

ATHANI LANE

{To Prema}

By Usha Kishore

Down that meandering lane that bore us
from childhood to youth, sprinkled
with sand temples, laughter shells
and gossip beads, I walk again, in search
of lost moments. The most poignant
of them all is forgotten friendship.
The truth of this moment is that,
in our fulfilled womanhoods, we have
lost each other in a maze of husbands,
children and continents that do not speak.
Plaited into my thoughts is the fragrance
of jasmine blooms and twilight shadows
sketching the sway of coconut palms.

GANGA DROWNING BABY

{after Raja Ravi Varma's painting}

Through the centuries, she stands at the water's edge,
river woman drowning child after child, while he falters
helplessly in the background, under the tinted *chroma*

of a darkening sky. Hand raised imploringly, he pleads
in vain. He is an abstraction, highlighting her nonchalant
repoussoir, immersing a cherubic baby in aqua tints.

With a wayward smile, hair melting into the horizon,
she glances back at him, extracting promises, altercation
that she has borne the seven *Vasus*, celestial beings

and drowns them one by one, redeeming them from some
wayward earthly curse. The seven infant boys, she drowned,
have cursed this nation and now they wander in hospital corridors,

in birth rooms, in dark alleys of the mind, murdering multitudes
of bewitched infant girls, redeeming them from the curse
of ancient patriarchal ire. They drown them in milk,

starve them to death, pluck female foetuses, gasping for breath
from their mothers' wombs, like buds, red petals falling, fragile
feminine dreams staining the wailing air, a dowry paid before birth.

They pronounce death sentences in ultra sound, while time
stands still at the water's edge, frozen, helpless, with one hand

in the air, imploring poignantly in canvas precision.

In a nation that worships a mother goddess, the epic curse
of infanticide plagues baby girls, who are drowned again and again
in the simultaneous contrast of virtual icons and stark reality.

{*Ganga drowning baby* is the subject of a Raja Ravi Varma (1848 – 1906) painting. This is the depiction of a story from the Indian epic, Mahabharata; that of King Shantanu and his wife Ganga, who drowns their seven sons in order to redeem them from a curse. Female infanticide in India springs from a preference for male children and the notion that girls are a financial burden on the family, due to the dowry system; this also involves sex selective abortion.}

ORACLE

Rain does not dampen them, lightning does not blind them,
thunderstorms do not deter them from the oracle.

She, a one-time prostitute, who found enlightenment
under a gnarled banyan tree, with roots in the sky.

They bring her their gifts, their hopes, their fears...

It is yet another rainwashed, fragrant, hysterical night.

Nagraj in hiding is exuberant, His eyes lighting up cosmic
chains of earthen lamps. His forked tongue contemplating
the rows of milk bottles, turmeric jars, caskets of eggs,
baskets of sweetmeat and a host of wayward souls...

In and around the wayside thatched cottage, devotees throng in Fiat cars, horse-carts and bicycles, while twilight serpents huddle in corners and lurk in shadows, passing judgement on human follies...

It is the night of the oracle, the night of the serpent king. His entwined, many hooded form, strewn in rice powder, turmeric and saffron, lies dormant in the *tantric* circle under a palm leaf canopy - heady scents of incense, camphor and jasmine flowers entice him in ritual chants, ringing bells and blowing conch shells...

In the lamplight of a distant monsoon night, swaying strains slithering from a *pulluvan veena* summon the serpent of the mind, who carries the world on his head. Dowsed in the scent of areca flowers, she crawls, hisses, writhes and with unravelled hair, dances in ophidian trance to the beat of the hourglass drum. A deep masculine voice overpowers her frail femininity: *Those who come to me shall not leave empty handed ...*

Caught between vibrant myth and fragile life, the euphoric crowd raises suppliant hands to the old woman, who becomes the serpent king in crepuscular light. In undulating frenzy, He exorcises evil spirits, promises bridegrooms for unmarried girls, guarantees jobs for unemployed postgraduates, underwrites debts and annihilates enemies - for me, the bemused passerby, He predicts exile, solitude and sojourn in distant lands...

Pulluvan Veena - A one-stringed folk violin, used to invoke the snake gods by the members of the Pulluvar community of Kerala.

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Bio:

Indian born Usha Kishore is an award winning British poet, writer and translator. 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. Usha was shortlisted for the *Erbacce Poetry Prize*, UK in 2012 and won the *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry Competition*, UK in 2013 and was highly commended in *The Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition*, Ireland in January, 2014. 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 *dplotcom*, 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 India, later this year. Usha is now working towards her second Poetry Collection.

Website: www.ushakishore.co.uk