

EMERGING TRENDS IN THE POETRY OF SUJATA BHATT

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ABSTRACT

Sujata Bhatt is a recognized name among post independent Indian women poets in English who have carved a special place not only in India but also globally. Her works are appreciated worldwide for newness, style, language, appeal and depth. Born in India, moved to America at the age of twelve and settled in Germany has given her a true global exposure with universal appeal. Married to a German writer Sujata has been into translating Gujarati prose and poetry into English while at the same time creating beautiful literary creations. She is one of the befitting women poets of post independent India chosen for analysis for bringing new life and trends into Indian poetry written in English.

KEYWORDS: *Linguistic, Indian English Poetry, Resistance etc.*

INTRODUCTION: DISTINCTIVE LINGUISTIC STYLE

Although Sujata Bhatt speaks and chooses to write her poems in English language but her love for her mother tongue Gujarati lies in the deepest layers of her personality with great intimacy. These two languages resulted in giving distinctive linguistic style to her poetry. Her mindset and personality have been shaped by her association with two languages. This is very well reflected in many of her poems. “Search For My Tongue” alternates between these two languages. The poet tells about her shift towards English language in a quite ornamental way:

Days my tongue slips away.

I can't hold on to my tongue.

It's slippery like the lizard's tail

I try to grasp

But the lizard darts away.

. . . I search for my tongue.

(“Search For My Tongue” 1-5)

The Gujarati language is translated into English within the poem itself giving a distinctive style to her poem:

મારીજીભ સરકી જાયછે

(marijeebhsarki jai chay)

કાઇનહિ, હૂનથીબોલીશક્તી

(kai nahi, hoonathiboli shakti)

परंतुक्याशोधु?क्या ?

(parantukyshodhu? Kya?)

अकदमशान्त

(akedumshant)

नीचेपानीनहि, उप्परपक्षीनहि

(neechaypaninahi, oopurpakshinahi). (“Search For My Tongue” 6-25)

The title of selected collection of poems *Brunizem* showcases the poet’s keen observation in selecting words, phrases and sentences from the languages that she came across. ‘Brunizem’ is also a word which is a dark prairie soil found in Asia, Europe and North America, the three worlds of the poet’s poetic imagination. The different geographical regions of her residence give distinct quality to her language while composing poems. Different associations of linguistic terms come from the perspective of her global movements and cross cultural personality.

CONTEMPORARY CONSCIOUSNESS

Sujata Bhatt is very conscious about what is happening around them. Her contemporary consciousness makes her aware about various social values privileged in contemporary society. She is conscious of deplete Indian women and children who are victims of exploitation. Sujata Bhatt is not only concerned about Indian women and children but also the women and children of the West. She draws a reader’s attention to the accidental killing of children in America who, at a tender age start holding the guns rather than playing with the toys. Guns in the hands of young boys or girl result into the painful killings of innocent people around. In one of her collection of poem she talks about the young children being killed in New York which was a result of the frustration of younger generation. Similarly, Sujata Bhatt also voices the other contemporary issues where she talks about the poor status of the refuge children from Vietnam during the war period of 1990s. Her poem entitled “Written After Hearing about the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan” she shows her awareness about the world politics and the influence of the powerful nations. She also reveals the ill effects of war in her poem: “What do you know of Bibi Jamal? /Her husband, napalmed, /ran burning across the rocks. (“Witten After Hearing about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan” 44-46). The pain of the consequences of the intensifies in the further lines, “Crisp shreds of skin, a piece of his turban, / a piece of his skull were deliver to her (47-48). The last lines of the poem are heart breaking as they reveal the devastating effects of war: “She only stared, didn’t understand,/ muttered,/ Allah AllahAllahAllah is great . But, / where is my husband? Allah AllahAllah (49-51). Like a sensitive poet she voices the issues burning in the contemporary society. Her heart beats for her country when she writes about the disturbing times in India during the Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984:

I won’t buy

The New York Times today.

I can’t. I’m sorry.

But when I walk into the bookstore

I can't help reading the front page
and I stare at the photographs
of dead men and women

I know I've seen alive. ("3 November 1984" 1-8)

The poet is very much disturbed with the violence and she doesn't want the violence to continue. She writes:

Today I don't want to think
Of Hindus cutting open
Sikhs-and Sikhs cutting open

Hindus-and Hindus cutting open ("3 November 1984" 9-12)

Poet's sensitive heart speaks for the poor and deprived section of the society. Her poems portray the poverty, diseases, deprivation in the society. The pain of the community is felt by the poet when she draws the picture of squalor in her own home town;

Go walk the streets of Baroda,
go to Ahmedabad,
go breathe th dust
until you choke and get sick
with a fever no doctor's heard of.

