



**Diasporic Traits of Travel, Place, Cities and Home in Usha Akella's Poem
*The Rosary of Latitudes***

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Abstract

Usha Akella, a poetess from Indian Diaspora in America showcases in her poetry, the loss of her homeland due to enforced migration and exhibits the original exilic resonances of diasporic experience. 'Travel' and 'Place' in her poem "The Rosary of Latitude" is a dynamic factor that allows moving between the present and the past. The poem depicts the beauty of landscapes of her homeland and physical spaces that are seen apparently solid and unchangeable. It is through them or around them that social action in the poem develops and identity is also constructed. The paper focuses on issues of 'Travel', 'Place', 'Cities' and 'Home' as a significant feature of diaspora studies to understand the formation of vernacular identities, ethnic clustering and conflict in particular neighbourhood.

Key words: travel, place, city, homeland, diaspora, , latitude

The poets of Indian Diaspora mostly explore the world in which they move constantly towards the land of origin and the land of their adaptation. With their poetic imagination, they create a new another home. In the process of creating a new space in alien homeland, the diaspora innovator remains a constant traveller and seen as a philosophical nomad. The essence of their way of life culminates in search and exertion as an organic inner aspect of their creative life and its fulfilment connected with their homeland. Poetry in English, written by both native and non-native speakers, has acquired a prestigious position on the global scenario. In fact, Poetry embodies ideas and experiences of human being in the subtlest way. The experience of diasporas in poetry, as described by Gur-Ze'ev that:

"The Diasporic individual, in exile from his 'home', any home, cannot escape by means of poetry from building one, but can use it to dismantle its confining walls, express solace, strive for creativity and discover love. Poetry may provide one of the most creative potential tools of Diasporic philosophy, love and creativity being its cornerstones. (Gur-Ze'ev, 2005 13-14),

Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi established their sovereign in the area of Indian diasporic poetry. Among the Indian Diasporic poets of wide acclaim, Usha Akella is one of the prominent names on the canvass of Diasporic poetry. Usha Akella is a pioneer of new immigrant writing, voice of Diasporas from the world, especially the Third World in (North) America. She is an Indian born American Poet, a very distinguished and eye-catching literary writer of first generation diaspora.

Her working is clustered with the feelings of dislocation, migration, exile, alienation and rootlessness. She has received substantial critical attention from all the corners of the globe. Keki Daruwalla, asserts that Usha Akella's works primarily focuses on the encounters of place after place. In one of the forewords, Keki Daruwalla comments,

"If you are writing 'travel poetry' then you need, apart from acute sensitivity, a handful of varied talents: empathy, a feel for people and place, and the alchemy of language to go with it to transform the place into something else. Usha Akella (if one has to call her a writer of travel poetry) is blessed with most of these attributes." (Goodreads Authors)

There is a scope of studying the diasporic experiences penned down by her on multiple aspects. Especially, poetry by women writers provides meanings and above all, a basis for discussion as they always use it as a vehicle to oppose and challenge patriarchal domination. It is a static assumption that a woman, though equally capable as their 'the other self' and their outlook are being essentially different from that of men. Yet their work is regarded as complementary and supplementary to the work by men. Among all the literary movements, it is 'women's movement' which passed through and reached a culmination, a phase where their attention turned inwards and lead to self-discovery. This search for identity is reflected in the writings of the contemporary women poets. While answering how women poems are different with that of men, Usha Akella in her interview with Jhilaam Chattaraj quotes "perhaps women's poetry has a way of pulling the world inward and men's poetry goes outward—not that it is superficial, but it culminates outside." (Akella)

Usha Akella has penned four books on poetry, one chapbook, and scripted/produced two musical dramas. She earned a Master of Studies (Mst) in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge, UK. A young diasporic Poet, Usha Akella step out with her first collection of poems *Kaali Dances So Do I* (Authors & Writers, India Ltd., 2000) is one among her magnanimous poetry collections.

