

“An Unapologetic Utopian”: Vinita Agrawal in Conversation with Sagar Kumar Sharma

Sagar Kumar Sharma *

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies
New Delhi.

Vinita Agrawal



Vinita Agrawal has authored six books of poetry. Books edited by her include two anthologies on climate change, The Centennial Volume on Nissim Ezekiel - Poet & Father and one on the Kashmiri Poet Ghulam Rasool Nazki. She is the recipient of the Jayanta Mahapatra National Award for Literature 2024, the Proverse Prize Hongkong 2021, the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2018 and the Gayatri GaMarsh Memorial Award for Literary Excellence, USA, 2015. She won a special mention in the Hawkers Prize 2019. Her work was shortlisted for the inaugural Dipankar Khiwani Memorial prize 2021. She co-edits the Yearbook series of Indian Poetry in English. She was former Poetry Editor with Usawa Literary Review. Her work has been widely published and anthologised. She is on the Advisory Board

of the Tagore Literary Prize. She was one of the twenty poets to be featured in a documentary on Asian poets titled Deepest Uprising made in Taiwan. She is a birder and a photographer. www.vinitawords.com

* Interviewer: Sagar Kumar Sharma

Email: dr.sagarkumarsharma@gmail.com

Received 07 Jan. 2025; Accepted 20 Jan. 2025. Available online: 25 Dec. 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



Poetry: *Eartha, Twilight Language, The Natural Language of Grief, Two Full Moons, Words Not Spoken, The Longest Pleasure, The Silk Of Hunger.*

Edited: *Count Every Breath, Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English, Open Your Eyes.*

Sagar Kumar Sharma (S K S): *Thank you for accepting the invitation, ma'am. I would like to begin the discussion with your idea of poetry. What is poetry for you?*

Vinita Agrawal (V A): Poetry is an art form to express deepest thoughts and emotions. When one writes poetry, one almost gets in touch with the subconscious mind. Almost like meditation. Apart from its mystical implications, poetry is also a fine craft. The way a poem is chiseled is as important as what it has set out to say. I believe strongly in the impact of poetry - in its ability to sensitise the readers to a particular issue, in its ability to create awareness regarding certain flaws in society and in its ability to amplify voices on the shortcomings & devaluations in the collective culture of the human race.

S K S: *How did your creative journey begin? What keeps you going?*

VA: I started writing from a very early age. I discovered early in life, my very real fascination with words and the cadence of sound they bring about. Obviously, the kind of poetry at that age was silly and childish. But the inclination to write had asserted itself. Then there was this closet-writer phase in the growing up years. My first mentionable publication was in 1997 when Femina published two of my poems. At that time Kamala Das was editing their poetry page. It meant a lot to me that she had accepted my poems.

S K S: *You have written and published poetry collections of great merit and received critical appreciation from the readers and critics. How do you assess your own development as a poet?*

VA: I used to write instinctively earlier. A hush of emotions or thoughts would provoke me to pick up the pen and write. These days I like to research the subject that I'm writing on. I like to explore a topic in all its dimensions. In other words, I like to spend more time with my poems now while writing them. I stay with them longer. I return to them over and over again before I call them 'finished'. That's one major difference in the process of crafting and conceiving my poems.

S K S: *Climate change has a direct influence on our very existence. You have edited a wonderful anthology on climate change, *Open your Eyes: An Anthology on Climate Change*, could you tell us something about it?*

V A: Climate Change, climate justice, climate silence... call it what you will, is a subject very dear to my heart. We've wreaked havoc on our environment and those who are on the margins of existence- the poor, the vulnerable people must bear the brunt of this catastrophe.

Open Your Eyes as you rightly pointed out is an anthology on the poetry and prose of climate change. It seeks to amplify various aspects of this very real threat to planet earth and the species that inhabit it - whether flora or fauna.

The book belongs to its contributors. All 63 of them who penned incredibly moving and powerful pieces that highlighted one or the other ecological issue.

It was a timely book and resonated well with readers across the globe. It was well received.

