

# Kavita's Review of *Immigrant* by Usha Kishore, The Lake Journal

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*"Without this exile, I am no one."*



Usha Kishore dives head-first into the cavernous experience of being an immigrant and everything the tag carries with it, both in her interior and exterior world. She inhabits both worlds simultaneously, as we all do, examining from different angles this experience – a person who resides on an island that is for all purposes, English; a person who is imprinted with memories of another place, and who oscillates between belonging and alienation.

She explores this internal schism in detail – “alien” is a word she uses often in this book: alien land, alien tongue, she refers to it being not her ‘home-born land’, ‘not her language or mantras’ yet concludes that she is an alien everywhere.

This feeling of not-quite-belonging is well understood by writers generally and of course, many immigrants, even those who are contentedly ‘integrated’. I use the word integrated advisedly (what a word for human beings) but I suppose it conveys the meaning that the customs and culture of the land of residence has been adopted.

I am an immigrant too, but perhaps because I was uprooted often in my childhood or because I moved from one urban city to another - London; and also from a liberal outlook in my upbringing to a cosmopolitan oasis (has anyone described London in such glowing terms?) I have never felt a conflict between old self/new self or past/present. From a young age I attempted to speak three or more languages, I was happy to listen to music of all kinds, Indian popular music or English pop/rock, Indian classical or Western classical. There was a place for all of these in my home. I was also lucky in that I had access to my father's and paternal grandfather's book collections. Again, these books were from all over the world. But only in the English language, which is something I felt regret about much later in life.

Reading Usha's collection has made me reflect that perhaps my own experience of immigration is coloured by my temperament and my background, and perhaps I'm fortunate not to feel conflicted. But I, too, am a foreigner everywhere. I don't necessarily fit in. I'm fine with that.

In ‘Immigrant’ the poet puts in hard labour to understand and scrutinize all the facets of her position and also of that loaded word. She explains with scrupulous honesty the conundrum of being from Elsewhere and also from Here.

Anyone who has moved away from the place they grew up can relate to this feeling, but in a very particular way for South Asians or other migrants from afar who have

made bigger leaps of continents, cultures and languages, this collection will create those I-know-just-what-she-means moments of familiarity.

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'. You and Me is one of the poems that showcases this interaction between host and immigrant post-colonials. After all, it's not just the immigrants who are navigating a post-colonial world, the former-colonials are too. Usha can command a wry tone, while enjoyably reciting colonial history as in the brilliant 'We Ain't No More Paki Mate'.

Goddesses show up of course, sprinkled through the book in many forms as deities viewed, remembered, imagined. In several poems the notion of being a woman crops up too, the meaning of it, and what 'womanhood' entails in particular. Words are carefully chosen and carefully put together, as you would expect, but occasionally the prolific use of more unusual words when simpler ones would do halts the poetic ease of a poem and detracts from its lyricism. The poems work best when they wear their learning lightly, when description is subordinate to the thrust of the poems and not an end in itself.

East London, for example, is a poem where the descriptive bon-mots flow into each other to make an engaging whole and the piece ends with perfect intrigue:

*A handsome young god,  
alighting on peacock-back, welcomes me with open arms: Yamirukka  
bhayamen?  
Why fear when I am here?*

Usha does question whether she, the narrator, is Marginal or Peripheral but ultimately it is the narrator's elegant expression of dichotomy and restlessness in an unsettled persona, who is nonetheless accepting of her situation, that holds centre stage in this book.

*But I am not lost, I am not alone,  
I am not afraid. My past seeps  
into my present; my future,  
a strange mixture of magic  
and realism.  
I am not one but two.  
India bleeds in my veins; England  
paints my feathers with her mists.*

## **Kavita A. Jindal**

To order *Immigrant* [click here](#).

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Kavita A. Jindal is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in literary journals and anthologies in the UK and around the world. Her short stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and her poems on Zee TV and European cultural radio stations. She is the author of Raincheck Renewed, published to critical acclaim by Chameleon Press. She is the co-founder of 'The Whole Kahani' – a collective of British Asian writers. She also serves as Senior Editor at Asia Literary Review. <https://kavitajindal.com>