

Nations of the Soul and Vision of Darkness: A Reading of the Poems of Sujata Bhatt

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:8 August 2013



Sujata Bhatt

Courtesy: <http://www.izdiham.com/index.php/iz/sujata-Bhattt>

Abstract

Sujata Bhatt belongs to the new generation Indian English women poets and has been writing of the Indian sensibility and the rich tradition. Her poems also reflect the complexities of the outer world comparing them with one's own native tradition. In a way, Bhatt pictures the distance between two worlds which, in the postmodern situation, makes everyone sensational and also dejected. An attempt is made in this paper to trace the poet's conscious outing and the unconscious inner world.

Sujata Bhatt, a Postcolonial Indian English Poet – Expression of Indian Sensibility

Poetry has a special place in literature and is one of the most intimate modes of expressing one's thought and feeling. It plays a significant role in the reconciliation of inner worlds with the complexities of the outer. It is one form of art which communicates the emotional issues in a way which other form of arts cannot. Sujata Bhatt, a postcolonial Indian English poet, has established herself as a familiar poet and her poems are the expression of

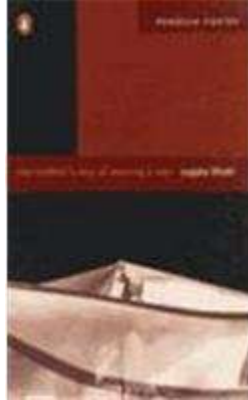
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Indian sensibility that reflect our cultures, life, attitudes, perception, life patterns, behaviour of people and traditions that have emerged over the years in India.

Reviewing Her Life in Her Motherland



Caught between identities, Sujata reviews her own life in her motherland and probes into the process of memory and desire, comforting herself by expressing her longing in the form of poems. Her long stay in abroad has inculcated in her a deep awareness of her Indianness. Sujata says “for me, the fact that I had to leave India certainly made me think about it more. And this departure from India, this loss, as I felt it, prevented me from taking India for granted. Ironically, exile brought me closer to India”.

Poet Sitakant Mahapatra’s words come true in the life of Sujata, “Unless a poet is rooted in his own local culture and milieu, he can’t speak to any reader” (3). Rooted in Indian culture and tradition, a large bulk of her poetical works deals with her Indian past in which memories of childhood cover the whole range of her imagination in which she reviews her own life in volumes of poetry.

My Mother’s Way of Wearing a Sari

Sujata’s *My Mother’s Way of Wearing a Sari* is a collection of poetry, a seeming labyrinth in its narration, each piece of poem fits in perfectly as one turns the pages, enchanted as much by the style and the intellectual rigour she places on telling the incidents in each poem. In the collection there are poems about nature, cityscapes, home, memory, love, pain and other subjects, displaying a freshness of perception. Her poems are the output as healers of her alienated state of mind and presents the dichotomy between thought and action, between the totality of being, seeing, believing and understanding that runs through

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life. Memories, self-discovery, nostalgia for childhood and inheritance seeking one's roots, history of one's country or community - these are the stepping stones in Sujata's journey to uncover her roots and the legacies that define her identity.

On the Margins of Changing Modernity – Father's World

The poet's father's experience in Benares is the backdrop of the poem "The Virologist" which is simple in address, direct, rhythmic and sharp at the level of cultural insight. The mode of living of a bachelor, and a habit of mind of displaced on the grounds of their cultural, civilization is described in a moral and spiritual backwardness.

Caught on the margins of the changing modernity, unable to forget the old rituals and taboos and unable to resist his mother, he vacillate between duty and self-fulfilment, a craving for roots and a hungering after tradition. As the author puts it, the boy, i.e., her father, oscillates in his moods between an enjoyment of the comforts of domesticity and the familial life, and a sense that his essential identity is a solitary one to be found in flight and loneliness and even adversity. His yearning for salvation pulled him in one direction. After taking bath he writes letter to his mother about the condition of the Ganga:

"That evening he wrote a letter
to his mother- disappointed
that stepping into the holy river
did not make him feel pure." (21)

These lines show the altered piousness. In this poem one can also identify a religious strain combining the material world. Through this poem, the poet envisages the pollution of the holy river Ganga, religious bigotry and also resorts the eternal symbol of the Ganges to reiterate the spiritual kinship.

Importance and Sterility of Modern Civilization

Thus, the poem is replete with images that project the importance and sterility of modern civilization. It is the poetry of the visual image, of sound and light that lays bare a musical composition. She clothes and animates her poetry with symbolism that is sometimes harsh, unable and perplexing, original but personal. She evokes surrealistic images which translate in visual and sensuous terms the elusive experience of being. The movement back

and forth in time, the compounding of parody and pathos, the fragmentation of strange experiences break the illusion of continuity. It is this inherent complexity of beliefs and miniscule observation that nurture her poetry which is at once fascinating, paradoxical and truly human.

The Pain of Partition and Violent Epochs

The pain of partition and the search for a new place under the sun have been recurring themes in the poem “Partition” in which Sujata revisits history as a zone of imaginative recovery and recuperation. Poetry becomes the vehicle for a form of retrospective understanding of how the past remains immanent in the present.

