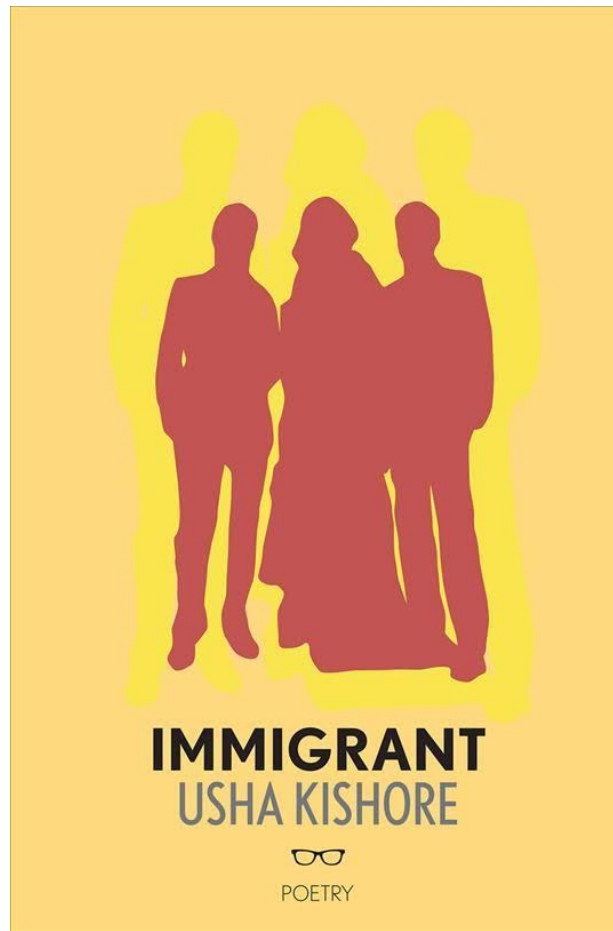


**“Marginal aesthetics of resistance”:  
Race and Resistance in the Poetry of Usha Kishore**

**Prasun Maji, Ph.D. Research Scholar**



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**Abstract**

Thematically Usha Kishore's poetry dwells on both India and the UK. Her poems explore the history of postcolonial India, the traumatic history of the Partition, Indian gods and goddesses, Indian spirituality, Indian culture, lifestyle and so on, and at the same time, her experiences as an Indian immigrant in Britain— homelessness, alienation, hybridity, racism or racial discrimination, multiculturalism and last but not the least, marginalisation and the sense of otherness. Her poetry argues that the lives of the South Asian immigrants in Britain are haunted by the discourse of race –

a concept that is founded on biological difference, culture, colour, religion and nationality. Critics like Avtar Brah, Paul R. Lehman and Peter Ratcliffe note that the discourse of race is a marker of power-relation. So, it can be argued that 'race', like any other power-relation, suggests inclusion and exclusion, union and division. This article argues how Usha Kishore represents her experience of racial marginality as a woman of colour in Britain and how she poses resistance against racial discrimination through her poetry.

