



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



*I, the dark woman, in the trajectory of your
consciousness:*

**Indian born British poet Usha Kishore
in conversation with Sutapa Chaudhuri**

*I am lost in an in-between space, where east and west
meet and shamelessly breed generations of hyperboles,
dispersed through land, water and air. Here I appraise
the ghosts of empire, invasion and colony. I summon
brave new spirits: Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism ...*

(Usha Kishore: Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism,' *On Manannan's Isle*)

Indian born **Usha Kishore** is an award winning British poet, writer and translator and a well-known voice in contemporary Indian writing in English. Usha now lives on the Isle of Man, where she teaches English in a Secondary School. Usha's poetry is internationally published and anthologised by Macmillan, Hodder Wayland, Oxford University Press (UK) and Harper Collins India, among others. Her poetry has been part of international projects and features in the British Primary and Indian Middle School Syllabus. The winner of an Isle of Man Arts Council Award and a Culture Vannin (formerly Manx Heritage Foundation) Award, Usha's debut collection *On Manannan's Isle* was published in January 2014 by dpdotcom, UK.

Usha also translates from Sanskrit. Her translations of Sankara and Kalidasa have appeared in UK, US and Indian journals. A book of translations from the Sanskrit, *Translations of the Divine Woman* is forthcoming from Rasala Books, India, later this year. Usha is now working towards her second poetry collection.

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In an exclusive interview with **Usha Kishore** conducted via email early this month, **Sutapa Chaudhuri** chats with her about her multicultural identity or 'cultural osmosis' as Kishore herself says and its bearing on her art and concept of poetry. The occasion for this conversation arose in the context of Sutapa Chaudhuri's reviewing of the poet's debut collection, *On Manannan's Isle*.

Sutapa Chaudhuri: When did you start writing poetry?

Usha Kishore: I started writing poetry when I was doing my MA in English Literature, back in India. Some poems were published in a couple of local magazines in Trivandrum and I was over the moon. However, I started taking poetry more seriously after I came to the UK in 1989. Here, I was exposed to new forms, new themes and new world views.

SC: Who or what has been your inspiration, and/or has influenced your poetry?

UK: I would call my poetry reactionary. My environment and experiences have been my poetic inspirations. To name a few – I write a lot about my teaching experiences. One of my teaching poems is ‘Teaching Tagore to 10 A/S’ which has been widely anthologised in the UK. An Indian (that too a first generation immigrant) teaching English in mainstream UK secondary schools has been an eye opener for me and I am sure for the students and other teachers too.

Another great inspiration is myth. I have been immersed in Indian myths as a child; as a poet, I delve into myths. Increasingly, I find myself writing about Roman, Greek, Far Eastern, Gaelic, Celtic, Russian and Nordic myths. One example is a sonnet on the ‘Poseidon Temple, Poros’ (published in *Mediterranean Poetry*, in January, this year). In this sonnet, I muse on the ruins of the Poseidon temple on the Greek island of Poros. My reference to Poseidon below is based on Homeric and Orphic hymns:

... the remains of feet, whose liquid
tread once swayed the earth. The awful hand
that bore the brazen trident shakes no more
the swelling brine; no neighing trumpet to summon
the storm ...

SC: You have written many poems themed on seasons. Indian monsoons and British autumns especially pervade your poetry and as you say ‘continents dissolve in autumn shades’ ...

UK: Seasons are very inspiring, especially the Indian monsoons and the British autumn with its falling golden leaves, migrating birds, ‘mists and mellow fruitfulness’. I find a lot of creative force in autumn as it signals the end of one year and the birth of a new year. My poem, ‘Waiting for Autumn’ (from *On Manannan’s Isle*, 2014) is my tribute to the queen of seasons:

Autumn, you are the beginning and the end.
Leaves of burgeoned gold flirt with the sky
in burnt ochre, sprinkling sindoor into my thoughts
as darkness invades light, charms her and makes her
his paramour. The colours of spring are too pastel

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and summer is dyed, far too often, in shades of grey.
But, you Autumn, queen of seasons, eternal bride
of the sun, dressed in russet red, edged with burnished
gold, erupt into song and kiss my soul. You warm me
with your soft fires as the sky turns into birds
and chases a fleeing summer. Then I, the dark woman,
in the trajectory of your consciousness, echo your dreams.

My translation of Kalidasa's *Ritusamharam* (Cycle of Seasons) certainly had something to do with this poem, as it did with the poem, 'Translating the Indian Summer,' published last year in the Australian online journal, *Meniscus*.

SC: What does it mean to you to be a poet? Or rather why do you write?

UK: This is a difficult question. I can only say, *I write, therefore I am ...*

Why do we all have to appropriate the Cartesian norm? We Indians, were colonised by the French as well – hence I think I can appropriate in French translation, the above tenet:

J'écris, donc je suis ...