The brilliant book was greatly praised for her deep sensibility to celebrate her life. She employs the myth of *Kali* in this poem with her creative conviction. With a wide global acclaim of her poems, they have been translated into several languages. Akella's works contains echoes of memory and nostalgia for the past. These emotions hold a significant place in the works of Indian diasporic literature. The memory and the nostalgia of the landscape, affinity for the places and people in India left a deep impact on Usha Akella during her stay in US. Her poems are mostly evolved in a circular winding pattern where Akella's consciousness that appears to oscillates between India and United States.

Akella's Second Collection of poems is *A Face That Does Not Bear the Footprints of the World* (Monsoon Editions, 2008). It is a very wonderful and mature piece of work. This beautiful collection of poem explores Akella's vision of life and love that is meticulously blended into spiritual concerns with the social reality. She wrote the musical, *Ek: An English Musical on the Life of Shirdi Sai Baba* (Sterling, 2011). This influential book is inspired from her deep devotion towards Shirdi Sai Baba, an Indian spiritual master. Many Indian devotees regard him as fakir (vagabond) and manifestation of Sri Dattaguru, a paradigmatic Sannyasi (monk). She is a regular visitor of Shirdi Temple and is very much fascinated to watch the Sai serial. Her devotion towards Sai Baba instigated her literary sensibility to compose this musical piece of work. She looks up this work not simply as her creative collections, but to her it is a *Sadhana*, Meditation. Usha Akella's magnanimous book, *The Rosary of Latitudes* (2016), is a collection of poetry and prose writings based on travel and poetic discovery. One of her poem titled "Rosary" from her collection of the book *The Rosary of Latitudes* is read as a poem of meditation on diasporic theme of place and placelessness which is evoked through the senses, history, language, memory and imaginations. The diasporic experiences that she depicts in her poetry unravel the doors of discovery. Her last poetry book, *The Waiting* was published by Sahitya Akademi, (India's highest literary authority) in 2019 followed

by the Mantis Editors, Mexico edition in Spanish translated by Elsa Cross.

The poem, "The Rosary of Latitudes" talks a lot about India—its places, cultures, religion through the eyes of a child, a young woman, and a mother. It explores the intense inner space of diasporic individuals. Her collection of poem *Rosary of Latitude* serves as a guidepost for the glittering array of poems that take us from country to country, from Macedonia to Israel to India. *The Rosary of Latitudes* comprises of various poems such as "Istanbul," "Kalishta Monastery," "St. Naum," "Monk's Cell," "Dakshineswar 1 and 3," "Nicaragua," "Peddling," "Basilica of G," "Jerusalem," "Gethsemane," "Bethlehem," and "The city in which I find my beloved." These poems are found enchanting for homeland beautifully premeditated with their surprising imagery, unexpected leaps and turns, and astonishing endings. Akella narrate the stories in the poem that are inspired by the place. While dealing with such narration, her imagination reaches beyond any compulsion to describe a place.

Usha Akella's collection of poetry *The Rosary of Latitude* is a gathering of oceanic beads on her Rosary that is excavated from different latitudes in Europe, the Americas, South Asia and Australia. Her poems symbolise the beads collected from different latitude, but connected in one single thread of Rosary thereby discovering a wide spectrum of history, language, memory and imagination that a landscape evokes. The poem, "The Rosary of Latitude" encapsulates the exploration of various places like Turkey, Kolkata and Austin. Usha Akella's Creative adroitness in oscillating between different places brings the world into a single window where one can view her vast labyrinth of diasporic journeys as a mystery she brings the globe and a labyrinth of mystical journeys to us in this volume.

