

What Handwashing and Social Distancing in the Times of Corona Remind Us: The Left Hand is as Vital as the Right

Devindra Kohli

Abstract: In a personal memoir, the author reflects on how poets such as John Donne, W. B. Yeats, Robert Graves, and Ernst Jandl portray conjoined hands as a mode of harmony and creativity. This reconciles traditional and religious values / sanctity associated with the right hand. He reflects on his own journey through this motif from his childhood through to the present Corona pandemic situation.

Keywords: hands, handwashing, Anjali Mudra, Coronavirus (COVID-19), Robert Graves, W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Ernst Jandl, John Donne, Cheiro

Luckily, I didn't have to break a bone in the right forearm in order to learn that the left hand is as good as the right hand. However, like most of us, I was raised to believe that the sanction (religious / mythological) vested in the right hand is superior to and more auspicious than the left hand. While growing up in Mardan (NWFP, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan), I was taken at age five for my naming ceremony to Panja Sahib, a Sikh temple, where the founder Guru Nanak's right hand (panja / extended palm) is imprinted on a boulder above a spring of water. Subsequently, in Delhi, where my 'displaced' parents settled in 1948 after the Partition of India, we learnt to offer salutations with both our hands pressed together, whether they were to gods and goddesses in the temple or to visiting guests at home. Now so many years since I first practiced such greeting, it seems ironical that the Corona virus, irrespective of class, religion, and caste, should have made

this mode of greeting so much safer than any other one. Yet, as I was growing up, there seemed to be much mystery attached to the right hand: it was, almost insistently, the preferred primary performer in rituals and in writing.

Later, as an undergraduate, while searching in Delhi Public Library for more books by Thomas Hardy whose fascinating novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* was a prescribed text, I ‘chanced’ upon *You and Your Hand* (1932) by Cheiro (meaning hands in Greek), the pen name of William John Warner, an Irishman and a contemporary of Hardy, who had learned astrology, numerology and palmistry in India before setting himself up as a dazzling celebrity consultant in London and later in Hollywood. Cheiro claimed that *You and Your Hand* (his last book) was further evidence of ‘the first principle that the left is the hand you are born with – the right is the hand you make’, but equally it was ‘one more of the many books of nature where God writes its history on leaves, on stones and on everything’.¹

To my Hardy-eyed imagination as an undergraduate, Cheiro seemed to have emerged from Hardy’s extended fictional world of ‘circumstance’ and predestination like a presiding predictor about whom even the doubting Mark Twain had been moved to acknowledge that ‘Cheiro has exposed my character to me with humiliating accuracy. I ought not to confess this accuracy, still I am moved to do it’.² Twain had, in fact, used, as I discovered later, fingerprint identification in his novel *Puddin’head Wilson* whereas Oscar Wilde’s ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ (1887) was based on his actual hand-reading meeting with Cheiro. More recent research by Anne Mallory and J. Hillis Miller, for example, points out that not only are references to hands a constant feature in Hardy’s writing but also that Hardy underwent a chiromantic reading as shown by drawings and interpretations of his hands in Eveline M. Forbe’s article ‘Some Noteworthy Hands’.³ Further, in *The Dynasts*, a play in verse, Hardy used a palmist’s terminology for his topographical descriptions.

I had no knowledge of such references in Hardy when I first encountered Cheiro. All I understood was that in his novels and poems, Hardy astutely explored the often-blurred connection between ‘character’ and ‘fate’ of individuals and that, while various influences shape an individual’s character, there is also the overriding phenomenon of an indifferent Immanent Will that ‘heaves through Space, and moulds the times, | With mortals for its fingers!’⁴ The power invested in the right hand is heavily underlined in 166 references in the Bible. The same idea resonates in John Milton’s great epic *Paradise Lost*, as Satan argues, ‘Our puissance is our own, our own right hand | Shall teach us highest deeds’.

