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From diaspora to multiculturalism: A study of Sujata Bhatt's poetry

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie in an essay written in 1985 said "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind". But in recent times, expatriate writers do not actually suffer from the onslaught of diasporic consciousness, which creates a divided or fragmented consciousness. Though expatriate writers do realize that they are products of two or more seemingly irreconcilable cultures, which gives them a sense of rootlessness and alienation, they have engineered ways and means to encounter, master and transcend the limitations imposed on them by the diasporic consciousness. Among such writers, Sujata Bhatt is preeminent.

A poet of the Indian diaspora, Sujata Bhatt transforms her personal experiences in the three continents-Asia, America and Europe-into an imaginative experience, which fructifies into a concrete, lived experience that changes her perception of differences among cultures. A study of her poems shows that her experience of diaspora initially unsettles her. But through an intense quest for a wholesome identity, Sujata Bhatt's poetry records the process of self-recovery and self-preservation through an act of transformation.

This quest, ultimately, results in the recognition of the rich multiplicity of life and leads to a celebration of pluralism, which acknowledges and happily accommodates the existence of groups with different ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds within one society. Sujata Bhatt, through her poetry, advocates and encourages the integration of people of different countries, ethnic groups and religions. The proposed paper will study a few germane poems of Sujata Bhatt to foreground the fact that she has seen multiculturalism as a condition which leads her not to a mere passive toleration of diversity but to an active acceptance of it. The paper will trace the evolution from conflict through 're-cognition' to acceptance and celebration.

Keywords: Diasporic consciousness, pluralism and multiculturalism, self-recovery and self-preservation

1. Introduction

In an essay written in 1985, Salman Rushdie said "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind" (qtd in Satendra Nandan 52). A sense of loss of roots has been an important aspect of the diasporic experience. Post-Independence Indian Writing has insistently recorded this sense of loss as seen in the poetry of poets such as AK Ramanujan and R Parthasarathy.

However, one can perceive a shift in the attitude towards the sense of loss in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt, as she moves from an anguished experience of conflict, stemming from living in three different continents, to a celebratory expression of multiculturalism. While Salman Rushdie seems to believe that for the diasporic writer reclaiming a homeland can only be wishful thinking for a proxy-homeland, Sujata Bhatt converts the negative state of displacement into an affirmative state of multiple-belongingness. As Cecile Sandten

observes, Sujata Bhatt is "...bicultural by birth and migration, and...tricultural by marriage" (99) and, one may add, multicultural by her art. Through her poetry, she redefines the concept of homeland. For her they are not "invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" but expansive homelands which are not defined by mere geographical and political boundaries. Rather, she locates the physical homeland within the larger understanding of the world as homeland.

This is not to say that Bhatt denies the schisms created by the diasporic consciousness; she acknowledges the diasporic consciousness, and engineer's ways and means to encounter, master and transcend the limitations imposed by it. She turns it to her advantage by concretizing her personal experiences in the three continents-Asia, America and Europe-through poetry. She uses her poetry to arrive at an altered perception of differences among cultures. Her poetry, especially the poems in which she deals with the issue of languages, this paper argues, evolves from recording the unsettling effect of diaspora to subverting it to initiate a process of self-recovery and self-preservation-a redefining of the 'self' being an important step in this process.

The 'self' is very often constructed through language and determines subjectivity. As Bill Ashcroft says, "The concept of subjectivity problematizes the simple relationship between the individual and language, replacing human nature with the concept of the *production* of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language. These are seen as determining factors in the construction of individual identity, which itself becomes an *effect* rather than the cause of such factors" (220). For multi-cultural writers, the babel of tongues creates an anxiety about their own linguistic identity, which, as Ashcroft points out, plays a large part in the construction of the self. However, Sujata Bhatt seeks to overturn this by exploiting the multiplicity of tongues to create a subjectivity that goes beyond language, culture and nation.