**Keywords:** Usha Kishore, immigrant, race, marginalisation, power-relation and resistance.

## Introduction

In her interview with Sutapa Chaudhuri, Usha Kishore, a highly acclaimed British poet of Indian descent, argues that as a diasporic writer, she carries with her many group identities, such as, "Indian woman writing in English, diasporic Indian woman writing home and ethnic minority woman writing from the imperial centre" ("I, the dark woman, in the trajectory of your consciousness: Indian born British Poet Usha Kishore in Conversation with Sutapa Chaudhuri", 6). The poetry of Usha Kishore encompasses the two worlds— both India and the UK, exploring multifarious themes and motifs. Whereas she explicates the British India and its postcolonial history, Indian myth, legends, culture, cityscape, the holy scriptures, the Indian Partition and so on, she also expounds her diasporic experience in Britain as an Indian teacher teaching English in the British academia, an Indian poet crafting poetry in English and above all, as a diasporic subject. As a first-generation Indian immigrant, she is shocked to encounter racism or racial discrimination in Britain, and she takes poetry as the best mechanism to demonstrate her experiences as a racially marginalised woman. In the same conversation, she acknowledges that her poetry "reflects my life, my experiences, multiculturalism, women's rights and my reactionary stance of racism" (5). It is interesting to note that through her poetry, she arouses the issues of racial subjugation and marginality and at the same time, she attempts to shatter and batter the discourse of race which tries to impose upon her the stigma of the other. In another interview with the renowned poet and academician Sunil Sharma, she assures that her poetry has been regarded as "*reactionary*, postcolonial, multicultural and of course, *militant*" ("Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore", n.pag; emphasis added). This paper proposes to show how Usha Kishore, the poet, represents the discourse of race which "remains a sort of catch-all term for 'the other'" (Ratcliffe 24) and how she tries to resist and subvert the discourse from within.

## Discourse of 'Race' and Politics of Exclusion

An exploration of the concept of race has resulted in certain disagreement and disputation among the researchers. Scientists like Stephen Oppenheimer have accepted ethnic and cultural differences among human beings but denied the idea of multiple races (Lehman 2). But the theorists of critical race studies assume a different idea of race from that propagated by the scientific community (Ratcliffe 2004; Cashmore 2004; Lehman 2009). Prof. Lehman opines:

To European Americans when the word race is used, the last image that comes to mind is European American. The reason for this is European Americans do not consider themselves as a race of people, they consider themselves to be just simply people, normal people. All non- European people are considered members of a race.  
(1)

Lehman's arguments of the simultaneous presence of different races, therefore, repudiate and replace Oppenheimer's study of race that speaks about "a single, common lineage" (Barzan, qtd. in Lehman 1). A reading of the varied opinions of the academicians and researchers claims that there is "no

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

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other concept in the social world which, despite being devoid of scientific validity, has nevertheless retained a hegemonic position in public consciousness (Ratcliffe 15).

Despite variance in opinions among the scholars centring around the disputative concept of race it “still acts as apparently ineradicable marker of social difference” (Brah 95). Race is, therefore, considered as “a social construct” (Ratcliffe 20; Cashmore 334). Race always carries with it an undertone of superiority and inferiority. It results in separation and division. Ashley Montagu is disturbed by the problematic connotations race bears with it and its aftermath upon people’s way of life. He, therefore, suggests that the word ‘race’ should be superseded by the words like ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethnicity’ (Lehman 2) as he declares that race is “man’s most dangerous myth” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 15).

It cannot be denied that in the European countries and in America, race predominantly deals with the colour of the skin. Apart from the skin colour, race or racism is also based on nationality, religion and culture. Lehman says that the English believes that ancestry is a major factor in determining race (3). The black-white dualism has, therefore, left crucial impact upon race. In the European countries, the colour ‘white’ is acknowledged as a marker of “*normality, Christianity, privilege, superiority*” (Lehman 9; emphasis added). So, it can be argued that its contested or rather opposite word, the colour ‘black’ denotes non- Christianity, inferiority and people who cannot enjoy their normality. In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah has portrayed a picture of the South Asian and African-Caribbean immigrants in Britain in the post-World War II period. She describes the treatment that the South Asians and African-Caribbeans were bound to go through as ‘coloured people’. To quote:

...the African-Caribbean and Asian groups experienced the racialisation of the gendered class positioning through a racism which foregrounded their ‘non-whiteness’ as a common thematic within the discourse of ‘coloured people’. Although the precise ways in which these heterogeneous sets of people were racialised were not identical, the condensation of the binary white/ non-white in this discourse constructed equivalence and similarity of experience, as they faced racist practices of *stigmatisation, inferiorisation, exclusion, and/or discrimination* in arenas such as employment, education, housing, media, the criminal justice system, immigration apparatus and the health services.