SC: What kind of poems do you write? Are there any special themes that attract you as a poet? You've written for children too in magazines like *Dimdima* and your work features in children's anthologies like Macmillan UK's *Works* series and Hodder Wayland's *Rainbow World ...*

UK: I write poetry for adults and children. For children, I write about animals and birds, myths, folklore, nature, festivals and India, India and India. My poetry for adults is postcolonial and multicultural. I discovered postcolonial angst, here in the UK. I have to appropriate Arif Dirlik here: 'Postcolonialism begins when the periphery invades the imperial centre.'¹ Postcolonial concerns are my concerns now: hybridity, marginality, language, culture, history, empire, otherness and diaspora. Nostalgia, India, religion and feminism are also recurrent themes in my poetry.

I do quite a bit of ekphrastic work. I have poetised the works of the Kerala painter Raja Ravi Varma, especially his work on mythical female characters; some of these poems have been published in the UK and India, most recently in *Kavya Bharati*, India. My project *Ekphrasis* with the British artist, Carola Colley has been featured in poster form at the Linfield Arts Festival, UK. The set of poems that evolved from this project are entitled, *Bones of Time*, after Carola's *plein air* abstracts, and are part of my collection, *On Manannan's Isle*. The poems elaborate Carola's readings of the Manx (as in the Isle of Man) landscape and archaeology.

¹ Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,' *Critical Inquiry* 20 University of Chicago (Winter 1994) 328-329. <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/dirlikpocoaura.pdf> Accessed 31/5/2014.

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SC: You said you wrote for both children as well as adults. Do you write with a target audience in your mind when writing for the adults? How would you then describe your poetry?

UK: My poetry has been defined as erudite. Some of my poems, especially the ones on Literature, Religion and Myth are for the more informed audience. However, I try to pitch at a target audience. For example, I have many Manx elements in *On Manannan's Isle*. Many of my poems that are published in journals and anthologies, back home, have strong Indian elements. The poems that are published in the UK and Western journals are predominantly multicultural and cater to a universal audience. I attempt to cross cultures and languages with my verse.

SC: You choose to work in English. What about your other tongues?

UK: Unfortunately, I can only write in the alien tongue. I call myself a relic of the British Raj. English is a second language to us, Indians and we have adapted it as our first. I went to an English medium convent school in Kerala and fell in love with the Language and Literature.

*I do not have a language to claim as my own,
only an irrevocable parental pledge made
on the pyre of a deceased empire to dye me
in the colours of invading eloquence ...*
(lines from 'Postcolonial Sonnet' – Unpublished)

I speak Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi and Urdu, but write in none of these languages. I also indulge in a smattering of French that lends colour to my poetry. And I translate from Sanskrit into English.

SC: Does writing allow you to have moments of understanding?

UK: Certainly. As a writer, you reflect and understanding dawns during these moments of reflection. Most of my poems help me acquire a wider view of the world and a better understanding of myself!! While drafting poetry, I start to realise that this is my interpretation of the world. Sometimes, I am surprised at myself and wonder, 'O, did I write that? I must have felt that way!' One such poem is my critique of the *Rigvedic* hymn of Creation, where I question the inherent patriarchal baritone of the *Vedas* in:

*...The Gods came later with their thunderbolt, discus
and trident, demanding sacrifices on earth, fire,
water and air ...
... In my mind's eye, I see them all, the gods
who line the roaring sacrificial fires and those who perform
the sacrifices in ritualistic metre, binding and unbinding.*

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***But, what of the goddesses who birthed these gods?
What of the earth woman who bore the primeval man?
To which of these deities, do I offer my verse sacrifice?
(‘Creation’, Muse India, May/June, 2014)***

SC: You have talked about postcolonial angst. As a poet, would you then say that you have a conscious sense of history?

UK: Yes, I am very conscious of Indian history. I am haunted by the ghosts of empire, invasion and colony!! Speak of postcolonial spirits!! I do historicise the past and present of India and the UK. I dangle precariously between the histories of these countries, occupying a sort of *Trisanku Swarga*, with a sense of sheer bewilderment. As you know, Trisanku is a character from Indian myth, who was sent to an illusory heaven by the sage Viswamitra. *Trisanku Swarga* (Trisanku’s Heaven) is a metaphor for being in limbo.

SC: Do you believe that the pen is mightier than the sword? Can poets influence people’s views? If yes, would you then describe the act of writing as a sort of ‘activism’?

UK: Yes. The pen is mightier than the sword. Poets certainly influence world views. To me, the art of writing is reactionary. In an oppressive environment, writing is resistance and subversion. What best to describe it than Rabindranath Tagore’s words, ‘into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake!’