Sujata Bhatt articulates the earlier states of anxiety and rootlessness caused by the adoption of an alien tongue in her poem *Search for My Tongue*. In the case of the first generation of Indian writers, the use of English, an alien language, was seen as an act of betrayal. In his Introduction to *60 Indian Poets*, Jeet Thayil says, "...writers who work in English are held accountable for nothing less than a failure of national conscience" (xi). Sujata Bhatt, too, expresses a grave concern for the supplanting of her native tongue by the English language. The acquisition of the English language seems to her to be a loss of tongue, a loss of identity:

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue.
I ask you, what you would 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. (ll 1-7)

The expression "two tongues in your mouth" suggests a confusion which is not only of language but also of identity: "She uses the word 'tongue' in three ways, firstly as the physical tongue in her mouth, secondly as her 'mother

tongue' (her language), but also as a symbol of her personal identity and Indian culture" (<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=4671>).

The lines "lost the first one, the mother tongue, /and could not really know the other, /the foreign tongue" point to the transitional stage, during which the poet seems to be caught in a limbo:

You could not use them both together
even if you thought that way.
And if you lived in a place you had to
speak a foreign tongue,
your mother tongue would rot,
rot and die in your mouth
until you had to spit it out. (ll 8-14)

She looks at the newly acquired English language as a threat to her mother tongue which would 'rot and die in [her] mouth'. As Ania Loomba observes: "Colonialism ...reshapes, often violently, physical territories, social terrains as well as human identities" (155). The English language, a colonial legacy, threatens to disrupt the monolithic identity she seeks to establish. She sees it as a parasitical entity that saps the vitality that the mother tongue can supply. In this context, the poem can be seen to consist of an extended metaphor of language as a plant. "At first, she is worried that it is going to 'rot and die' (that she is forgetting it), but later it 'grows', 'shoots', 'buds', 'blossoms', representing the poet growing in confidence, remembering Gujarati words, forming them on her lips, and finally speaking them full out fluently in Gujarati" (<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=4671>).

However, the mother tongue fights to reassert its position:
it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,
it ties the other tongue in knots,
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,
it pushes the other tongue aside. (ll 19-23)

She is unable to bring the two languages together in her mind, because the associations that they carry are very varied. This results in a fractured consciousness, a frozen identity. The words in the two different languages have lives of their own and seem to inhabit two different worlds which can be integrated into a whole.

When I look up
I think
aakash, suraj
then: sky, sun.
Don't tell me it's the same, I know
better. To think of the sky
is to think of dark clouds bringing snow,
the first snow is always on Thanksgiving. (ll 25-32)

The only way of recovering her identity seems to be recovering the mother tongue. She looks upon the acquisition of the English language as a betrayal which can be atoned for only by re-acquiring her mother tongue, Gujarati:

but to think:
 aakash, asman, aabh
 ...
 Overhead, large black crows fly.
 Over the crows, the sun, always
 the sun, not a single cloud
 which means no rain, which means no wheat,
 no rice, no greens, no bread.Nothing.
 Only crows, black crows.
 And yet, the humid June air,
 the stormiest sky in Connecticut
 can never be aakash (ll 33-50)

In the context of colonial experience of the Caribbean countries, George Lamming observes: "...the colonial experience is a *live* experience in the *consciousness* of these people...the experience is a continuing *psychic* experience that has to be dealt with and will have to be dealt with long after the actual colonial situation formally "ends" " (cited in Loomba 155). In the context of Sujata Bhatt's poetry, the lingering over of the English language is the "continuing *psychic* experience"; it is the ghost of colonialism that has to be exorcised by reclaiming her mother tongue, "And my mother in the kitchen, /my mother singing:/mon mor megher shungay, ooday cholay dikdigontair panay/I can't hear my mother in English" (ll 51-54) She is apologetic about adopting the English language, supplanting the mother tongue with it thereby. This act of betrayal creates an identity crisis, which she seeks to resolve by escaping into the imaginary home scape of Gujarat, or to adapt Rushdie's term, by creating "a Gujarat of the mind". Her quest here stops with a regional rather than a global identity.

