

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 1, SPRING 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

About Us: <http://pintersociety.com/about/>

Editorial Board: <http://pintersociety.com/editorial-board/>

Submission Guidelines: <http://pintersociety.com/submission-guidelines/>

Call for Papers: <http://pintersociety.com/call-for-papers/>

Lapis Lazuli

All Open Access articles published by LLILJ are available online, with free access, under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial License as listed on

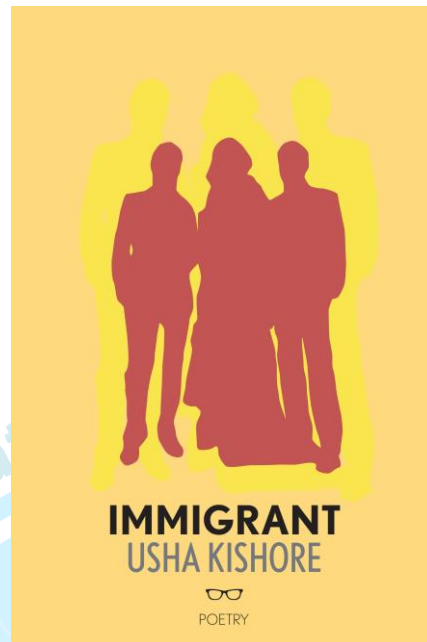
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Individual users are allowed non-commercial re-use, sharing and reproduction of the content in any medium, with proper citation of the original publication in LLILJ. For commercial re-use or republication permission, please contact

lapislazulijournal@gmail.com

Imagined borderline and the self: Mapping the life of an Immigrant

Madhumita Majumdar

***Immigrant***

By: Usha Kishore
 London, Eyewear Publishing Ltd, 2018
 ISBN 978 -1-912477-08-1
 PP 79| PB £10.99

To the immigrant, one of the primal challenges is adapting to a different culture. Homi K. Bhabha rightly pointed out in his book *The Location of Culture* that immigrants can end up in an in-between stage between cultures (1994, 313), and that they develop hybrid cultural identities. Usha Kishore who grew up in India acknowledges this in-between space in an interview that was published in *The Hindu* on 4th Nov, 2015: “The common threads to my poems are postcolonial elements, feminism, myth, nostalgia and exile. I cannot write as the English do; my narrative is different. I carry my culture with me, my language is hybrid; ‘Indian-ness’ permeates my work.” Naturally, she ends up portraying this dual identity in one of her poems in the volume *Immigrant*:

I have no flock,
 No music, no culture,
 For I am not one but two. (*I am not one, but two*, p.13)

It is then natural that she juxtaposes Jupiter and Indra in a poem that she has rightly titled *In-Between Space* revealing her familiarity of the two cultures that is so much

'her' (interestingly both Jupiter and Indra are king of Gods/ thunder albeit in two different cultures):

In fear of Jupiter's thunderbolt and Indra's vajra, gathering
Gemstone legend from the lands you traversed in search
Of a dark entity. (*In-Between Space*, p.17)

On one hand, Kishore is aware the goddess of her land will not be comprehended in her home:

How can I portray you as a goddess here?
They would not comprehend your mini skirt.... (*Kali*, p.63)

But Miles away, the Vedas ring in her mind and is part of her:

Vedas are a distant
Soundtrack woven into my mind.... (*Chanting the Vedas*, p.70)

She remembers the fire mantra that her grandfather had taught:

Behind me are all the mantras
I learnt, piling like firewood,
Waiting to claim me. (*Fire Mantra*, p.71)

True, Usha Kishore's journey is not exclusive – she is part of a phenomenon called 'globalization' that on one hand encouraged movement across countries and continents. On the other, it came nonetheless with the crisis of identity for the 'immigrant'. The 'in-between' space is volatile where one's identity is fluid, where language is not just an elementary tool of communication:

You teach me your language.
I curse in your language. (*Postcolonial Poem*, p.11)
(Interestingly this is a reference to Shakespeare's Caliban)

The politics of the dominant language is an automated thing especially when the immigrant is taken as the natural 'other' in the land of her newly adopted home. Protest when essential often happens in the language of the dominant/ the language of the adopted home. The poet here is excited about her new home but fears the borrowed robes cannot be hers completely. The dilemma is that the immigrant in search of new opportunities has to encounter negotiations of cultures and even language:

A new horizon opens, and I
Dressed in borrowed robes,
Journey into a foreign tongue. (*Journeying into a Foreign Tongue*, p.10)

The language that Kishore writes in is also what she studied in schools and later in her higher education as she grew up in Kerala, India where English happens to be the additional official language. For the educated middle class Malayalee, a mixture of

English and Malayalam is the unmarked code of informal interaction. The role of English as a social divider is perhaps less true today in Kerala than in many other parts of India. This meant that Kishore was part of a social space where English as a language was the spontaneous way of communication. Yet in her new adopted home, she and her language is appropriated:

Restive, my thoughts
 Wait in the wings to appropriate the colonial tongue
 And versify a postcolonial tongue
 And versify a postcolonial *Weltanschauung*. (*Postcolonial Sonnet*, p.15)

A word like ‘Weltanschauung’ only reinforces the idea that her post-colonial status in England looms over her (she is an Indian now residing in a land that colonised India) but this does not mean that she is reluctant in pronouncing her native origin in the new home:

I am bathed in the milk
 Of Sanskrit, clothed in divine raiment, perfumed
 By incense and camphor, drowned in soliloquies
 Of pealing bells. (*East London*, p.21)

And earlier in the same poem, Kishore celebrates her multi-lingual and immigrant self, along with multicultural London:

Winding my way through the maze
 Of languages – Hindi, Bengali, Tamil,
 Urdu, Malayalam – I trespass
 On bold immigrant dreams. (p.21)

Does that mean Kishore will not raise her voice against the former colonial rulers?

Dare I question
 The unrepentant empire? (*Jallianwala Bagh*, p.22)

Usha moved to the United Kingdom in 1989 from her home in Kerala and, then in 1991, moved to the Isle of Man, a place where she happily calls home today. She had gone on record to say that the themes running through the book are issues that she herself faced when she moved to England and that they are still current today for many like her who have left their native land. She put this thought about her poems in an interview: ‘The times covered are contemporary to today.’ (*IOM Today*) Further in the same interview, the poet confesses: ‘The poems in my book are based around anecdotal experience of what I have picked up, and they also touch on things I have personally experienced, such as assimilation into society and discrimination. They also narrate a collective history of South Asians in the UK, their history, their culture and what made them come to UK in the aftermath of colonization. There are number of issues in the

book that need to be addressed, like assimilation and discrimination, diversity.’ The complexity of double identity necessitates that the immigrant assimilates both in the self. Usha Kishore calls our attention to this new self whose culture of assimilation needs not only to be recorded but also be given its due credit:

How can I celebrate being British
And multicultural when the students
I teach mimic my accent in hyperboles?
Am I marginal or peripheral? (*Marginal or Peripheral*, p.19)

And she ends the poem with:

Now the periphery takes up arms:
Guerilla warfare of equality
In bullet points, marginal aesthetics
Of resistance in *Bhangra dances*
And subterranean poetry
In gender coded interlanguage.

What fascinates me is the use of the word ‘bhangra’ in the above quoted poem. Kishore migrated to England at a time when Bhangra music had been re-invented and could be read as the focal point of an incipient British Asian youth culture. Ethnomusicologists have noted that bhangra mixed with Bollywood music was called the Asian dance music in the 90s – this hybridity represented multiculturalism and diversity: a site where the West and the non-West came to form a synthesis. This postcolonial construction is an attempt to gain control of the body that felt ‘othered’ by the State Power as the immigrant. On the other, it is also an attempt to reframe its roots. Preceding this movement, in India dance forms like that of the ‘Devdasi’, ‘tawaif’ had come to be associated with immorality but post- independence there was a conscious effort to foreground the re-invented sanitized form of dance (Srinivasan 1985; Oldenburg 1991). Globalization had appropriated a regional form like ‘bhangra’ onto a larger platform. It also needs to be seen in the reconstructed form as resistance to the dominant cultural ideology of its immigrant’s new home. In a poem like *Doppelganger* Kishore speaks of her experience of having watched a Bollywood film *Paheli* directed by Amol Palekar. Beyond that I wonder if Kishore was using doppelganger (double of a living person) as a metaphor for the immigrant: one who remains nostalgic of one’s roots and the other trying to assimilate into a new geographical as well as cultural space. This complexity is yet again threaded in a poem when Kishore speaks of the first reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*:

Night after night, a restless creature stalks my thoughts
as I lie in bed shivering, windows shut tight and bolted
with garlic; a borrowed crucifix from
threaded to my rosary of tulsi beads.....