(Brah 96-97; emphasis added)

It cannot be denied that even though there is cultural difference between the South Asian and African-Caribbean immigrants, the treatment that they perceive in Britain is almost the same and it is because of their non-whiteness. The colour ‘black’ is a political term which “constitutes a political subject inscribing politics of resistance against colour-centred racisms” (Brah 97). The concept of black cannot be read from the essentialist point of view because it is difficult indeed to ignore cultural specifications or cultural particularities among the South Asians and African-Caribbeans. But at the same time, the colour ‘black’ is the concept that brings together Asians and African-Caribbeans or all the non-white communities under the same shade to form a political unity against racial discriminations that they face in the European countries and the USA in almost all the spheres of their lives.

In race studies, the concept of Eurocentricity has been questioned because it has given birth to hegemony in all forms of cultural and political practice. This hegemony is still playing a significant role in “identifying, categorising and classifying fauna, flora and peoples, asserting its ‘scientific neutrality’ while marking hierarchies of ‘race’, class and gender” (Brah 218). The concept

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

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of Eurocentricity, like any other hegemonic enterprise, camouflages racial prejudice or discrimination which is responsible for the marginalisation of the coloured people. In his book *'Race' Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining the Inclusive Society*, Prof. Ratcliffe attempts to “explore the social significance of ‘race’ discourse because perceived differences take a *hierarchical* form and provide the basis for *exclusionary behaviour*” (15; emphasis added). In other words, under the garb of “scientific neutrality” (as mentioned earlier), the discourse of race denotes the hierarchical superiority of the west to the people of non-western origin, thereby resulting in the exclusion of the latter. Even the non-western and non-white women encounter a different reality. Brah interrogates the limitation of feminist studies which fails to include the issue of the women of colour. In other words, within feminism, too, we can locate a mode of exclusion. The concept of racism is “neither reducible to social class or gender nor wholly autonomous” (Brah 110). To put it otherwise, the concept of race, in many cases, is related to class and gender. So, it can be argued that within the discourse of race, a white woman can enjoy certain privileges because of the superiority attached to her whiteness, whereas a black woman goes through double marginalisation due to her gender and her non-whiteness.

Brah claims that the proposition of diaspora space depends on “a multi-axial performative notion of power” (239). Race is not an abstract idea; rather, it is a matter of performance. The Asian and African-Caribbean diasporic subjects engage themselves in a power-relation with the Europeans and Americans who feel racially superior due to their whiteness. This racial superiority of the Europeans and the white Americans leads them to suppress and oppress, dominate, marginalise and exclude the coloured people who are regarded as hierarchically inferior in the power-structure. Ratcliffe rightly declares that race is, in the ultimate analysis, “an indication of power” (16).

### **Racial Marginality in Usha Kishore’s Poetry**

Most of the poetry of Usha Kishore, especially those depicting her life as an immigrant in Britain, emanates from her experiences as a woman of colour. She can locate that racism engulfs each and every aspect of the lives of the immigrants in Britain. Césaire thinks that racism is the “European disease of colonialism” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 20). In her conversation with Sutapa Chaudhuri (as discussed in the Introduction of this article), Kishore says that she “discovered postcolonial angst, here in the UK” (3). Her own view of racism can be studied from her reply to the interviewer Sunil Sharma’s question regarding the racial problem in Britain, as she says:

Racism is not a political shibboleth in Britain. It is a living and breathing monster. Having worked in this country, I have faced racism in various avatars: verbal abuse, institutional racism, implied racism, racial stereotyping *et al.* A lot of work still needs to be done to eradicate racism from British society. The situation has improved, but recently the successes of South Asians, especially the Indian diaspora in the UK has created a lot of resentment within a considerable section of the host population and this has led to a lot of heart breaks for the Indian community. (“Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore”, n.pag)

