

Being Woman

Usha Kishore

*Women like me, born and bred
in a distant monsoon land,
think in rain, laugh in lightning,
cry in thunder and procrastinate
like the wind.*

(‘Women Like Me’)¹

I am unabashedly feminist. I was initiated into this order as a child growing up in India, where I was told that a woman is the incarnation of the Mother Goddess. As a young woman, I learnt the hard way that a woman’s place in society is secondary to that of a man. My nature and nurture have endowed me with this dilemma on womanhood. All my life, I have struggled to come to terms with it.

¹ Usha Kishore, ‘Women Like Me,’ *On Manannan’s Isle* (Isle of Man: dpdotcom, 2014), p. 50.

With the world at war, with atrocities against womanhood at a peak, when female security is an uncertainty and a woman's right to her own body is disavowed, it is time to re-think the whole concept of being Woman. In the current international arena, where toxic masculinity invades social media, where rape is a military strategy, where misogyny seems to be the order of the day, it is only right to chant the Gayatri Spivak mantra: 'Can the subaltern speak?'² It is time for an *nth* wave of Feminism, which would re-educate the world on the rights of women.

Let me start with faith. As a practising Hindu, I have often wondered why the eulogisation of the Divine Woman has not translated itself into socio-cultural realms. In 2015, while translating Kalidasa's *Śyāmalādaṇḍakam*³ from the Sanskrit, my co-translator, the late M. Sambasivan, and I were contemplating this socio-cultural irony. I still am in 2023.

I wish the Hindu myth of the Goddess, the Divine Woman, would permeate the universe and give some sort of legitimacy to womanhood in this 21st century world, in which gender equality is a dream yet to be realised. The legendary

² Gayatri Spivak, Indian born American scholar, academic and theorist. Her paper, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' discusses the Indian Sati Practice and the representation of women.

³ The Sanskrit text *Syamaladandakam* is attributed to the legendary Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa. The text is a long praise poem, eulogising the female deity Syamala, the goddess of wisdom and the arts.

Sanskrit writer, Kalidasa (4th or 5th century CE) dreams in verse of this equality, through his invocations to the goddess Syamala:

soul of all knowledge

soul of all yogas

soul of all cadence

soul of all syllables

soul of all Vedas

soul of all the universe

soul of all initiation

soul of all eternity

soul, all pervasive

*manifest in many forms.*⁴

Here, Kalidasa's invocation is not to the goddess alone, it is also his invocation to womanhood. From ancient times, India has excelled in her worship of the female divinity. I often wonder when this would be translated into respect for women!

I speak best through my poetry and through my translations of poetry. So it is best that I present my thoughts on 'Being Woman' through excerpts from my work. My second collection, *Night Sky Between the Stars* (2015), reflects my pre-occupation with Indian womanhood and a marginalised identity.⁵ A

⁴ Kishore and M. Sambasivan, *Translating the Divine Woman* (Bangalore: Rasala books, 2015), p. 87.

⁵ Kishore, *Night Sky Between the Stars* (Allahabad: Cyberwit, 2015)

gendered diasporic engagement with India, the collection comprises of reflections on patriarchal Hindu texts and renderings of alternate voices for mythical female characters. Perhaps I am attempting a shift of paradigm from patriarchal conventions and interpretations of Hindu religion and myth; perhaps I am defining what I call *écriture féminine et indienne*⁶?

Whence was this world created? Who was the primum movens?

Who was the creator? Did he fashion it or did he not?

Or was it a woman? Did she mould it or did she not?

Whose eye controls the world from the highest heavens?

Perhaps she knows it, perhaps he does not.

(‘Creation’)⁷

Patriarchal creation myths abound not only in Hinduism, but also in other world religions. My interpretation of the creation myth is female-centric, simply because the woman gives birth to humanity. In ‘Creation’, I have appropriated one of the Rigvedic hymns on creation through interpretative translation to enable an alternative gender dynamic.

My verse journeys into the worlds of myth and religious texts have reinforced my belief in womanhood, which metamorphoses into the Goddess Kamakhya, elemental goddess of desire:

⁶ Kishore, ‘L’ *Écriture Feminine et Indienne*, in *Night Sky*, p.75. Translated as Indian feminist writing, this is my postcolonial modification of *écriture féminine*, the term coined by the French feminist and literary theorist Hélène Cixous.

⁷ Kishore, ‘Creation,’ *Night Sky*, p. 13.

My psychic song flows in your veins, carrying promises of verses to come. I am infinite soul spilling forth in countless forms, my endless female hungers wooing the heavens. I am laden cloud, twilight rain, water in its element; a ritual beyond time, bleeding in cosmic myth.⁸

While re-interpreting this myth of womanhood, in this desire of being woman in a contemporary world, I find there are others who share my dreams. The women of Piplantri, in Rajasthan, plant 111 trees on the village common when a baby girl is born. In their reverence for the female child, these women revere Mother Earth, they celebrate womanhood and practise their unique brand of Eco-feminism:

Today the village common is a pulsating forest of women, singing, dancing. Mother Earth reborn, every girl becomes a tree, every tree a girl.⁹

The women of Piplantri offer light and hope in a dark world abounding in gender inequality, lack of female inheritance rights, and crimes of abduction, assault and murder that create parables of shame. We hold candle-lit vigils, we re-invent ourselves, we reincarnate:

*Do I weep for myself
for I am lost hope, beating
my weathered bosom
in the annals of history?*

⁸ Kishore, 'Kamakhya,' *Night Sky*, p.18.

