

Chandra, the moon, my lover, scaled the sky in his silvered fullness. He cast his sheen on the landscape, onto every entanglement of foliage and the sprawl of the ocean.

He intended not to sit in tranquillity, where his magnificence would be sublimely reflected, but to cause perturbation.

Creatures with heightened sensibilities picked up the livid flashes of anger under Chandra's determined passivity.

Wolves bayed at him in alarm. Horses thudded their hooves. Birds squawked abrasively. Startled trees grouped closer. And crabs on ocean floors rocked back and forth sending fluster signals to other sea creatures.

Something was distressing in Chandra's restlessness. It was as if he was about to collapse inwards and fall into a stellar black hole, the cosmic quicksand.

His failed attempt to hold on to his past even as an unwanted present was being created was causing this tumult, triggering his caprice.

I saw his face pitted with holes, his forehead corroded with crevices and his eyes, like mini-volcanoes, glare down on the liquid surges of the ocean. It made its waves churn, bulge, upheave skywards and close the gap between heaven and hurricane.

Next, I saw him incline his orbit dangerously close to the Earth, threatening to skew its balance and alignment with a host of planets, stars and even galaxies, all bound together in a revolving carousel.

His defiance, his moon strike, was nothing short of cosmic disobedience.

Outstretched terrestrial lightning, whose luminous limbs strung out in serpentine forms, and deafening cosmic thunderbolts confirmed this.

Well, how could it not be?

An iridescent love story of the moon and a star, between him and me, between Chandra and Tara, could not have played out any other way.

I was warned that only the aberrant could love Chandra. I was told his handsomeness could get into another's being, in its every shade and shape, that he could mangle another's mind into lunacy and throw their emotions beyond recognition and control.

He did all this to me yet I fell in love with him anyway. Or maybe I did because of it.

Chandra came to stay at our home as he was the pupil of my husband, Brihaspati, the god of the planet Jupiter, who imparted wisdom to celestial beings. I had a thirst ready to be quenched and Chandra's appeal was instant as it was irresistible. He was everything my husband was not. Brihaspati was indifferent to me. He was phlegmatic in nature, dense in energy with no lightness or lustre to his being and incapable of surprises to pique interest and passion.

Chandra filled my inner spaces of infinite solitude. I gave myself to the magic of his changing contours, as he moved his shape from nothing to crescent to quarter to half to full and then back to half to quarter to crescent and then to nothing.

Why did he shapeshift? Chandra was married to twenty-eight sisters, stars like me, daughters of Prajapati Daksh, the son of the Creator of the universe Lord Brahma. But he was partial to Rohini. The neglected sisters complained to their father who cursed Chandra saying he would lose his shine. Distraught, Chandra appealed to Lord Shiva, the third deity in the Hindu trinity, who said while he could not reverse the curse he could soften it by letting him shine for fifteen days. "I will wear your crescent in my hairlocks to show you are dear to me," he comforted.

This vulnerability made me love Chandra more.

Like most fugitive lovers, our secret was forced open one day which is what caused Chandra to go rogue. I was made to return to my husband upon the intervention of Lord Brahma who also quieted Chandra's anger.

Distracted, I was inattentive towards my duties as a wife and my responsibilities towards the cosmic community which caused planetary imbalances. Lord Brahma was made to intervene yet again.

"How little you know of the universe you live in," he said.

"Did Chandra's changing shape teach you nothing? Did not his frenetic straddling of the dual rhythms of light and dark, life and death, constancy and change, past and present show you that both realities are fleeting?"

After a pause, he said, "Did you not understand from his plunging into non-existence that the essential nature of the universe is that everything comes from nothing and goes back to nothing, that the galaxies are minuscule and ninety-nine percent of the cosmos is empty."

"Nothing?" I asked fearfully.

"This is a perilous idea, destructive to the extreme," I said trembling.

He smiled at my trepidation. "Don't confuse nothing for emptiness as everything originates from this space. The word 'nothing' has negative connotations so I will call it limitless presence," he said.

"What are you saying?" I questioned.

"I am merely taking your secular event, Chandra's and your love story, back to its sacred origin, to shunyata, to nothingness or its limitless presence. You have a choice. You can either be a small creature in this vast cosmos or the emptiness itself which is the source of all creation, where everything, living and non-living is contained in complete harmony and bliss," he said.

"We also call this limitlessness brahman, the indivisible, incorporeal, infinite and all-pervading nature of existence and the source of eternal bliss. It alone exists, the rest is an illusion. Everything takes form from it but dissolves within it ultimately."

Here was the complex, extraordinary cosmic truth, the real nature of existence, the natural order of things explained lightly, intelligibly.

"I now know gods, goddesses, galaxies are but manifestations of this limitlessness. Their existences, however numerous across cosmic time, are transient, like the Chandra-Tara moments," I tell him in thankfulness.

"I also know there is nothing here for tears or remorse and that I must continue in my role until it is time to embrace the zero: the absence of being and allow myself to disappear into the bliss of Brahman, into its infinite, spaceless, timeless, nothing," I finish.

Happiness bubbles within me.

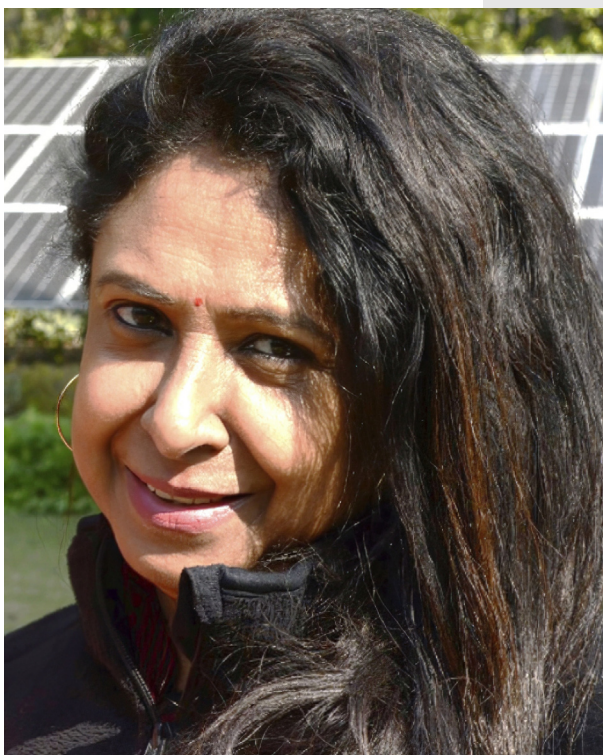
About the story

My short fiction 'The Absence of Being' attempts both a literal and philosophical slant at the issue of existence and non-being.

The Hindu concept of 'nothingness' or 'shunyata' was introduced in the Vedas, Sanskrit texts, 5,000 years ago. The texts say our temporal realities are mere illusions equating to nothing, which is the only reality. This nothing is not nihilistic but filled with a limitless expanse of possibilities. Today, quantum physics says the same thing: everything comes from nothing and returns to nothing.

Using magic realism, this piece explores this complex idea, the basis of the universe's truth, against a cosmic backdrop, against the love story of the moon and a star, to heighten the drama and play up the possibilities of this void called nothingness.

I am fascinated by the fragrance of the beyond as described by the Hindu philosophy. Where one comes to absolute nothingness but a nothingness overflowing with possibilities. As a writer, I wanted to be able to grapple with this idea through a story that makes this idea understood.



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She uses her ardour for writing to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript, and tree-ism and capitalism.

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