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## Multi-coloured perspectives of Sujata Bhatt's poetry: An Indepth study

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### Abstract

In Indian Writings in English, More women poets are now steering heading to present the universe in its multi-dimensions in varied forms. In short, they provide us a full-fledged understanding of human experience, without leaving a single feature of life. Among the Indian women poets writing in English, Sujata Bhatt's is a significant name. She is a poet of the Indian diaspora who, in her poetry which is rooted in multiculturalism, makes creative use of her experiences on the three continents. Sujata Bhatt's diasporic experience does not hamper her creativity; rather it provides her with plural perspectives which enhances her understanding of life's multiplicity. She has published several collections of poetry. Apart from writing poetry, Sujata Bhatt also translates from Gujarati and German into English. Her poetry, explores issues such as love, violence, racism, language, creativity and displacement. This present paper will discuss how Bhatt's writings help her take root anywhere.

**Keywords:** Indian writing, women poets, diaspora plural perspectives

### Introduction

In the words of Srinivasa Iyengar, "More women poets are now attempting than men to pack the universe into pellets of poetry. In short, they all strike a symphony of many notes, discarding no part of human experience..." (1983:642). Among the Indian women poets writing in English, Sujata Bhatt's is a significant name. She is a poet of the Indian diaspora who, in her poetry which is rooted in multiculturalism, makes creative use of her experiences on the three continents. Sujata Bhatt's diasporic experience does not hamper her creativity; rather it provides her with plural perspectives which enhances her understanding of life's multiplicity. Premila Paul says that "Bhatt's poetry reflects her ability to convert difficulties into opportunities and to make home wherever she is" (2006:99).

**She has published several collections of poetry, the most important of which are:** Brunizem (1988), Monkey Shadows (1991), The Stinking Rose (1995), Augatora: With drawings by Michael Augustin (2000), A Colour for Solitude (2002) and Pure Lizard (2008). Apart from writing poetry, Sujata Bhatt also translates from Gujarati and German into English. Her translations from Gujarati poetry have been published in Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women's Poetry. She has translated poems by Gunter Grass and Gunter Kunert into English from German. Another translation from German, Mickle Makes Muckle: Poms, mini plays and short prose, was published in 2007.

Sujata Bhatt's poetry, explores issues such as love, violence, racism, language, creativity and displacement. In the essay From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen, she observes, "I feel homesick for both United States and India... I now feel so attached to both the East and the west that I believe I cannot do without either culture" (1988:7). Premila Paul observes, "Bhatt considers herself an Indian writer who lives outside India. Otherwise, she believes that any further discussions of her identity is futile, for the inner life is complex and private. She does not, however, complain about being uprooted because she can take root anywhere. This ability has given her the refreshing realization that home is not a geographical location but a state of mind". (2001:37).

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It is this ability to acclimatize that distinguishes Sujata Bhatt's poetry as well. The title of her first collection of poetry, *Brunizem*, refers to the dark brown prairie soil common to Asia, Europe and North America, the three worlds she straddles in her poetry. The title itself is coined by her from French ("brun" meaning "brown") and Russian ("Zem" meaning "soil"). Thus, the title brings out the most important concern of the poems in the collection: the multicultural experience and an attempt to make some sense out of the disparate experiences by imposing order upon them. In her essay, *In Her Own Voice: Sujata Bhatt and the Aesthetic Articulation of the Diasporic Condition*, Cecile Sandten observes that,

In her poetry, Sujata Bhatt uses linguistic variations and multilingual mixings, thereby employing language as a means to represent cultural identity and difference. She does this by interlacing or intercalating her poems with passages in some of the official Indian languages such as Gujarati (mainly) and also Hindi and Sanskrit, though English is her main creative language. She also uses German, Low German, and Spanish (mainly single words) in some of her poems. This playful incursion into the poetic text of different languages serves the specific cultural context of each poem, which can be defined as one of the characteristics of her intercultural mode of writing. Further, Sujata Bhatt acknowledges her indebtedness to a mosaic of writers, both poets and novelists, from various literary and cultural backgrounds and countries (2000:99-100).

This bringing together of the western and indigenous tradition is common to many postcolonial writers. In fact, it is often an attempt to integrate the two strands of experience the postcolonial writer both inherits and lives through.