⁹ Kishore, 'Girl Trees,' *Night Sky*, p.22.

*Or do I re-write myself
as Kali incarnate
trampling a nation's shame?*

(‘Don’t tell me her name’)¹⁰

Despite inequalities, many world leaders today are women. Why am I bringing in politics here? Because Womanhood is Politics, and there is no point in Being Woman without being Political.

As an Indian-born British writer and translator, I am caught between two nations, two cultures, two histories and many languages. As a first-generation immigrant, living and working on the British Isles, I consider myself a translated woman, alongside many immigrant women who live and work in nations that they are not born into. In the poem ‘Translated Woman’, I refer to these women and to those who write from what was the imperial centre:

*I travel between cultures
I journey between languages,
I am the witness of merging
histories and geographies,
I break barriers with my dreams,
I am a translated woman.¹¹*

My collections *Immigrant* (2018) and *On Manannan’s Isle* (2014) explore the world of immigrants, highlighting the predicament of a postcolonial, of a

¹⁰ Kishore, ‘Don’t Tell Me Her Name,’ *Night Sky*, p.56.

¹¹ Kishore, ‘Translated Woman,’ *Night Sky*, p. 71.

woman of colour writing in a language not her own, of a diasporic Indian woman writer:

Offspring of a colony, I am a colony within a colony.

*My language is not my own, I am a mooncalf,
lispng in an alien tongue, seeking a bigger light
by day and a smaller one by night. My words
are not my own. I appropriate those of others
at the school of imported words, where meanings
are translations of fabled history and syllables
are definitions of mottled culture.*

(‘Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism ...’)¹²

As an English teacher, working in the British secondary school sector, I teach a language not my own. I am passionate about the English language. I am passionate about English literature. As a teacher, as a writer, as an academic, I am drawn to *The Tempest*. I teach the play often and aim to re-interpret Caliban:

*... Caliban rolls
in the dark recesses of my heart,
an accident like me, taught
to moon-worship in an alien tongue.*

¹² Kishore, ‘Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism...’ *On Manannan’s Isle*, p. 33.

*I dance in the air, like a harpy,
a humane spirit, trapped in time.
The Gods alight before me
and perform their masquerades,
I end in smiles for a bard, who
gives me the stuff of dreams,
Only Setebos is lost at sea...*

(‘On Teaching the Tempest’)¹³

I identify with this ambiguous character in metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche. I write myself as Caliban. Or, should I say, a female version, who populates your island with little Calibans? I have tried to understand the many facets of this character, academically, creatively, postcolonially.

As a woman of colour, I cannot write as the English do; I can only write as an Indian does:

*Spreadeagled on the criss-cross trellis
of your literary croft, my monsoon verse
clambers up in a whimsical arc of heady,
oriental jasmine, not honeysuckle or rose.*

(‘Otherness’)¹⁴

¹³ Kishore, ‘On Teaching the Tempest,’ *On Mannan’s Isle*, p.20.

¹⁴ Kishore, ‘Otherness,’ *On Mannan’s Isle*, p.28.

I have tried to write about Aphrodite and Diana, about Isis and Astarte, but I write best about Kali. The West, however, would not decipher a vampire goddess, a terrible deity, anklets ringing across eternity, marrying the sacred and the profane. Perhaps the West would appreciate if I portrayed Kali as 'scantily clad, Third World feminist':

*[...] They would possibly
envisage you as polymorphous primeval energy,
devouring time in flickering tongues of flame;
female wrath trampling male divinity, inhabiting
the fringes of liminal nature; woman boldly
crossing boundaries, eluding all definition.¹⁵*

Despite patriarchal norms, despite the cruelty and criminality meted out to us, whatever the colour of our skin, I believe that us women will continue to evolve, as we have always done. As women, we are survivors; we have the resilience, we have the dreams! We have always emerged strong, steadfast survivors and this is why I pride myself on 'Being Woman'.

¹⁵ Kishore, 'Kali,' *Immigrant*, p. 63.

Usha Kishore

Usha Kishore is an Indian-born British poet, resident on the Isle of Man, where she teaches English at St Ninian's High School. She has published three collections of poetry, most recently *Immigrant* (Eyewear 2018), and a book of translation from the Sanskrit.

Usha won the Exiled Writers Poetry Competition in 2014 and the Pre-Raphaelite Society Poetry Prize in 2013. She has been awarded by the Isle of Man Arts Council, Culture Vannin (Isle of Man) and Word Masala (London).

Usha's poetry has been published internationally and widely anthologised by Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Faber India, amongst others. Her poetry is featured in Indian school and university syllabi and the British school curriculum. Her work has been translated into German, Spanish, Turkish and Manx Gaelic.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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