S K S: *Does your gender influence your poetry? How?*

V A: When we write we write from our experiences. From all the dots that make us who we are. Our gender is one of those critical dots because it defines who we are. It defines whether we are at a place of privilege or victimisation. There was a time in my writing when gender issues crept into almost all that I wrote. I wrote about patriarchy and biases, vulnerability and defences. Gender underlines my poems in a big way.

S K S: *You have been a practitioner of the art for a fairly long period, what changes do you see in Indian writings in English over the period of time you have been writing and reading poetry?*

V A: Indian poetry in English now offers a wide-angle perspective to Indian society as it has evolved post-independence. While you still have poems addressing the age old issues of divide namely caste, religion, economic disparities etc., contemporary English poetry brings under its arch myriad modern concerns as well. Issues like alienation, identity, belonging, gender, LGBTQ, to name a few. The themes that poetry addresses are not new but the craft certainly is more avant-garde, the outlook wider, more global. Consider for instance, the vast body of the Indian diaspora that writes about finding a foothold and acceptance in a foreign land and looks at its own country with a sense of nostalgia and yearning. Consider in another instance Dalit poetry in India - their poetry is a powerful medium for the community to make its mark in

mainstream society. Look at the vast canon we have in gender literature today in India. It's an awe-inspiring ode to the struggles that women in our country have undergone. I've observed that that Indian poetry has evolved greatly in the past two decades. Poetry is a significant benchmark to measure the evolution of our society itself.

S K S: *How do you balance style and content in a poem? Do you have a preferred style of writing?*

V A: That's a good question. To be honest, content has always taken precedence over form in my writing. A thought well conveyed, using economy of words, without any frills, is in my opinion, an effective way to write poetry. I'd rather do it this way rather than entangle myself with set forms and norms of a poetic form. That's not to say that form should be slighted or overlooked. No way! Tercets, ghazals, pantoums, sonnets, rhymes and others are all charming forms of poetry. And I've dabbled in them at one time or the other. However, I like to keep things simple and focus on the message. Free verses are a great way to do that and that's the form I use most often.

S K S: *You have variously talked about women's issues in your poems, how far do you believe we have travelled on the path of equality? Is there a utopia? How do you perceive it?*

V A: Sometimes I want to call myself an unapologetic utopian. But it's hard to abandon oneself to such labels when there's so much exploitation in society vis-a-vis gender. Society has become so depraved that even young girls, infant girls, are not safe anymore.

Equality is a distant goal. Working women, economically independent women have better bargaining power towards attaining equality with men. But broadly speaking, and particularly in the rural areas, there's a long struggle ahead of women.

I'm not sure if there is a utopia. If there is one, it sure has taken a long, long time in showing itself. Personally, I feel there will always be differences. Physical, economic, cultural etc etc. It's ok to have differences. The important thing is to respect differences and live with them. Problems arise when we exploit differences.

S K S: *You talk about existential crises, in one of your poems, particularly dear to me, titled "Stillness", you offer a solution: stillness. Does poetry help you to figure out the existential*

crises in any way other than the relief received out of having something said, a pain shared, a situation declared?

V A: Thank you. Much of my poetry is existential in nature. Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the purpose of life? Those kinds of things. Poetry has helped me to cut the chaff of these wandering thoughts, so to speak. I won't say that it has provided answers/solutions. But it has peeled off at least a few opaque layers from such questions. It has helped me take a closer look at myself. It has helped in the journey. Without poetry, without that shared pain that you mention, I would have felt stifled. Poetry has made the air lighter.

S K S: *Any current literary engagements that you would like to share with the readers?*

V A: My next manuscript of poems - Twilight Language- is almost ready for publication. I also have a manuscript of Ecopoetry ready which I'm in the process of tweaking and polishing. As an editor, I'm co-editing the next volume of the Yearbook of Indian poetry in English.

S K S: *Who are your favourite poets?*

V A: Several. But to name only a few - Jayanta Mahapatra, Pablo Neruda, Mary Oliver, Pascale Petit, Ranjit Hoskote, Ocean Vyoung, Simon Armitage...

S K S: *What is your message for budding poets?*

V A: Read a hundred poems before you write one. Buy poetry books.

S K S: *Thank you very much, ma'am, for your precious time and efforts. It's been a memorable experience talking to you.*

V A: It's been a pleasure! Your questions were wonderful. Thank you! I'm honoured.