Language becomes an important aspect of the multicultural experience, as it is through language that identity is largely constructed. Postcolonial writers, therefore, repeatedly turn to their multiple linguistic and literary heritages in order to establish an identity that is often hybrid. Some poems which express this concern about language in *Brunizem* are *A Different History*, *Search for My Tongue* and *The Undertow*.

However, multilingualism and multiculturalism are not the only issues that Sujata Bhatt explores in her first collection of poetry. The poem, *The Kamasutra Retold*, explores a primal human instinct-desire. In this poem, two teenage lovers get to know each other and themselves through spontaneous physical desire and its fulfilment. The title of the poem establishes connections with the ancient Indian treatise on desire, and, perhaps, points to the necessity of rediscovering our roots in a rapidly changing world where even the oldest and most basic human instinct is finding new expression.

*Brunizem* also contains poems about womanhood and its construction. Poems such as *Udaylee*, *Kalika* and *Muliebrity* explore how womanhood is perceived while also trying to define it. In his review of Bhatt's first collection of poetry, John Welch describes it as "exciting... moving and invigorating". He further observes that "In the optimistic confidence with which it encompasses different cultural and linguistic traditions, it is typical of much poetry now being produced by South Asian writers" (<https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgibin/scribe?showdoc=47;doctype=review>). This assessment is ironic as it tries to slot her into a convenient category, typical of much Western construction, while the attempt of most contemporary

writers from the subcontinent has been to escape such narrow compartmentalization. This could be because of the fact that the West, by and large, is discovering multiculturalism only now while, in the subcontinent, it has been a given for several centuries.

Sujata Bhatt's second collection of poetry is called *Monkey Shadows*. In this collection she moves on from an examination of the human world into an exploration of the animal world as well, while also analysing the relationship between the human and the animal worlds. Here, as elsewhere in her poetry, the contradictions inherent in life are probed- the seeming contradictions between the past and the present; between India and the West; between the human and the animal world and so on. However, these contradictions are brought to the fore and disturbing questions raised only to be resolved through a poetic vision. One of the best-known poems from this collection is *The Stare* which is taken up for a detailed analysis in Chapter III. Another poem in this collection, *Understanding the Ramayana*, is replete with resonances from the epic and while, describing a childhood memory, also tries to connect the myth with a child's curiosity and sense of wonder.

Sujata Bhatt's next volume of poetry, *The Stinking Rose*, derives its name from garlic, which is also known by the name stinking rose. In a poem sequence with twenty-five parts, Sujata Bhatt takes the readers through various aspects of the plant which usually arouses very strong feelings. She touches upon its mythology, explores its practical uses, and also exploits the emotional associations the plant evokes. The Carcanet review of the collection observes that the poems in the collection are "haunted by places, especially Vancouver Island... and by her native India. Europe is also present, a place of sometimes reluctant abode. There is a dialogue between new worlds and old, intensifying towards the end of the volume in a series of experimental poems, building on the experience of those celebrated earlier 'bilingual' poems which bring Gujarati and English together" (<http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781857540482>).

*Point No Point*, a selection from her first three collections of poetry, was published in 1997. *Augatora*, published in 2000, is the next significant poetry collection by Sujata Bhatt. The author explains the title of the collection in her article. "The Hole in the Wind" from the author's *Point of view*: "My curiosity about the relationship between the words window and wind eventually led me to *augatora*, a word which comes from the gothic *augadauro*, a completely different etymological root from the Nordic roots of window. In my poem "*Augatora*" I have juxtaposed these different words, different etymological roots and, in a sense, different interpretations for the physical object 'window' "(*Connotations* Vol.10.12000/2001: 103-104). The poems in this collection, in a sense, become windows to the past and to the present, To India and to the other countries across the world, and also to real and imagined landscapes and mindscapes.

*A Colour for Solitude* is Sujata Bhatt's next collection of poetry. This collection comprises a poetry sequence inspired by the self-portraits of the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. Paula Modersohn-Becker was a close associate of sculptor Clara Westhoff and her husband Rainer Maria Rilke and all three artists lived in an artists' colony in Worpswede. This rural community near Bremen in north Germany is where Bhatt herself has lived. The poetry

sequence tries to explore the complex and tense relationship that existed between the artists, though the poetic consciousness seems to be that of Paula's. In these poems, Sujata Bhatt probes into Paula's world in an attempt to understand the creator and the artist in the woman. Critics, however, have also detected a strong influence of Rilke himself in the poems in the collection. In a review of the collection, Ruth Padel observes that, "Exploring whatever mystery it is that lets a woman bring to birth a whole new way of outward seeing by gazing inward at herself, the poems focus on flowers, surfaces, and light. They bring out the strangeness of painting: how the sensory experience of people a hundred years ago is here in front of you, in paint". (<http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=44;doctype=review>).