Don't ask me

for I will tell you nothing

about hunger and suffering.

("Go to Ahmedabad" 1-8)

She is so much concerned with the hunger and poverty of the people in her home state that she repeatedly makes the readers feel her pain;

Go walk the streets of Baroda,
go to Ahmedabad
. . .Go meet the people if you can
and if you want to know
about hunger, about suffering
go live it for yourself,
When there's an epidemic,
when the doctor says

your brother may die soon,
 your father may die soon-
 don't ask me how it feels. (‘Go To Ahmedabad’ 83-98)

She is equally concerned about violence against women, warfare and negative effects of colonial economics. Being an ardent lover of nature the Sujata Bhatt is also conscious about the deteriorating environment; ‘Parvati, Oh Parvati/Where is the mountain today, where did you/ take it away?’ (‘Parvati 13-15). She conveys a lot of ideas to through her poems reminding everyone’s social responsibility. In this context she not only speaks for regional issues but also conveys the inseparable relationship of human beings with nature. She conveys message through her poems about saving the trees and by saving the trees eventually saving the habitat of birds:

Paper is dry, flat.
 Where is the soil
 for the roots, and how do I lift out
 entire trees, a whole forest
 from the earth of the spirit
 and transplant it on paper
 without disturbing the birds? (‘The Writer’ 7-13)

Bhatt’s poems serve as the social documents constantly dealing with the contemporary issues. She not only discusses these issues but also enlighten the readers by continuously conveying the message that human beings should develop compassion for towards all the creatures. Many of her poems speak about the problems of growing urbanization and industrialization that are ruining our ecology. Her many poems suggest that human beings should learn the art to co-exist in perfect harmony with nature and surroundings.

NEW WOMAN

Sujata Bhatt is a voice of New Woman. Her women rise from the mythological idealness and perfection yielding to the demands of those who are related to her. Bhatt’s woman today is not ashamed of not being perfect. She destroyed the concept of an ideal woman who fulfills the expectations of others by sacrificing her own self, her desires and her identity. Her women do not want to sit on the periphery and be considered as secondary but they strive to be as central as men. These women voice for equality and more freedom. They do not want to be taken as weak, feminine and less developed. In the poem ‘Udaylee’ (means untouchable when one is menstruating) the poet wants to convey the message that just because women menstruate they should not be treated like untouchables, they are the bearers of the future generations they should be respected and men are born out of women. Sujata writes for the women; ‘rising with the foam,/rising’ (‘Udaylee’ 23-24). The poet in same poem wonders at the ironic advantage a woman gets by chance due to the confinement; ‘Here we're permitted to write/ letters, to read, and it gives a chance/for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal’ (15).

There is a strong voice in the poem ‘The Difference Between Being and Becoming’ where the protagonist strongly pleads and desires for independence and autonomy:

So where does the body house the soul?

Locked in the attic;

. . .No

These doors and windows are always open.

(Brunizem33)

Protagonists in her poems are the epitome of women who are not ready to yield before adverse circumstances but are ready to stamp their presence in fighting the difficulties to come out strong and victorious. The young widow (“Buffaloes”), poet (“Swami Anand”), Kalika (“Kalika”), poet wife (“She Finds Her Place”), Parvati (“Parvati”), the women of Leh (“The Women of Leh are such”), women puppet makers (“The Puppets”). Pregnant mother (“Pink Shrimps and Guesses” etc. are the representative ‘new women’ in the poems from the collection “Brunizem”. These new women articulate their feelings and voice despite being all around attempts to suppress their expressions. Through these poems one can easily feel the undercurrent of ‘New Woman’ consciousness promoting a life of equality and dignified living for women. In this way Sujata Bhatt presents herself as the true follower of her ideal poet Kamala Das.

Sujata Bhatt uses mythology to negate the power of patriarchy. Her new woman refuses to have dependency on men because they are of the belief that dependency will make the women lose their individuality, identity and potentialities as dependent women cannot claim any power and even equal status in the society. In her poem “Parvati” the poet accuses the goddess Parvati of giving all her *shakti* (energy) to her husband Shiva and in this way accepting his protection and subordination. Sujata Bhatt suggests that women should not surrender their rights and identity to their male counterparts but they should be liberated from all kinds of helplessness. This approach of women will help them to grab the male space. In her poem “Well, Well, Well” the poet advocates that her new woman will not depend on man power but she would herself take the power, control and privilege; “I need words like witch, power/ may be even, gypsy./ But I need witch. Will you grant methat ?” (Brunizem106).