SC: What is the relationship between your speaking voice and your writing voice and/or the voice that appears on page?

UK: My friends say that they can see me in my work. I agree, I think my writing voice is an extension of my speaking voice. Poetry is the speech of the poet, his/her voice; a sum total of the poet’s thoughts, emotions, ideals and principles.

SC: How much does your poetry reflect your life? Or in other words how personal or political is your writing?

UK: My poetry is the poetry of an ethnic minority woman in the UK. It is personal and postcolonial, hence the politics is unavoidable. Actually, my poetry is my *weltanschauung*. My poetry reflects my life, my experiences, multiculturalism, women’s rights and my reactionary stance on racism. Here is my stance against colonial attitudes in the UK:

***I am Caliban, you want to tame me.
I am the exotic, you want to taste me.
(‘Fussy, Militant, Rebel’, *Index on Censorship*, UK, 2002)***

SC: As a woman poet and mother, how much does gender influence your writing?

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UK: Feminist concerns inevitably filter into my poetry in the form of myth, Indian and Western attitudes to women and issues surrounding the female body. In fact, one of my poems is called, *L'écriture féminine et indienne* (published in 2007, in the UK Journal, *New Writing*). This is a term that I had first used in critiques, which later became a poem and a preoccupation.

SC: How important is your multicultural identity and background in your poems?

UK: I am not one but two.

**India bleeds in my veins, England
paints my feathers with her mists**

(*'I am not one, but two ...'* Translated into German by Johannes Beilharz, as *Ich bin nicht eins, zonden zwei*, published in *Indische Gedichte und Geschichten*, Stuttgart, 2006)

Poetry is the way I express myself. My Indianness is who I am; my Britishness is where I am. Hence my background and identity seep out of my poetry in some form of cultural osmosis.

SC: What do you think should be the relationship between a poet and the society/culture she lives in?

UK: Poetry is the response of a poet to her culture and society. Therefore, the relationship is integral and to a certain extent symbiotic. The society or culture is the poet's environment that shapes her thoughts and it is this environment that she poetises.

SC: What are your views regarding contemporary Indian women's poetry in English? Where do you situate yourself within this context?

UK: Contemporary Indian women's poetry in English owes a lot to Kamala Das. Her gendered yearnings and expressions and her critique of Indian womanhood, previously unheard of in Indian women's poetry, have all permeated into contemporary writing. Although most contemporary Indian women poets in English have a feminist stance, their work does not revolve around women's issues. It responds dynamically and forcefully to a changing India and wider concerns of politics, religion, culture and society.

Now where do I come into it? I think I belong to many groups: Indian woman writing in English, diasporic Indian woman writing home and ethnic minority woman writing from the imperial centre.

SC: Do you have a favourite word? What about a poet who has meant a lot to you or a favourite poem?

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UK: Currently my favourite word or term is Caliban as *The Tempest* is my favourite Shakespearean play. I teach this play very often, with an overbearing postcolonial angle, of course. I am tending to use the term, Caliban, as a metaphor within my poetry. As a postcolonial, I can identify with Caliban; here is my appropriation or assimilation of the bard:

You taught me your language; and my profit on't is I know how to write in it, how to subvert in it.

I have been influenced by a lot of poets over the years, both Indian and international. The list is endless starting from Kalidasa, Sankara, Shakespeare, Browning, Christina Rossetti, Tagore, Kamala Das and Pablo Neruda to Maya Angelou, Carol Ann Duffy, Debjani Chatterjee and Moniza Alvi. I am grateful to Debjani Chatterjee for having mentored me tirelessly over the years and to Priya Sarukkai Chabria for that wake up call to my erstwhile dormant poetry in 2012.

I have many favourite poems. One of my all-time favourites is Kamala Das's 'An Introduction.'

SC: As a poet and a teacher, what advice do you give to emerging writers?

UK: Craft your work well!
Be patient and doggedly determined!
Never give up!

I could call myself the epitome of patience. I never knew that I was so patient. I have been published in international journals and anthologies, alongside well-known poets, for quite some time. I have also edited poetry anthologies in the UK and an issue for *Muse India* in 2013; but my debut collection only came out, after a very long time in 2014 and that too with two awards!!

SC: Would you say something about your debut collection of poetry *On Manannan's Isle*? The poems seem so intriguing – connecting the East and the West, bridging the two worlds ...

UK: The collection *On Manannan's Isle* portrays the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the Isle of Man with the postcolonial palette of language and culture. I have explored many facets of the island like the landscape, history, literature and art. The spirit of the Celtic deity Manannan permeates the whole collection. (To me, Manannan is the Manx equivalent of Varuna, Vayu and Indra put together; he is one more in my pantheon of 33 million gods.)