So, while I read English and American authors for my courses, I also read more books by Cheiro and in fact began to dabble in comparing the lines not only of one hand with the other but also with those of my friends. I looked at them as though they were lines from different poems, thus exploring this genre of what seemed to be scientific detection, if not science fiction! Some of my friends who were familiar with traditional Hindu palmistry told me that the interpretations of the lines vary according to the gender: while a man’s right hand is thought to reflect his own destiny and character, his left expresses those of his spouse. In some rituals the woman’s left hand is regarded as the counterpart of the man’s right hand.⁵ Cheiro argues rather anecdotally that whereas Henry VIII had banned palmists and astrologers by an Act of Parliament since ‘this much-married monarch was afraid his wives might learn their fate’, his daughter, Elizabeth I, who became the Queen eleven years later and never married, ‘not only encouraged such tabooed studies but actually regularly consulted and trusted John Dee, her favourite palmist and astrologer’ (*You and Your Hand*, p. 22). At first, these gendered interpretations seemed romantically intriguing, but I found they were also confusing. So, I also gave up on Cheiro as it seemed that the obsession with changing or unchanging lines on our hands detracted from the immediate challenges of exploring life and living it more fully.

Whatever the difference in the lines of my two hands, the simple fact was that I needed to use both hands as and when needed, just as I needed both my feet to balance my walk on the road, one at a time, and sometimes both together, for example, to jump over a puddle. I came across Rumi's saying, 'Life is a balance of holding on and letting go'. One needed both hands, even metaphorically, to do that balancing act! On one occasion, in 1963 after I joined teaching at the University of Delhi, I even put forward, with instinctive convenience, my left hand to receive an award at an annual function. I realized this when I received a copy of the officially taken photo. A colleague of mine then, who had recently returned with a degree from Columbia University, was not amused at seeing the photo, and was quick to point to the *faux paus*, saying: 'Do we receive an award with our left hand'?

The English and American poets I studied, and later taught, placed no special emphasis on the right hand. Although John Donne rhetorically addresses his patroness, the Countess of Bedford – 'Reason is our soul's left hand, faith her right, | By these we reach divinity, that's you'; he quickly adds that even though it is 'a squint left-handedness... yet we cannot want that hand'.⁶ Donne remains a preeminent poet who with 'roving hands'⁷ explores to achieve spiritual wholeness: 'to 'intergraft our hands, as yet | Was all the means to make us one'.⁸ Or, when he ventriloquizes Sappho in a verse letter to her female friend Philaenis: 'thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only | Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye'.⁹

W. B. Yeats, who was profoundly influenced by the occult, astrology, theosophy and mysticism does not prioritize the right hand over the left as Milton does. In 'The Balloon of the Mind', Yeats apostrophizes both his hands to focus on pulling in the ideas into the shape – 'narrow shed' – of his poem:

Hands, do what you're bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

And in ‘A Poet to His Beloved’:

I bring you with reverent hands
 [...]

And with heart more old than the horn
 That is brimmed from the pale fire of time:
 White woman with numberless dreams,
 I bring you my passionate rhyme.

Equally in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, as ‘an aged man’, reflecting on the procreative ‘sensual music’ of ‘dying generations’, he invokes the soul to ‘clap its hands’ to rejoice in its power to create ‘monuments of unageing intellect’ and be gathered ‘into the artifice of eternity’ (p. 193).

It was not until I discovered Robert Graves that I was revisited by the mysterious tradition of prioritizing the right hand over the left. Graves famously attributed his poetry to the right hand and his prose to the left hand even though he claimed that he made more money from his bestselling autobiography and historical novels than he did from his poetry! Writing against the Biblical grain and the patriarchal tradition in *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, originally published in 1948, Graves reimagined poetic inspiration and reconstructed it from various sources as a matriarchal gift. Poetic inspiration is mythologized as the mystique of the hands in engagement with the Muse. In ‘Hercules at Nemea’, for example, Graves reinterprets the mythical story of Hercules killing the lion at Nemea. Instead of Hercules killing the lion, it is the poet’s amorous engagement with the Muse who, ‘fierce as a lioness’, maims his ‘fool’s-finger’ as a token of poetic heroism:

See me a fulvous hero of nine-fingers –
 Sufficient grasp for bow and arrow.
 My beard bristles in exultation:
 Let all Nemea look and understand
 Why you have set your mark on this right hand.

In ‘Juan at the Winter Solstice’, the Muse / Moon-Goddess herself signals with her right hand when the moment for the poet’s amorous sacrifice has arrived:

She in her left hand bears a leafy quince;
 When with her right she crooks a finger, smiling,
 How may the King hold back?
 Royally then he barter life for love.