In her poem “You and Me”, Kishore highlights how under the garb of the concept of ‘multiculturalism’, the white British people show their social discrimination or racism which is “aimed at denying members of certain groups equal access to scarce and valued resources” (Cashmore 345). British multiculturalism is constituted by the migration of people from the former British colonies like South Asian and African countries to Britain to work especially in the low-waged labour market. But this British multiculturalism cannot be described as a melting pot where people/immigrants from different races can assimilate or integrate themselves. Brah assures that in the 1960s Britain, colour

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“acted as a significant additional barrier” (225). In this poem Kishore describes how British political parties crave for support (vote) in the time of elections but refuse to show any interest to the South Asian immigrants when they claim integration that suggests equal opportunities in Britain in spite of racial difference and cultural dissimilarity, as she says that they “...do a disappearing act/ when I speak of integration” (14). Even though they speak about “the brotherhood of man” (14), they inscribe on their walls— “*Paki, go home*” (14; italics in original). Cashmore says that the “racial discrimination may range from the use of the derogatory labels” (345). ‘Paki’ is the term used by the British community to label the South Asian immigrants, whereas they define people of African descent as ‘nigger’. It cannot be doubted that the concept of multiculturalism is used to conceal racial prejudice that the coloured people face in Britain.

In another poem “Marginal or Peripheral”, the hollowness of multiculturalism becomes clear when the poet questions her own existence and her identity as an immigrant:

How can I celebrate being British  
and multicultural when the students  
I teach mimic my accent in hyperboles?  
Am I *marginal or peripheral*? (19; emphasis added)

The poet is conscious of her marginal identity that she culminates through her teaching experiences. She declares that she cannot enjoy her hyphenated identity. She fails to celebrate her multicultural identity because her racial identity makes her feel otherness. She continues:

Equality is the new rain, here.  
I breathe in the old rain, the latticed  
winds of racism and anti-racism.  
In swirling mists, I recall *grimaces*,  
*harsh word and jibes reserved*  
*only for the marginal or the peripheral.* (19; emphasis added)

The grimaces, cruel word and epithets and jibes or mocking tones that she experiences as a teacher from the white European students intensify her marginality. In her interview with Sunil Sharma (as already mentioned), she says that she has written this poem as “a reaction to what I was going through: to what I think was a race-related harassment at the workplace” (n.pag, emphasis added).

Her poem “Fussy Militant Rebel” depicts how the European society forces to check and choke the voice of a woman of colour. Whenever the poet attempts to speak against the politics of exclusion (“You want me to be invisible”), the British society categorises her as fussy or fastidious, militant or aggressive and rebel or mutineer. The European society wants to erase her very existence. The poet marks this differentiation:

I play by your rules,  
but you call me *names*,  
for I am *your other; your*  
*reflection in a dark mirror,*  
*your consciousness in colour.*  
I am Caliban, you want to tame me,  
I am the exotic, you want to taste me.  
When I say I am human, like you,

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you get lost in the dual labyrinths  
of nature and culture. (43; emphasis added)

Usha Kishore accentuates the argument that before the British eyes, a South Asian is always considered as the other and the inferior. The word 'dark' hints at the black skin colour of the South Asian people in general but most possibly, it also points out the darkness of the British society lying underneath.

This sense of being marginalised pervades a number of her poems. In "Bastard Children of the British Raj", she affirms that the new pedagogues like her are "the literature of marginalisation" (18). In both "Bastard Children of the British Raj" and "Where Do I Belong?", she expresses her failure as an immigrant to discover home in Britain. Her poem "Teaching Tagore to 10A/S", narrates her teaching experience in a British school where she introduces Tagore, an Indian poet, to the European students and "attempt(s) multiculturalism" (28), but at the very next moment, the doubts and awkward reactions of the littluns show that multiculturalism is a facade or rather a mask -- "Multiculturalism, with/ a wry smile, thunders down" (29). The connotations attached to the discourse of race force her to go through hard times, devoid of great expectations which result in her experience of identity crisis.