In this collection, I have also examined diasporic Indian culture, juxtaposing integration and alienation. Through symbols of myth and legend, through migrant metaphors, I have contemplated the themes of assimilation and marginalisation, displacement and nostalgia. I have reflected on my multicultural identity and documented an immigrant perspective, seeking an in-between space.

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SC: Please comment on the many awards that have graced your art as a poet.

UK: In 2013, I received two awards for *On Manannan's Isle*, one from the Isle of Man Arts Council and the other from *Culture Vannin*. I think I am the first Indian to receive an award from *Culture Vannin*. I am grateful to both organisations for the awards.

In 2012, I was shortlisted for the *Erbacce Poetry Prize*, UK. 2013 has been particularly lucky for me; I have been on the Prize List of a few UK and Irish poetry competitions or have been shortlisted. I was shortlisted for the *Live Canon Poetry Competition* and won the *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry Competition*. My poetry has been highly commended in *The Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition*, Ireland (in 2013 and 2014). My work was also highly commended in the *Compas Poetry Competition*, Keble College, Oxford University and received an honourable mention in the *New Writer Poetry Competition*.

I have been honoured and humbled by these awards. I am grateful to Debjani Chatterjee for encouraging me to submit my work to UK Poetry Competitions.

SC: What about your current project/s? Which poems are you working on right now?

UK: I am currently finishing off a translation project with the Kerala based Sanskrit scholar, M. Sambasivan for my forthcoming book, *Translations of the Divine Woman*, with *Rasala Books*, India. The book incorporates translations of Kalidasa's *Shyamaladandakam* and *Mooka Kavi's Aryashatakam*. The process and the project are outlined in my essay, *On Translating the Divine Woman* in Sangam House Poetry online.

I am also involved in the ekphrastic project *Prerna* (translated as inspiration) with the Indian artist Sandhya Arvind, who works in the media of tribal art forms, *Madhubani* and *Warli*.

Incidentally, I am also looking for a publisher for my second poetry collection.

SC: Among your own poems, which is your favourite? Will you share the poem with our readers?

UK: Poems to a poet are like children to a parent. Favourites are always alternated. My current favourite is 'Cosmic Man,' based on the universal patriarch of the *Vedas*. Although predominantly patriarchal, the myth of the cosmic man is mystical and at the same time universal. This poem is the result of my preoccupation with myths from different cultures. The myth of the Hindu *Purusha* or 'cosmic man' is similar to the Norse myth of Ymir. I am fascinated about the genealogy of myths. Different cultures of the world share belief systems through myths. Many myths have equivalents in various cultures. For example, the Indian *Indra* is Jupiter/Zeus in the Western classical pantheon and *Uchchaisravas* is Pegasus. *Garuda's* Mongolian counterpart is Khangarid. Similarly, there is a common inheritance of concepts in Vedic and Avestan (Zoroastrian/Pre-Zoroastrian) deities. The Vedic *Mitra* is the Avestan *Mithra*, *Yama* is *Yima* and *Sarasvati* is *Haraxvaiti*, a mythological river goddess.

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In '*Cosmic Man*,' I explore the Vedic myth of *Purusha* and the creation of the universe. This poem was published in *IUP Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, India, 2011.

Cosmic Man

Sahasra śīrśa puruśa, sahasrāksha sahasra path ...

I am a star
somewhere
in the cosmos -

Sun, Sirius, Pollux,
Arcturus, Aldebaran,
Rigel, Betelgeuse, Antaris...

In a million stars,
in a trillion stars,
I am unique ...

I am the universal star.
I am the universal man.
I am the cosmic man.

The Gods tie me up in space
and throw me into the fire.
I am the ritual sacrifice

of the heavens, my blood
spilling out in stars. Spring,
Summer and Autumn

light up in flaming leaves
to engulf me on the pyre
of Winter. I sacrifice myself

to create the universe.
From existence to awareness,
from thought to action,

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I merge myself
into the universe.
I am the universe –

My myriad heads
are serpents that crawl
across time.

My myriad eyes
are light years, piercing
the darkness of space.

My spirit is moon;
my breath, air; my
dreams, the planets.

My slender waist,
the space between
heaven and earth.

I am the cosmic man,
from me, life flows
into the milky way.

The Sanskrit quote at the beginning of the poem is a line from *Puruśa Sukta*, which is a hymn from the Hindu *RigVeda*. It can be translated as – *myriad headed and myriad eyed is the Puruśa, the cosmic man*. The Hindu cosmic man is often compared to the Norse God Ymir and the sacrifice of the *Puruśa* or cosmic man is not unlike the Norse creation myths. Vedic legend speaks of the sacrifice of the *Puruśa* to create the universe.

SC: Thank you, Usha, for your time and for sharing such lovely poems. It has been a pleasure having this conversation.

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