(*On the First Reading of Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, p.25)

The immigrant is a powerful voice forging connect between two cultures, it not about being appropriated but also speaking of 'identities'. In the post- modern world, these multiple identities create the much needed homogeneous space. Kishore's voice is undoubtedly one such.

Kishore talks of the crisis that comes with migration. She agrees that assimilation of people into a society different from the native does happen but pockets of discrimination and resistance are an obvious reality:

What shall we call ourselves?
Diaspora, self-exiles, immigrants,
Bastard children of the British Raj?

(*Bastard Children of the British Raj*, p.18)

Post- independence the attitude of the former imperial rulers changed as Nehru declared on 15th August, 1947 India's began her 'tryst with destiny' as a free nation. The 60s saw Indians migrate to Britain: it was the post-World War economic rise of the Island nation, the 70s and 80s slowed the migration and again saw a rise in 1990s with economic bloom and a large number of the people following their relatives/ friends in countries like Britain. If the 90s saw harmonious existence with the large diaspora, the turn of the 21st Century made things very different as migrant asylum, race, ethnicity and multiculturalism once again became central political issues. Therefore when Kishore and others began living in England, it was not an idyllic space of homogenous co-existence or of complete positivity. Here colonial language becomes a metaphor for the immigrant reality:

You are immigrant banter:
Postcolonial, subversive, reactionary.
You are an ageless debate, a shift
Of paradigm, an appropriation
Of language, an in-between space. (*Immigrant Text*, p.33)

Independence in 1947 came with disintegration; it saw the birth of two nations. The space called 'home' stood reconstructed under forced political circumstances. "Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent, as the Holocaust is to the identity among Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence" (Inspired by William Dalrymple's article, "The Great Divide" on the partition of India, 1947, in *The New Yorker*, June 2015) Kishore begins her poem *Partition 1947* with these words of Dalrymple. Somewhere the pain of being a refugee then and now in an alien land invokes a tingling pain:

He mutters prayers
for his helplessness
his sin for survival

like the moon
he has a dark face
the one that he hides (*Refugee Child*, p.35, 36)

In the poem *Partition 1947* (p.41), Kishore begins each of the five stanzas with the refrain: 'this subcontinent is a nation no more no more...' different stanzas speak of the bruises, of betrayal, of blood and violence and a freedom that came with such a heavy price:

.....eternal curse hangs
Upon its people in the poignant cry of an old nation self-immolating
At the altar of freedom..... (p.41)

One of the crises of the diaspora is oscillating between belonging and alienation:

I live on the edge of history and politics
Wallowing in the culture of a distant
Monsoon land. Equality is new rain, here.
I breathe in the old rain, the latticed
Winds of racism and anti-racism. (*Marginal or Peripheral*, p.19)

The pain rants in the lines:

We are the literature of marginalization,
That metamorphoses into alien tongue;
Our metaphors, wandering ghosts of past lives. (*Bastard Children of the British Raj*, p.18)

The experience of immigrants has some homogeneous character. In the poem *In Exile*, Kishore talks of a fellow poet Naomi Shihab Nye who calls herself a 'wandering poet'. Nye, a poet and songwriter was born to a Palestinian father and American mother. She grew up in different places St. Louis, Missouri, Jerusalem, and San Antonio, Texas but considers San Antonio home. Nye suggests that even a small space that feels agreeable can be home away from one's roots. Kishore writes a poem after Nye aptly titled *In Exile* weaves the large collage where she talks of 'Language is the magic carpet/ of their exile' or that longing for 'hot pakoras' and masala tea that reminds one of a different monsoon even as one resides in a different space and a different monsoon!