Thus, in evoking the power of the Muse, Graves draws on collective consciousness, ranging from romance to ritual, mythology to religion in attributing propitious power to the right hand. If Graves’s belief seems a subversion of the dominant Western belief in a male divinity, he is, arguably, on home ground so far as Hinduism is concerned. In the diverse streams of Hindu mythology and religion, there is also the concept of the interdependence of the right and the left, the male and the female symbolized, for example, in *Ardhanarishvara*, the integration of two deities, Shiva and Parvati, as Shiva-Shakti. Whereas, in the androcentric Hinduism, the three goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali are seen as deity consorts respectively of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, in the gynocentric Hinduism, more prevalent in Northeastern parts of India, they are seen as triple goddesses representing Shaktidharma, with Mahasaraswati riding a swan or peacock, Mahalakshmi riding an owl or elephant, and Mahakali riding a lion or a bull.

According to Graves, the story of Hercules has a universal appeal because not only does the word Hercules have multiple meanings, but: ‘He is, in fact, a composite deity consisting of a great many oracular heroes of different nations at different stages of religious development; some of whom became real gods while some remained heroes’.¹⁰

Martin Seymour-Smith also noted the complex personality of the Muse:

The Goddess thesis in itself is simple, though its detail is complex. [...] The original Goddess is Mother, Lover and

Crone (Layer-out). [...] Graves's definition of his own function is quite different from that put forward by any other poet (or critic): it is 'religious invocation of the Muse, the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites'.¹¹

At the heart of the perceived or mythologized dialectic of the hands, then, lies a recognition of a quintessential duality within and without us. It propels our search for balancing or reconciling, however momentarily, through a creative interaction with the other within us and without – in the human world, in Nature, and the divine.

Is there a message hovering in the Corona-ized air / Coronavirus times? Can it be that while birds and animals breathe and rejoice as before, we humans, irrespective of caste, class, creed, and nation must needs wear a mask, keep physical distance and observe ritual washing of both hands? When social greeting with the right and left hands joined together ('Anjali Mudra' in Sanskrit) becomes a protective shield against the virus, the political undertones, if any, are tellingly conveyed by Ernst Jandl. In his tantalizingly short poem, 'lichtung', the Austrian poet, reflects on the natural symmetry and the potential or perceived asymmetry of the left and the right, punning on the letters 'r' and 'l' in 'lechts und rinks' instead of 'rechts und links':

Manche meinen
lechts und rinks

kann man nicht velwechsern.
Werch ein Illtum!

Some say
reft and light
don't collerate.
entilery farse!¹²

In 'Sea Side', Robert Graves playfully critiques the mechanized symmetry of housing structures through which man destroys, as in duplication through procreative but loveless coupling, the 'symmetry of two in sea and sand, | In left foot, right foot, left hand and right hand'.

The beast with two backs is a single beast,
 Yet by his love of singleness increased
 To two and two and two and two again,
 Until, instead of sandhills, see, a plain
 Patterned in two and two, by two and two –
 And the sea parts in horror at a view
 Of rows of houses coupling, back to back,
 While love smokes from their common chimney-stack
 With two-four-eight-sixteenish single same
 Re-registration of the duple name.

In this blurring of distinction between the right and the left hand, there is a poetic message perhaps that we should hold fast, with both hands, with compassion and empathy, as Graves, too, who attributed his poetry to his right hand, urges:

Hold fast, with both hands, to that royal love
 Which alone, as we know certainly, restores
 Fragmentation into true being.

Devindra Kohli is a scholar editor. Formerly Professor of English, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, he has taught in Delhi and in Germany and held numerous Visiting Fellowships in Europe and the US. He is a founding co-editor of *The Indian Literary Review* (now no longer extant), has written two books and edited numerous books including *Kamala Das: Selected Poems* (Penguin).

 NOTES

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- ⁴ Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts*, II.3 [n.p.] <<http://www.online-literature.com/hardy/the-dynasts/8/>> [Accessed 24 May 2021]
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- ⁶ John Donne, 'To the Countess of Bedford', in *John Donne's Poetry*: selected and ed. by A. L. Clements (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 66.
- ⁷ John Donne, 'Elegy XIX. To His Mistress Going to Bed', in *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 55.
- ⁸ John Donne, 'The Ecstasy', in *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 30.
- ⁹ John Donne, 'Sapho to Philaenis', in *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols, ed. E. K. Chambers. With an Introduction by George Saintsbury (New York: Bartley, 2012), II, pp. 23-24. <<https://www.bartleby.com/357/152.html>> [Accessed 9 June 2021]
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- ¹¹ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 392.
- ¹² David Sansone, '(di)versions, translations into Greek and English of Ernst Jandl's "lichtung"', 2008 <<https://www.academia.edu/4579896>> [Accessed 24 May 2021]