

***HOW'S AND WHY'S OF COLLABORATIVE POETRY***

**By Nalini priyadarshni**

History of collaborative goes back many centuries when poets collaborated with their contemporaries to refine and augment their poetic skills. Development of Renga in Japan and Renku in Chinese could be good examples of collaborative poetry which is as popular today as it was hundreds of years ago. Renaissance poetry in France is marked by 'virtuoso circles' wherein many professional poets would collaborate with their contemporaries and engage with their predecessors. Several anthologies were produced as a result. In modern times, collaborative poetry continue to flourish along with avant garde found poetry, erasure poetry and shape poetry as well as several other modern poetic forms.

There are many types of collaborative poetry involving two or more poets. Thanks to internet and social media, poets don't have to be present at the same place to write a poem together. Epistolary poem-writing is a part of this category along with "in response to" poetry. Translations also fall within the category of collaborative poetry and so does the poetic response to a photograph or a painting. My purpose of writing this article is to share the silent but exciting wave of collaborative poetry sweeping the literary world in the present times and encourage more poets to try this particular form of writing that has proved to be extremely rewarding to me as a poet.

When I first started sharing my poems on Facebook, I didn't have the faintest idea about collaborative poetry. A poet friend, D Russel Micnhimer whom I befriended on Facebook and who is well known for practicing form poetry suggested that we should try writing sedoka.

The Sedoka is an unrhymed poem made up of two three-line katauta with the following syllable counts: 5/7/7, 5/7/7. It can be a standalone poem but frequently written in the form of mondōka (問答歌 dialogue poem dialogue poem between two lovers).

Now, I live in India and Russel lives in Oregon, US and had a job that required traveling so it wasn't possible for us to write at the same time. Moreover, I had not tried any Japanese poetry form other than haiku and therefore, I was both excited and apprehensive at the same time. Over several emails, one sedoka at a time, our first Mondoka emerged. Russel kept it interesting by constantly altering the standard 5/7/7, 5/7/7 pattern with each sedoka. I just followed his lead and the whole experience turned out to be so enjoyable that we decided to repeat it. Here are a few sedoka for your reference.

*Her*

*Verses too fragile*

*For platitude of paper*

*Crave parchment of his broad chest*

*With kohl of her eyes*

*She spins yarns of solitude*

*Into pillow book of love*

*Him*

*Unraveling pages*

*Between old empty covers*

*Feels new dark ink drops*

*Painting fresh squeezed breath*

*On soft mounds of rising suns*

*By brush tip bidden*

*Her*

*They come in waves*

*Lay half forgotten by dawn*

*Dreams stuck in empty covers*

*Fodder for musing*

*Beads of rudraksh slip between*

*Fingers of her compulsion*

Encouraged by the result we also tried Katuata, (片歌, side poem or half poem which dates back to 8th century Japan found in the Manyōshū (the oldest collection of Japanese poetry) and soon enough we had a couple of series. For instance, here are a few katauta-

*You fondly burnish*

*Pieces of my existence*

*Nurture me to flowering*

*Polishing edges*

*Buffing your glistening joy*

*To shimmering reflections*

*Light of our loving*

*Unlock enchanting visions*

*Sweet symphony to twain souls*

*Focus of living*

*Shining key to ecstasy*

*Opens all chests of treasures*

However, not all collaborative poetry we write is premeditated. For instance, I discovered several kinuginu tanka on Russel's page one morning and was so charmed that I decided to find out more about it.

Kinuginu were the exchange waka that lovers exchanged in the morning when they met at the woman's house. Murasaki Shikibu wrote 795 waka in her book **The Tale of Genji** representing them as waka written by the characters of her story.

Soon enough, I replied to his tanka post as a comment which was followed by another tanka by him and soon enough we had a series of kinuginu tanka.

But perhaps the most collaborative poems Russel and I have written which are now part of poetry collection, Lines Across Oceans, are those that fall in the category of "in response to" poems. One of us would post in poetry group we belonged to and the other would come up with another poem as a response. For instance- Russel posted this picture and poem and as a response, I wrote the second part.

*Now you know*

*How I conjured you*

*From amongst*

*Tattered tomes*

*On the poetry shelves*

*Now you know*

*of another conjuring*

*unfolding in another dimension*

*when pen started bleeding*

*slivers of my liver*

*and drunk on desolation  
I tied corners of my dupatta  
in tight knots  
invoked blessing of blue throated god  
I did not believe in  
by denying self of viaticum  
rocked gently on my feet  
chanting soundlessly  
one hundred names of love*

Then sometime we both approached the same topic from different perspectives. The poem may seem to contradict itself but actually the first stanza speaks for the dust and the second, for the drop.

*I am dust  
When drops  
of your love  
splash into me  
we merge  
and rise  
as a crown  
of new born mud  
seeking the firing  
of the sun*

*A forlorn drop*

*I turn into love*

*The moment*

*We embrace*

*Cease all seeking*

*Home at last*

There are a few poems that we wrote together sitting thousands of miles apart. A facebook friend, Sakina Minhaj Shikari, who is an artist and photographer was visiting Sri Lanka and posting breathtaking pictures. As we clicked on those pictures and expressed our wish to visit the beaches someday, imagining started crystallizing into words and before we knew we had a poem. I arranged it into stanzas, doing away with repetitions and sent it to Russel the next day. He chiseled it and gave it final shape.

*Let us quench our thirst with coconut water*

*untangle miscarried quests from wet hair*

*discover lifetimes we missed*

*in crinkles around our eyes*

*our hearts beating to the rhythm of uddekki*

*oblivious to the swaying dancers at twilight*

*(an excerpt)*

Though Russel and I have been collaborating for last couple of years and our writings have now been compiled into a collection titled Lines Across Ocean, we both keep collaborating with other poets and artists too. For instance, I collaborated with Denise Zygadlo for SpringFling, Scotland's Premier Art and Craft Open Studio Event where I wrote a poem for her art. We also write renga with other poet friends in facebook poetry group, The Wordsmiths and each time it fills me with wonder and new enthusiasm.

Collaboration between two poets living miles apart may be rare but not entirely impossible. Another outcome of such collaboration is OM śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ, a superb poetry collection by Jen Walls and Dr. Ram Sharma. In fact, social media has made it easier to connect with like minded people and collaborate across time-zones and nationalities.

There are several other literary journals that invite and encourage collaborative endeavors by writers and artists including The Toad Journal, Duane's Poetree, Whispers in The Wind etc. One can always find interesting and thought provoking collaborative poems there. It wouldn't be off the mark if I say, no other time in the history of literature was as exciting as now for collaborative poetry or fiction and nonfiction.

### **Bio**

Author's info - Nalini Priyadarshni is the author of **Doppelganger in My House (2016)** and co author of **Lines Across Oceans (2015)**. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and international anthologies including Mad Swirl, Camel Saloon, Dukool, In-flight Magazine, Poetry Breakfast, The Riveter Review, The Open Road Review and The Yellow Chair. Her forthcoming publications include Sacred Women in the Anti-violence movement: Anthology and Your One Phone Call.