Is the experience of the immigrant only of alienation and of the periphery? No, there are times when the immigrant writes back, introduces her culture in her new home:

Floating an Indian poet in an English class,
enhanced by sitar music, to be tuned into ears
overflowing with Anglic notes and Saxon beats,
seemed ridiculous at first; but with drumming
heart I read, with dancing eyes, they listen. (*Teaching Tagore to 10 A/S*, P.28)

She celebrates the power and contribution of the immigrant in the adopted home through a poem written after Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian poet, an important instrument in fostering 'new Canadian writing'! Kishore chooses the title of her poem after Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* which chronicles the lives of four people of different ethnicity brought together by circumstances in an Italian villa!

The picture of Shakespeare's Caliban comes up quite a few times in this volume of poems of my discussion. Caliban, the slave, the colonized man protests against his master in the very language taught to him by his master. Her writing of resistance is filled with powerful punch:

When I say I am human, like you,
You get lost in the dual labyrinths
Of nature and culture. (Fussy *Militant Rebel*, p.43)

What is fascinating is the use of the dominant language though the voice and the thoughts are self-conscious and independent; she deliberately breaks the grammar construction when she allows Caliban to talk. What is natural cannot be the result of human intervention while culture can be seen as antidote to our wildest natural tendencies, through Caliban that 'in-between space' (nature is oft the colonized and the colonizer the culture) is wonderfully portrayed.

Kishore talks of bitter experiences of the immigrant naturally. The racial slur 'Paki' was probably coined in the 60s where immigration from South Asian nations increased. The term did not target a particular nation but largely South Asian immigrants. The 70s and 80s saw violent attacks opposed to immigration known as "Paki-bashing", which targeted and assaulted people and premises of people of South Asian origin as well as ethnic minorities. So late 80s when Kishore arrived in England, she too must have felt the hate that leaves her angry:

You want me to grin and bear
Your affectionate connections
With the Paki corner shop.
I demand an apology.
You dub me militant. (Fussy *Militant Rebel*, p.43)

And then she lays claim to her individuality / her identity / the identity of her people/ immigrants:

We ain't no more Paki mate
our desi tycoons

In your poshest Kensington
wooing you in steel and style

Our desi doctors

wandering the corridors

Of your NHS, in A & E,
in Cardiology, delivering your

Babies, saving your lives,
keepers of your island health

(*We ain't no more Paki Mate*, p.56)

Presently, Kishore is deep into translating Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara*. As a translator she wishes to: 'speaking in parables to synods/ of dreamers, igniting their visions with syllabic fire.' (*Translator*, p.66) What is interesting is that the said poem is dedicated to Ralph T.H. Griffith (1826–1906) an English Indologist, and among the first Europeans to translate the Vedas into English. On his retirement, he had settled in Kotagiri, in the Nilgiri Districts of then Madras. Kishore through her translation wishes to re-introduce the rich heritage she has been part of – it's a mellifluous circle; assimilation at its contagious best! She also provides a note at the end of the volume introducing words from her culture to her readers in England.

The whole concept of post-colonialism and attitudes towards it and ideas held by post-colonials themselves, are finely studied, portrayed and most of all 'lived' in this volume of poetry. *You and Me* is again one of the poems that showcases this interaction between the host and immigrant post-colonials: 'You admire my Benares silk saris, my ethnic/ silver jewellery and smile at my love for your poetry' (p 14) – this probably sums up the spirit of the volume of poetry. And as reader the effect of her poetry I think would be best described (again I borrow from Kishore): 'narrative that haunts me day in and day out' (*Chanting the Vedas*, p.70).

WORKS CITED

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. 1994. London: Routledge, 2004

<https://www.thehindu.com/books/usha-kishores-latest-collection>.

'Poet Usha Kishore reads from her new book, 'Immigrant': IOM Today, 23rd June, 2018.

REFERENCES

Oldenburg, Veena. 1990. *Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow*, India. *Feminist Studies* 16(2): 259–87.

Srinivasan, Amrit. 1985. *Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance*. *Economic and Political Weekly* 20(44), 1869–1876.

BIO-NOTE

Madhumita Majumdar, PhD (University of Jadavpur, India) is an Assistant Professor in English at Bhangar Mahavidyalaya (affiliated to Calcutta University) Bhangar, 24 Paraganas (S), West Bengal, India has been teaching at the college for 16 years now. Her areas of interest are Victorian Literature, Indian Writing in English with inclination towards Dalit Literature. She has presented papers at national and international seminars and has articles to her credit in reputed journals and books.

E-mail id: madhu_majumdar@hotmail.com

