in an instant, as if it was their personal response to my question and prayer. An image which overtook my thoughts, thrown up from the depths of a great well of knowledge.

So I go to my friend Google and find that shells are symbolic of the protective quality of love because they provide a strong armour of defence. They protect life and even shelter pearls. In Roman mythology, Venus, the goddess of love, was said to have been created from the foam carried onshore on the top of a scallop shell. The Hindu goddess Lakshmi was also thought to have been formed from the grit that creates a pearl within a shell. More generally, in Hinduism the conch shell is symbolic of an awakening of the heart of the faithful because it is heard by those who live with love in their hearts.

My mother used to say that her name, Marjorie, carries the meaning *The Pearl of Great Price*, an idea she must have picked up as a child and delighted in ever after. It's certainly an appealing catch-phrase. The name does mean 'pearl', but someone must have endowed it with even greater value for her alone. So that as a girl, and a pearl of great value, she felt safely cocooned within a craggy oyster shell – a rare artefact in a mining village, Beaconsfield, in northern Tasmania in the early 20th century. And in turn, as a woman, she nurtured her own children, the last, the seventh, named Christine after one of the greatest protective avatars of all time. Back in their day, she and my father swam the tides of life, just as conches, alive in the sea, are swept along with their eyes, feelers and suction caps their only sense organs for

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navigation and security, save their strong, vortex-spiralled outer shells, pointed at both ends. Now buried in dry land, my parents can only offer me a memory, a shell of the protective love they gave me when they were alive. Or is it more than just a memory from the past they offer me now?

In *Prakrit* indigenous poetry in India, the conch, or *shankha*, often has an erotic connotation:

Look,
a still quiet crane
shines on a lotus leaf
like a conch shell lying
on a flawless emerald plate.¹

The erotic effect is evoked through the contrasting image of the creamy quality of a conch shell set against a starkly green precious stone, the emerald, said to vibrate with love in perfect tune with one's heart chakra. The emerald symbolises wisdom, hope and success in love through the fidelity of one's lover.

I've read about this language of precious stones, the age-old myths of their powers beyond the scientific known; I feel I am swept along by these swirling unconquerable currents of nature let loose to bestow good fortune, extending further than anything our conscious minds will ever comprehend or control.

Like a conch, the crane – a bird which symbolises long life, even immortality – is able to trumpet the future using its distinctive call. Since the meaning of *Shankha* is beneficence and bliss-giving, in Hinduism the sacred *Shankha* shell is used in ritual as a ceremonial trumpet sounded to begin worship. The warriors of ancient India also blew 'divine' conch shells to announce battle, hoping for a cleansing auspicious beginning to drive away evil spirits, as described in the famous epic, *Mahabharata*.

Hindus depict the preserving aspect of God, or Vishnu, holding a conch, a *Panchajanya*, to represent life, in the belief that it emerged from an ancient churning of the ocean, which produced the nectar of immortality. This divine shell, *Shankha*, is praised in Hindu scriptures for bestowing fame, longevity and prosperity, and as the home of Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth – who is Vishnu's consort. His very own pearl. The legend is an acknowledgement of the power of female sexuality. Remembering that each human life originates within the body of a woman, arising from the secret of erotic desire.

And I learn that the *Shanka*, symbolising water, has always been linked with women's fertility and serpents or *nagas*. Without any embarrassment about such symbolism, the southern Indian state of Kerala has taken this shell as its emblem, perpetuating the former emblems of the Indian Princely state of Travancore and the Kingdom of Kochi.

Finally, I find that a *Shankha* shell crushed into powder is used in Indian Ayurvedic medicine, for stomach pains and also to enhance beauty and strength, it's

¹ Hala's *gāhā sattasāi* 1.4, tr. M. Selby. From a collection of 700 single-verse poems by more than two hundred poets translated from *Mahashtri Prakrit* dating from the time of King Hala (c. 200 BCE to 200 CE)

said. Who would dare doubt these reputed powers? Surely, only a miserly unromantic sceptic. I'm a willing believer.

I discover that, in fact, many different kinds of molluscs can produce pearls. Even the conch. So my mother's message is gaining more and more credence. Pearls from the Queen Conch, *Strombus gigas*, are rare, having been collectors' items since the Victorian age. Conch pearls range from white to orange or even a pale brown, but pink is their signature colour. They have a unique attraction, a silvery, iridescent effect known as 'flame structure', caused when light rays interact with infinitesimal crystals on the pearl's surface, also said to resemble French *moiré* silk, or the quality of the surface of running water.

Now, skimming through my precious, still scant research, this time in sacred Western annals, I find that *The Pearl of Great Price* is a significant story in the scriptures followed by devout Christians the world over. In the New Testament book of Matthew, Jesus is said to have told his followers a parable titled, 'The Pearl of Great Price', about a merchant who is searching for beautiful pearls. Finding one pearl 'of great price', he sells everything he owns so that he can afford to buy it. That pearl is 'the kingdom of heaven', a great treasure indeed. The reason the pearl is considered to be symbolic of the kingdom of heaven is that the story follows on from another parable, through the use of the word, 'again', about the conversion of St Paul, who was said to have unintentionally found the hidden treasure of the kingdom of heaven and given up everything for it.

My mother must have felt the thrall of the pearl, as she even identified herself through two mother-of-pearl brooches, one the shape of an 'M', the other its reverse, a 'W' – her initials – that she used to wear, set against a black suit jacket for dramatic effect. Aligning oneself with such an irresistible, universally-acknowledged romantic image as the pearl would be a deeply-satisfying pleasure, I can see. And now I feel sure that this message of love and protection has come from her to me, as if a whisper from the sea heard through a shell held to the ear.

My mind floating in a world of creative reverie, I too feel an urge to consciously identify my love with the symbolism of the conch shell, since that was the exact image I saw in my mind's eye as a message from both my parents – whose inner shells, the bones making up their skeletons, lay buried beneath my feet.

After all, I've dived deep into the known facts of marine science, able to describe the conch and its almost priceless pearl, as well as plumbed the mystery of the shell's universal symbolism and as metaphor. What need is there for me to quest further? I'll go with the flow. Bob along on the waves. Yes, in a conch that might carry a passenger safely, traversing an entire ocean before reaching her destination.

This is a sacred message my mother and father have bequeathed me as a comfort in my distress, settled as they are in a single grave after more than eighty years of husbanded fidelity. A signal to bide my time. So that I, like St Paul, may give up everything – outworn material dependence, cramped emotional attachment – once the time is ripe. At *Vishu*, perhaps, the first equinox of the zodiac year, as a golden cassia showers her petals in a downpour, like tiny canaries swooping to carpet the earth in colour.

A sign that I will find a treasure, and dwell within a spiral of perfect symmetry, a kingdom of love. Perhaps a living conch – there must be some male shells, surely – may even wash up on my foamy scalloped shoreline one day.