In diaspora studies, 'Travel' and 'Place' is the one most important issue for any discussion of Cities. These issues undoubtedly deal with physical places shaped by social, economic and political forces. It evaluates the process of imaginative construction of these places in writing texts. The

Diasporic Literature refocuses on the metaphor of 'place' and 'placelessness' pertaining to the actual spaces and spatial practices of social diversity around borders. James Clifford, Professor in the History of Consciousness, Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz refers 'diaspora' as "a travelling term". (Eisenberg) John Eade, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Visiting Professor at Toronto University and former Executive Director of CRONEM (Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism) states: "...issue of place and placelessness, since it refers to the links between countries of origin and destination established in many cases by those migrating from the countryside to urban areas in other countries and so cities in particular." (Eade p. 107)

Usha Akella's poem "The Rosary of Latitude" is studied under the concept of 'Travel', 'Place' and 'Cities' which is one of the major aspects of diaspora. Usha Akella, as an Indian diasporic writer has travelled widely. In her poem, "the Rosary of Latitude", the concept of travel is observed:

In one city, I walked hoping to see him
somewhere,

And then I looked in another city,

And another, and another, I returned empty
handed,

There were cities that would not meet my
gaze,

Not one of them told me to stop looking,

Not one of them says it yearns for me,

(Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry II)

In the above text, the poet discloses 'place' and 'placelessness' in the city of alien land surrounded by millions of people. The poet in the text tries to unravel the exilic situation which is an absolute reality observed in diasporic milieu. Usha Akella without reluctance undermines her diasporic consciousness candidly in her poems. Therefore, in one of her interviews with Subramania Iyer, she

declares: "We are poets because we dare to say the unsaid and we hear the unheard...we unlock experience with words" (Iyer) This excellence of writing straightforwardly shows her specialization in writing reality with rupture.

Usha Akella writes poetry irrespective of the geographical location, in her mental landscape. Her consciousness seems to entangle between the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. She deals with the notion of 'place' and 'placelessness' as a tool to rescue from these trapping strings of exile by way of writing poems. The influence of 'Travel' and 'Place' is dexterously exploited by Akella on diasporic life which she depicts with medium of language, rhythm and landscape.

Usha Akella, as a diasporic individual, depicts a deeper connection with her country of origin in her poem, "The Rosary of Latitude". Her Indian ethos towards her homeland display how she is connected physically by her return visits to India, but even more importantly through her poetic creations as seen in the text:

In one city, I saw monuments of loveliness
rise from my imagination
and hover in the twilight like rose tinted
pearls,
(Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry II)

The beautiful landscapes and monuments of Cities of her homeland seem connected to globalizing cities through her poetic creations. The aspect of 'Cities' within the diasporic milieu gives an outlet to develop attachments to multiple homes, contribution to growing 'new ethnicities' and contestations over traditions that is shaped by fusion of cultures.

The 'latitude' as a metaphor of travelling to different cities as shown in the text given below specify the spectrum of different cities and places that the poet travelled specify the relationship between diasporic and other forms of social identification.

And the latitudes passed under my feet like

Skipping ropes under a young girl's quick step

(Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry II),

The text specifies various expressions of cosmopolitan attitude around the world, in the cities of the global South as well as the North. Usha Akella creates her own space in the alien land by fusing the two boundaries of alien land and original land. Her poetry explores the intense inner space of diasporic individuals who is rootless and unrealistic and at the same time trying to create a space in a new third world which is a bridge between the two worlds of original land and foreign land. This may aptly be seen in her description of her experiences in India and America in one of her interviews with Jhilam Chattaraj:

Poetry is the reflection of the centering-self. The journey of consciousness is beautiful whatever the sphere of experience it decides to stop and dip in. There is a kind of alchemy in that process—it shapes things on the outside and its own self. It takes in and pours out, creating a new third, which is an amalgamation or fusion obliterating the boundary of separateness. (Akella)

Usha Akella's poetry in background to create a space in an alien land through 'Travel', 'Place' and 'Cities' impulsively discloses the ways of investigation of Indian diasporic experiences. The collection of *The Rosary of Latitudes* celebrates the progression of contemporary post-colonialism to find a literary history in India. Usha Akella in her poems brilliantly deals with the precision of metaphors. Moreover, she presents to readers common things in an unfamiliar or strange way that gain new ideas and see world differently. Her poem embraces a hope of fulfilment through the nation. Her persistent endeavour of transfiguration and escape from capital's corrosion of communal bonds, finding space for fullness and discovery of her roots articulated by the medium of poetry makes her poetry avidly predictive of present India.

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