The poem “Partition” is not all about the partition of India but is about all kinds of violent epochs that thwarted the aspirations of the common people, as found in the vast expanse of recorded history. The poem traces the incidents in which a land and its people are partitioned on the basis of religious beliefs, giving centrality to the partition of India. The poet seems to question the validity of the decision which caused the bloodshed of civilians on an unprecedented scale:

‘How could they
have let a man
who knew nothing
about geography
divide a country?’ (34)

A society in which ordinary Hindus and Muslims lived in perfect harmony and good neighbourliness was smashed up following the political formula of partition.

This poem seeks to mitigate the negative effects of alienation, isolation, and dispersal through the literal and symbolic activities of translation. The fragmented senses of self, the frailty of survival, the persistence of hope, the wariness of the new are all represented with sharp precision.

Unsettling Experience and Language Use - Own Tongue Becoming Alien in Your Mouth

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Sujata's poems revolve around the unsettling experience of her persona. The poems "History is a Broken Narrative" and "New Orleans Revisited" speak of what can happen when one ventures out of her own nation. The struggle over the language is the dominant theme in which the shifting temporariness of the poet is refracted in these poems. Her frequent reference to Poona and to New Orleans reveals how the transmigration has affected her language and view.

Childhood Experience

Writing about her childhood in the poem "Earthquake", she slips easily and unaffectedly into the dialect of her growing up years. Her language changes imperceptibly as she moves to New Orleans. Languages are dying due to domination of one language. The beauty of sentences, the depth of emotions and serenity of utterances are difficult for one to achieve in an alien language. She feels her own tongue had become alien in her mouth. She manages to reproduce the robustness and flexibility of her mother tongue:

It will give you time-
Time to gather up the fallen pieces
Of your language- one by one
With your mouth, with your mouth-you need time
To pick up the scattered pieces of your language. (3)

Sujata wonders what besides the words got lost. The poet says that when words are lost, treasures of indigenous thought and identity are lost. The broken syntax explores the expressive function of linguistic opacity.

'what would you do
if you have two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.' (7)

Sense of Displacement and Ambiguity

Faced with the choice between the revolutionary mainland and the outside world, Sujata is unable to make the sacrifice of the self that reveals her distinct sense of

displacement and the ambiguity of her ability to fully assimilate culturally into the alien society.

Cruelties of the Motherland – Female Foetus Speaks

The dark gloomy corners of our country, rife with female foeticide, are illuminated in the poem “Voice of the Unwanted Girl.” The poet describes the brutal killing of an infant girl by her mother, who wants to hoard her daughter from future distress. The poem seethes with an internal anger of the foetus at the macho role that a provincial society fosters. The poem focuses on the question addressed to the mothers who are responsible for the act of brutality such as female infanticide by not mounting a little child. The narrative acknowledges the need for justice, punishment, and truth to the little foetus. It categorically points to the fact that a seemingly progressive city Mumbai has one of the worst female foeticide exists in a demonic form and is increasing across the state. It is a poor reflection on our society. The quest is that everyone views girl as financial and emotional burden. It is a difficult one to change the preference of Indians for a male child. There is a strong preference for a son to uphold the family lineage, to support parents in their old age, to inherit the family business, and to light the funeral pyre so that the parents attain salvation. Girl children are seen as nothing but burdens, with dowry being the biggest problem. She must not be seen as a burden or an emotional drain.

The cruelty of the scenario is bold and mocking and so is the voice of the poet. Reflecting on the violence, the little bud says:

I looked like a sliced pomegranate.
The fruit you never touched.
Mother, I am the one you sent away
when the doctor told you
I would be a girl- your second girl. (38)

It exposes the subconscious cry of a female infant and also brings to light the inhuman nature of the society. The use of the soliloquy helps the poet in presenting the evils and the feelings of the infant in both rural and urban India vividly. Through this poem, the readers are made to see the dark gloomy corners of this largest democracy of the world that exist beyond the hype of shining India.

The Danger of Modernity

The danger of modernity has affected the fields of culture, language, food, living style and mental setup. The conflicts and melancholy of modern life find full expression in her poems. Her poetry is replete with images that project the impotence and sterility of modern civilization. Such darkness exists in India. The poet watches the glaring disparity between the owners of skyscrapers and the poor:

The traffic rushing outside, the monsoon
slush, the wind sulking through
your beloved Mumbai-
I could have clutched the neon blue
no one wanted (38)

These are the ills of modernity. She stays articulate with the simplicity and directness of image and by the metaphysical anguish in this bleak world.

Sensory Realm

In this book, Sujata makes a bold experiment with techniques. Her poems are sensory realm of unforgotten sights, sounds, smells, and sensations combined with recollection of persons, events, and modes of thought and feeling that are too exact and serve as mere anecdotal pragmatism. She also probes into the process of memory and desire, comforting herself with an earlier moment only to discover its strangeness. She possesses both skill and imaginative vitality to translate her perceptions into unique and significant artistic expressions. Her poetry presents the dichotomy between thought and action, between the totality of being, seeing, believing and understanding that runs through life. Thus her poems are honest, unpretentious and appealing, rooted in reality, and a blossom in the imagination. The poems sail through with felicity, creating for the author an enviable position among Indian poets writing in English today.

Works Cited

Bhatt, Sujata. *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000.

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16 Feb 2003 http://www.raghu.myehome.in/authors/Sujata_Bhattt.html.

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