From this position of apology and uncertainty, she veers to a position of aggressive assertion in the poem "A Different History". In this poem, she raises a rhetorical question regarding the wide-spread use of the English language:

Which language
 has not been the oppressor's tongue? (ll 19-20)

The language may have been brought to India by the oppressors. In *The Decolonised Muse*, Keki Daruwalla observes that "Colonial history shows that language can be as domineering as any occupational army. It supplants myths, whole iconographies, world-views, ideologies. It ushers in its own symbols, and its own values. An armada of new texts sails in. Old dogmas and bigotries are swept away-and exchanged for new ones" (43). But the language itself, in spite of its complicity in the process of colonization, is not oppressive. She also suggests that language, per se, does not have a destructive element, as it gets integrated into the cultural fabric of a multilingual country like India. So, she says:

Which language
 truly meant to murder someone? (ll 21-22)

Though all hegemonic practices become operative and are legitimized through the medium of language, Sujata Bhatt argues for disassociating language from the colonial impulse and would prefer to look at language as an integrating factor. This, she feels, would be possible by a constant, sympathetic and apolitical use of any language. It is

possible, then, that a language, which had been the language of the conqueror, is naturalized and becomes a language of the conquered, taking on the flavor of the indigenous language.

Keki Daruwalla, in *The Decolonized Muse*, observes that "To become fully conscious of writing in the language of one's erstwhile colonial rulers, one must cross various thresholds of realization" (43).

And how does it happen
 that after the torture,
 after the soul has been cropped
 with a long scythe swooping out
 of the conqueror's face-
 the unborn grandchildren
 grow to love that strange language. (ll 23-29)

Sujata Bhatt very clearly suggests that it is possible for a conqueror's language to be loved as one's own. Commenting on Sujata Bhatt's use of English and Gujarati, Premila Paul says,

In demonstrating that language and food have the ability to defy and cross boundaries, Bhatt resorts to multilingual expression, a method tested and put to use in her earlier volumes. A word becomes an idea, and it is hard to separate the two. Some of her ideas live in Gujarati; therefore, the diction and script of the language find their way into her English-language poems. Sometimes Bhatt translates the words, but in other cases the reader is left to conjecture the meaning from the context" (38).

However, this is resolution of conflict between the languages of the colonizer and the colonized is an intermediate stage in the process of integration.

The final stage of the process is reached in *The Multicultural Poem*:
 Is there a cure
 For the numbness within the skull?
 The exiled composer's skull-
 Listen to the exiled echo-
 The echo mixed
 with the numbness. (ll 22-27)

The diasporic condition, which is seen as a paralyzing one to begin with, is transformed into a revitalizing one by the end. The expression "the exiled composer's skull" suggests that a diasporic writer is in a precarious predicament because she is disabled by a sense of alienation. However, the writer uses the multicultural experience (which is, more often than not, the cause of a sense of exile) creatively to battle this debilitating alienation. The word "echo"-resonances which form the well-spring of her poetry-suggests that this process is not an easy one. Her juxtaposition of the words "echo" and "numbness", oxymoronic as it may sound, actually suggests the process of synthesis of heterogeneous experiences.

Later in the poem, Sujata Bhatt resolves the issue by transforming the metaphor of death-like numbness to one of rejuvenation:

The multicultural poem

is a creature, a being
 whose spirit breathes
 like an orchid in the sun
 still wet from the rain
 on a day when the garden tilts slippery, sublime –
 on a day when
 the garden dazzles
 growing loud with birdsong. (ll 30-39)

She describes a poem as “a creature” infused with life; “a being” which quivers with vitality like “an orchid in the sun/still wet from the rain”. The “exiled composer’s skull” which had stood for aridity is now exchanged for the life-giving rains of inspiration and poetic expression. The arid desert of her mind has been metamorphosed into a garden, which “dazzles” with fruit-bearing trees, and the mere echo into melodious birdsong.

The poet is also alive to the fact that a multicultural poem is intractable, as it escapes narrow categorizations. It defies all attempts at confining it to a limited space:

It will not settle down.
 It will not be your pet. (ll 41-42)

Rather, the process of recording the experiences is liberating, in that, a multicultural poem breaks down walls which have been the cause of meaningless discrimination. At this level of experience, the multiplicity of languages resolves itself into the singularity of pure, abstract Language. Ayyappa Paniker observes that “Language itself is a value-but that use of the word language is in a totally different sense. In that sense language does not mean English or Marathi or Malayalam” (15). Sujata Bhatt is talking about this abstract notion of Language when she says:

It wants to be read at the border
 to the person who checks your passport. (ll 43-44)

The passport officer must understand that national and linguistic boundaries are mere constructions rather than fixed truths. The poem eludes the grasp of readers who are trapped in a cocooned existence, denying multiplicity and variety:

The multicultural poem does not expect
 the reader to ‘understand’ anything.
 After all, it is used to being misunderstood.

