Dub poetry is a form of performance poetry from the West Indies, which evolved out of dub music and consists of the spoken word over reggae music or reggae rhythms; and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze is acknowledged to be the first woman to have made her mark in this previously male-dominated field.

This dry, rather academic definition conceals the vigour and vibrancy which Jean Breeze brings to her art, with its colourful and passionate portraits and landscapes, many of them joyful, some of them darker, depicting people, women’s lives, race, sex, drugs and mental health.

Jean was born in Jamaica in the late 1950s. By the standards of Jamaican society at the time, she had a middle class background – her father was a public health inspector, her mother a midwife; though a lot of her childhood was spent in the country with her grandparents who were peasant farmers.

Poetry was always an important part of her life. She remembers that her mother loved to recite to her from an early age; and that her father would read to her from Shakespeare and other classics. She started to recite poems at school and church when she was 5 – an experience which she enjoyed (unlike many children) and which no doubt gave her the foundation for her later performing career.

She attended high school in Jamaica, and started to write privately from the age of 11, but it was not through formal education that she found her voice as a performance poet. She was sitting one day by Montego Bay, writing poetry inspired by the location and by the song “Sittin’ on the dock of the bay”, when a Rastafarian spotted her, asked if she was a poet - and in no time she found herself performing live at a festival, which was recorded and broadcast.

There was further educational experience at the Jamaica School of Drama in the late 1970s. At this time she also lived as a Rastafarian and became associated with efforts to improve the economic and legal status of Jamaican women.

In 1985, with a growing reputation as a poet, she came to London at the invitation of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, settling initially in Brixton, where she worked as a lecturer in Brixton College. She
found herself close to the Brixton riots of 1985, but was frustrated in her desire to cross the police line in order to get a closer look.

Not long after that she moved to Leicester, which became her base in this country for 15 years. Her impact on the Leicester and East Midlands cultural scene has been significant. She is an honorary Creative Writing Fellow at the University. She has performed in Leicester regularly, inspired local writers by running workshops, and acted as patron for a number of literary projects, including Lyric Lounge and WORD! – the longest running spoken word event in this region.

Jean is the proud mother of three children and a very successful poet, but her life has not always been an easy one. She has suffered mental ill-health and has done much to address the taboos associated with it, and to support those who are affected. She has been patron both of Showcase Smoothie and of Soft Touch Arts - projects designed to support the creative talents of people who have experienced mental health issues or who are otherwise disadvantaged.

Jean has been described as a “one woman festival”. Her performances are powerful and committed, but also warm and approachable. Her work is known worldwide and has included tours of North America, Europe, South East Asia, Africa and of course her native Caribbean. Her contribution to literature was rightly recognised by the award of MBE in 2012.

The poet who has most influenced her is T S Eliot, because “his choice of words is always surprising”. And the imaginative use of language is undoubtedly one of the outstanding characteristics of Jean’s published work, which now runs to eight books of poems and stories, the latest of which, published last year, is The Verandah Poems. The title reflects the pleasure – and the inspiration - that Jean has obtained from life on her verandah in Jamaica. It is this book she would take with her if cast away on the BBC’s desert island.

Asked which poem she would choose out of all her work, she selects Simple Tings – a short and deceptively simple poem which is a reflection of the exceptional quality of her work, in its command of language, its sympathetic characterisation and its powers of observation.

Mr Chancellor, on the recommendation of the Council and the Senate, I present Jean Breeze, that you may confer upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.