The poet herself makes genuine attempts to carve a strong identity for herself in an alien land. First and foremost she recognizes the importance of retaining her mother tongue while living in a country of other languages. This understanding comes when she listens to the video tape sent by her mother while the poet was staying in Maryland, America in which her mother expresses her concern about Sujata’s losing her mother tongue and linguistic identity. The poet feels that if she doesn’t retain her native language Gujarati her mother tongue will “rot and die” (“Search For My Tongue” 102). This makes the poet stand firmly with her own mother tongue Gujarati by strongly voicing her intention:

I ask you, what would you do

if you had two tongues in your mouth,

and lost the first one, the mother tongue,

and could not really know the other,

the foreign tongue.

You could not use them both together

even if you thought that way.

(“Search For My Tongue” 92-98)

Sujata Bhatt's strongly pleads that one must continue to love and speak one's mother tongue even when one is living any where in the world. This is the way one can retain one's strong identity in the foreign land. In the poem "She Finds Her Place" the poet shows how her woman has become 'New Woman' by gaining an identity or establishing a place for herself:

she finds her place

and looks at the moon

as if it were her little sister

finally come home.

(Brunizem 38)

Sujata Bhatt is a strong voice amongst the Indian women poets who vehemently attacks the traditional role of women in the patriarchal set up. Her poems are powerful vehicles to convey that women in India society are challenging the conventional setup to develop new identity and create new waves.

GLOBAL GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL ACQUAINTANCE

Sujata Bhatt's has travelled across the world acquiring global geographical and cultural acquaintances. She moved from India to America and now she stays in Germany. In this way she came across different cultures, traditions, languages, people and geographical settings creating for her a global diasporic identity. Her stay in different continents has inculcated a rare gift of love and empathy for different cultures. This feature in his poetry gives universal appeal as she is able to dive into the inner most world of the artist and in the process she dramatizes the linguistic experience and its multicultural meanings. Though her main occupation is writing poems in English language but at the same time her heart is always inclined towards her country and mother tongue: "Everytime I think I've forgotten, I think I've lost the mother tongue, it blossoms out of my mouth" ("Search For My Tongue" 125-27). The poetry of Sujata Bhatt spreads the fragrance of universalism striking, solicitous and humanitarian perspectives:

The Spain has decided to help

NATO. . . .

That although the Dutch were the first

To help the people at Nicaragua they don't say much

about their history with Indonesia.

That van Gogh collected Japanese prints. ("What is Worth Knowing" 4-13)

Bhatt's poems also display a spirit of openness towards diverse cultural milieu of the world. Different cultures of the world fascinate her due their tremendous inherent possibilities which make her feel that her exile is a kind of blessing in disguise because it gave her creative freedom and the view openness towards these cultures. While staying in Germany she writes about both German culture and Indian culture with the same passion and she writes about the Indian culture and the German culture with the same gusto and buoyancy displaying her imaginative flight and creative depth. Her understanding of the different societies and cultures give her poetry a unique flavor. Her poems have description of global events and settings. She is quite alert and aware of the places and cultural settings which can be seen in her poems when

she gives description of these places, people, cultures, traditions, buildings and languages i.e. Kosbad ("Swami Anand"), Maninagar ("Lizards"), Leh ("The Women of Leh are Such"), Nevsky Avenue, Spain, Iowa city, America, Russia ("Another Day in Iowa City"), East Berlin, Germany ("Living with Trains"), Baltimore, Maryland (USA) ("Baltimore"), The Sorbonne (France), North Sea, Germany ("Clara Westhoff to Rainer Maria Rilke"), Poona ("Wanting Agni"), Darjeeling, Hindu Kush and Khyber ("Written After Hearing about the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan"), New England ("Meatmorphoses II: A Dream"), Ahmedabad, Baroda ("Go Ahmedabad").

SYMBOLISM

Sujata Bhatt makes her readers feel elevated through her symbols and philosophize the simple thoughts into ideas of deeper meanings. She uses the symbol of paper in order to convey the message of saving the trees and other natural resources. She writes;

The best story, of course,

is one you can't write,

you won't write.

It's something that can only live

in your heart,

not on paper

("The Writer" 1-6)

The poem also leaves a message that since papers are made of trees that are cut from the forests so to save trees we must save papers. In her other poem entitled "Sad Song with Henna Leaves" the poet uses "henna" leaves (used for colouring hands during auspicious occasions in India also called as *mehndi*) symbolically to present the different shades of feelings:

Sing me sad songs and I'll be happy

sing me happy songs and I'll be sad;

give me good-luck and I'll want to die

give bad-luck and I'll live.