It speaks of refraction.
 It wants more dialogue
 Between the retina and the light.
 It says, ‘get rid of the squint.’ (ll 45-51)

The multicultural poem is a prism that scatters the misperception of monolithic existence into the wide spectrum of heterogeneity. Only by entering into a dialogue with the poem, can the readers be cured of their skewed perception, their “squint”. Poetry, thus, becomes perception itself, and the distance between “the retina and the light” is removed.

It lives the chapter in history
 They can’t teach you in school. (ll 52-53)

The vision that books fail to teach is imparted, through the poem, by virtue of its being a lived reality.

Sujata Bhatt sees her experience of multiculturalism through the metaphor of the mask, which connects to the grand idea of life as drama and human beings as role-players. A multicultural poem “likes to wear a mask-every day/A different face” to adumbrate the fact that different cultural identities associated with human beings are but masks which hide the underlying unity that exists among them. This leads her to locate her home not in a limited geographical space, which, as the world knows, has led to territorialization and isolation, but in a notional, poetic space that transcends boundaries while also creating a world-home. Home, thus, becomes a space that integrates varied perceptions (“eyes”) and multiple voices (“mouths”):

Home is a place filled with eyes
 And mouths hanging on the walls- (ll 55-56)

The lines that follow seem to suggest the protean quality of identities:

Strands of silk, paper hair-
 Sometimes they sway in the wind,
 Sometimes they lift
 Themselves with a rustling sound-and look
 As if they would fly away. (ll 57-61)

With a recognition of this comes the realization that, in the world-home, identities expand through accretion, through the integration of the bewildering multiplicity suggested by “feathers./Beads, glass, paint,/Wood, shells, bones,/More wood, more feathers, more skin/ And fur-” (ll 62-66)

The poem, thus, finds its energy “In the time between the shadows,/In the sounds between/ The crows fighting in the guava trees” (ll 67-69) This points to the fact that, in a poem, the pregnant silences deliver more than what the articulated words do. Alluding to the inherent music underlying the babel of tongues, the poet invokes the image of Orpheus, whose music breaks through all the stony obstacles of life and rushes on:

While at the other end of the garden
 A man like Orpheus
 Slides artichoke leaves
 Dipped in *balsamico*
 With *wasabi*
 Then dipped in *shoyu*- (ll 70-75)

Orpheus, the Prospero-like weaver of musical spells, is able to reconcile differences by incorporating words from different languages into a single song. A multicultural poem, then, urges human beings to shed enfeebling differences. Exhibiting a healthy respect for all languages is the means to achieve the spirit of accommodation. She sees language as being purely intuitive, instinctive and integrative. In his introduction to an anthology of contemporary poets, Ranjit Hoskote talks about a shift in the attitude of the younger Indian poets with reference to their use of the English language:

These poets are not apologetic about the fact that they write in English; their poetry is refreshingly free of the excess ideological baggage of Indianness that

encumbered the earlier generation of post-colonial poets in English. (xiv)

The shift Hoskote sees between two generations of Indian poets writing in English can be seen within the poetic oeuvre of Bhatt.

Diasporic writers like Sujata Bhatt do realize that they are products of two or more seemingly irreconcilable cultures, which gives them a sense of rootlessness. These writers record this experience of unsettlement at the political, metaphysical, and existential levels, which makes the problem of diaspora acute only to go beyond it and realize that human consciousness may comprise layers of multicultural experience which mend the schisms caused by diaspora. The harshness and dissonance created by an initial recognition of diaspora is poeticized in “A Search for My Tongue”. “A Different History” moves on to aggressively denying this dissonance while “A Multicultural Poem” harmonizes the dissonance into the euphony and consonance of integration in her poetry.

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