In her introduction to the collection, Sujata Bhatt says that she was intrigued by the fact that the voices of Paula and Clara are never heard in the poems of Rilke and, therefore, she wanted give them a voice through her poems. The Poetry London review of the collection remarks that the poems have a three-dimensional quality much like the paintings they are inspired by. (<http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=44;doctype=review>).

Bhatt's latest collection of poetry is titled *Pure Lizard*. The poems in this collection deal with various kinds of rebirths and often juxtapose destruction and creation, death and birth, in the natural world. The best example of this is an image in which a field of organic sunflowers in Pennsylvania is set against sunflowers grown out of the toxic soil of Chernobyl. But the poems are also concerned with much more. To quote from the Carcanet review of the collection, "Pure Lizard also documents artistic exchange in its many forms: Schiller's desk is taken to Buchenwald during the Second World War, and *Jane Eyre* haunts a laboratory in Baltimore. There are poems in response to music by composers as varied as Telemann, Bob Zieff, and Philip Glass, as well as a poetic correspondence with the Welsh writer Gillian Clarke about a writer's sense of home and place, to be broadcast by BBC Radio Drama" (<http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781857543810>).

This brief survey of the poetry of Sujata Bhatt establishes the breadth and range of poetic material to be found in her work. Her poems draw predominantly upon her varied experiences as a post who has lived in three different continents and is acquainted with multiple languages. In her essay, *Blended Identity: Culture and Language Variations in Sujata Bhatt's "The Hole in the wind"*, Cecile Sandten, while discussing the postcolonial preoccupation with migration and identity in Bhatt's poetry, observes that, "Although she seems to have solved the Problem of displacement,... feelings of uprootedness, displacement and exile are also prominent in her poetry, along with an acute awareness of the epistemological and cultural implications of a blended identity and its creative potential" (*Connotations* Vol.10.1 2000/2001,88).

The natural world is also ever present in Sujata Bhatt's poems and often brings into perspective the human world against which it is set. Bhatt explores the complex relationship that exists between these two worlds as also between these and the world that is created by the artist's imagination. In several poems, she has attempted to explore and comprehend the creative process itself, in its varied expressions such as music, painting, and poetry.

Bhatt comes across as a poet who is quite conscious of both the art and craft of writing poetry. Her poems are quite spontaneous and startlingly original, especially in their imagery, while at the same time, being well-crafted and tightly structured. Perhaps the best way to understand this would be to turn to what the author herself has to say about her poetic art, (in an essay titled "The Hole in the Wind" from the *Author's Point of View*) which she sees as an organic and integrated whole:

For me, the structure or the form of the poem and the rhythm, cadence, metre, tone, diction, syntax within the poem all come together with the subject matter. The poem comes out as a piece, as an organic unit, if it's going to work. Frequently, what happens to me is that I might have one line in my head and if I write it down it leads to more lines... A poem has to have its own life and its own rhythm-just as a baby is born with its own blood in its veins. The poem has to create its own form while it is in the process of being written. I cannot impose a form upon it. Of course, in the end I have to polish it up until it sounds right. I always have to read my work aloud while I'm in the process of writing and revising. When I feel that I have a certain rhythm in my mind that's connected with the images and ideas, then I feel I'm able to write... Also I feel that the poem has to have a certain energy to begin with-and when I'm writing the energy has to appear and take over, so to speak" (*Connotations* Vol.10.1 2000/2001: 102-103).

Sujata Bhatt is a highly perceptive poet and deals with a broad range of aspects from across cultures, with her poetic consciousness blending them into a syncretic whole. Perhaps, the best assessment of her poetic ability is Cecile Sandten's observation that "By creatively exploring her frames of references, she obtains access to a better understanding of her shifting multicultural ambience. These constant self-induced joltings of perception out of the monocularity of cultural fixity make her see the world from strange and unfamiliar perspectives".

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