(Brunizem 97)

Her symbols are powerful and extremely suggestive. Images like 'peacock', 'lizards', 'buffaloes', 'puppets', 'garlic', 'agni' (fire), 'Brunizem' (soil), 'pipal tree', 'neem tree', 'bodhi tree', 'Sherdi' (sugar cane), 'oranges and lemons', etc. express her keen interest, love and deep faith in various objects of nature. Through symbols of birds, animals, insects, trees and various other objects of nature she evokes the images of her home and native country. These symbols are very effective means to communicate poet's feeling and the messages. Symbols in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt are powerful and highly subjective. Her symbols are beautiful means to connect with her readers. Bhatt uses familiar symbols and is able to easily associate her readers with the symbols. Her use of images attracts the sensitive readers. 'Bodhi' tree is associated with Lord Buddha and is symbol of knowledge and serenity; 'pipal' and 'neem' trees are the symbols of holiness for Indians; 'peacock' is considered to be a bird very much adored; 'buffaloes' are the symbols of submissiveness and patience; 'sugarcane' represents the seasonal sweet stick enjoyed by every household of India, especially villages.

Sugarcane is also worshiped during festive occasions especially during Diwali; 'puppets' are symbols of the maker's creativity, vision and philosophy where puppet maker is compared with the God; 'woodcut' & 'paper' are the symbols used to denote the importance of forests in human lives. The title of the collection of poems *Brunizem* is also a symbol of cultural synthesis of three continents in the poetic life and imagination of Sujata Bhatt in which she explores the richness and the conflicts of moving between varied cultures and different languages.

VOICE OF RESISTANCE

Sujata Bhatt is a true successor of Kamala Das. Her poems entirely participate in and plead for a freedom of articulation. They raise a voice against all kinds of discriminations and oppression that especially the women have to face all over the world in general and in India in particular. She wants her women protagonist to come out of their deplorable and subjugated conditions to carve a place for themselves. She represents her women as the one who have struggled all their lives but they have not lost the hope of finding a place for themselves. Despite the darkness and gloom poet's woman continues to move and finally finds her place. The female protagonist in the poem "She Finds Her Place" expresses her desire for going out of the clutches into open and wide horizons:

Now outside in the snow

I'm looking for the tallest pine tree,

the one whose sly wisdom I need.

Now outside in the snow.

. . .Over there

it's always dark. The sky

if not grey, is black.

The snow thigh high

slowly grows waist deep.

. . .The tall woman, walks alone,

deeper into the woods

among a crowd of trees

she finds her place.

(Brunizem38)

Writing in English language becomes an interesting vehicle where the oppressor's tongue becomes the language of the oppressed. Through this global language the modern Indian women poets have not only brought the problems of the marginalized class in the society in the forefront but also garnered global support for them. In this way new generation of post independent women poets have not only received global exposure but they have also opened new vistas of knowledge to the generations to follow as they have followed their predecessors who wrote in English. This validates that the English language is like a catalyst for freedom, resistance and renaissance but they still adhere to their mother tongue to keep their identity intact. They write in global language because they wish the world should know about India and Indians should be

aware of what is happening globally. She writes:

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language
truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the sould has been cropped
with long scythe swooping out
of the conquereror's face-
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language. (Brunizem 37)

Among the Indian women poets, Sujata Bhatt's feeling is similar to that of other contemporary Indian women poets in English. She takes the help of myths to present her voice against the depressed sections of the society. She goes to the extent of using Medusean myth and believes that Medusa represents a complexity of contradictory attributes as well as a disturbing rebellious and turbulent persona. The poet refers to the Medusean myth and thinks of grabbing power and knowledge:

When I say witch I can't have you
thinkingof Medusa
or Macbeth or Salem.
I can't have you thinkingatall. (Brunizem 107)

These mythological figures and images are power-oriented and provide a challenge to the oppressors. This helps the marginalized especially women to integrate into the main stream society.

Bhatt presents her anguish and anger without being out and out rebel. She believes that standing firmly amidst the problems will definitely provide the solution but one should not leave one's space for others.

DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND

Sujata Bhatt's writes in simple language yet at times she is difficult to understand because it seems that for an expatriate poet like her remains in a state of animated suspension who is anxious about the surrounding and sometimes unsure of her affiliations and roots. Due to her nature of being unsure at times the selection of images and linguistic items make her difficult to comprehend. Due to her geographical movements across the three continents and different cultures it looks like there is a loss of geographical markers which definitely bring change in individual sensibilities. So to clearly understand the poetic world of Sujata Bhatt it is key to understand her cultural shifts which are the combination of Indian as well as

western attitude and at the same time her diasporic sensibilities. She is a part of three different worlds along with three linguistic expressions for her creative output. Yet she has been successful in communicating what she wanted to communicate with some abstruseness.

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