

I write therefore I am

Usha Kishore

*'I have no 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 ...'*

(Postcolonial Sonnet)¹

I have often asked myself why I write. This question draws me into the wider world of writers. No, it is not sheer Orwellian egoism, or any historic impulse to leave my writing for posterity.² Somewhere along the line is certainly a sense of aesthetic enthusiasm for perfecting my writing; elsewhere, a postcolonial realm merges the personal with the political.

¹ Usha Kishore, *Immigrant* (London: Eyewear, 2018), p.15.

² George Orwell, 'Why I Write,'

<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/>

I started writing when I was at school in India. It should be no surprise that Indian children write creatively in English, a colonial import. I went to an English Medium convent school in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. My mother, a Hindi teacher, inspired this writing habit of mine, with her own student-day poetry. My father, a Sanskrit scholar and voracious reader, added fuel to my reading habit. Between the two of them, they managed to conjure the magic of words within me. English teachers at the convent also encouraged me, publishing my juvenile poems in hand-written school magazines.

It was during my MA *Eng Lit* days that I started writing in earnest. I took myself very seriously then, convinced I was William Shakespeare or Rabindranath Tagore re-incarnate. My initial poems were 'discovered' by the late editor and art critic, Padmanabhan Thampy, who published my work in his art and literature journal *Southern Chronicle* that came out of Trivandrum in the late 1980s. Looking back in awe, I find that *Southern Chronicle* had an international clientele and its pages were graced by renowned writers, among whom was the Egyptian born Israeli poet, Ada Aharoni.

As a first-generation immigrant in the UK, I discovered postcolonialism, beyond my school-girl love of Rudyard Kipling and my juvenile fascination for Rider Haggard's exotic worlds. As a child growing up in India, I could not comprehend

the Kipling refrain of 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' Nor was I aware of Haggard's mindset that the imperial frontier had a spirit that improved the English character and that imperial emigration was a patriotic act.³

Now, I find myself caught in the hybridity of Indian and British perspectives and an overwhelming linguistic dilemma. I am a translated woman. I am not unique here, many British writers of Indian origin flourish in the Imperial Centre. Despite the yoke of postcolonialism, my mature poetry has found wings here in the UK, my work appearing in British journals, anthologies and competition prize lists, before taking flight elsewhere.

I am a translated woman, re-interpreting my cultural past. There is this India of the mind that I translate to an international audience. Then, there is this lived-in Britain that colonises my verse. I am a seasoned postcolonial, spinning narratives of nation, history and culture. My immigrant identity grants me a poetic voice. I hold on to my Indian roots, simultaneously assimilating myself into the socio-cultural spheres of the British Isles. Today, I am happy writing in English from the imperial centre. Politics colour my poetry; culture and history

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<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/historical-journal/article/land-reform-henry-rider-haggard-and-the-politics-of-imperial-settlement-19001920/7977418C4BE91572423994B2EEFFE126>

form its lines. I feel strangely uncomfortable when I do not write about culture and politics, and the joint history of India and Britain. I write in a language not my own. I translate Sanskrit and Hindi literatures into a language, not my own. I write, therefore I am!

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.

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