### **Resistance against the Discourse of Race**

In her poems depicting her diasporic experiences in the UK, Usha Kishore focuses on the overshadowing impact that the discourse of race has left upon all the immigrants, especially upon those coloured ones. As a poet, Kishore thinks that it is her duty to resist the discourse of race. What attracts the readers is that she takes English, the language of the Europeans to subvert the racial discourse of the Europeans. In the course of his interaction with Kishore, Sunil Sharma marks this basic reality of Kishore's poetry when he tells her, "The most distinct feature of your poetry is that you can disrupt the whole discourse from within" ("Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore, n.pag.). In other words, while she is living within the discourse, she is trying, at the same time, to pose her resistance against the same discourse. It has already been discussed that race is a marker of power-relation that causes domination of the South Asians and African-Caribbean immigrants by the Europeans in the UK, but it can also be argued:

...power is not always constituted but is produced, and reiterated and challenged, through its exercise in multiple sites. Its effects may be oppressive, repressive, or suppressive, serving to control, discipline, inferiorise and install hierarchies of domination. Yet on the other hand, power is also at the heart of cultural creativity, of pleasure and desire, of subversion and resistance. Power is the very means for challenging, contesting and dismantling the structures of injustice. (Brah 239)

So, the concept of power or power-relation is not fixed at all; rather, the people at the margin can come to the centre by challenging, resisting and subverting the discourse of race that gives supremacy to the Europeans.

Kishore endeavours to throw away the stigma of racially marginalised identity. She attempts to dismantle the hegemony. In her poem "Marginal or Periphery", this idea of resistance is argued when she declares:

Now the periphery invades the centre  
and rewrites history in smudged margins,

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like mischievous schoolboys, who abuse  
their teachers in obscene drawings  
on the margins of dog-eared exercise books  
and on the dark walls of their adolescent minds. (19)

Here the expression “mischievous schoolboys” (19) refers to the non-white immigrants like the poet herself who live in the margin or the periphery and the Europeans are represented as “teachers” (19). Through this metaphorical representation, Kishore reiterates the concept of Brah about the construction and reconstruction of power-relation, as discussed above.

Even though the labels like fussy, militant and rebel have been attributed upon the resistant immigrants like Usha Kishore, the outcry against racial discrimination is reverberated when Kishore announces:

I want to be seen!  
I want to be heard!  
I want to be thought of!  
I demand non-stop.  
I get my difference, my  
apology, my acknowledgement!  
...  
Somewhere in me lurks  
a spirit that haunts you  
day in and day out.  
My atavistic wounds  
would not heal otherwise. (“Fussy, Militant, Rebel”, 43-44)

In another poem “We Ain’t No More Paki Mate”, the poet argues that in almost all the significant fields like medicine, politics and last but not the least, academics, the people from the Indian subcontinent play important roles, thereby causing interruption in the European authoritative power that has dominated and subjugated the South Asians for a long period. Besides, the honours and awards won by the *desi* poets who appropriate “imperial tongue” (57) and the study of *desi* writers like Kalidasa, Tagore and many more and lectures delivered by the *desi* scholars in the British academia challenge the hierarchical superiority of the Europeans. In Usha Kishore’s poetry, we can mark an optimistic note for the South Asian immigrants, and she assures that it can be achieved by one’s effort to break the stereotypical images of predominance of the Europeans in the name of race.

## Conclusion

A scrutiny of the poetry of Usha Kishore shows how the hyphenation of identity can appear as a cumbersome burden to the diasporic subjects. She opines that the South Asian immigrants cannot integrate themselves in Europe because of the discourse of race or racism that denies “the designated groups access to resources and services” (Cashmore 345) of the country to which they have migrated. But what makes Kishore different from the contemporary diasporic poets is that she aims at questioning and challenging the hegemony that dictates the racial hierarchy, and redefining and reinterpreting power-relation in the diaspora space.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **18:8 August 2018**

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