

A Pedagogy of Possibilities: Social Justice Delivered through the Poetry of Sujata Bhatt

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Abstract: *This article explores the theme of identity in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt. She try to rebuild home and reformulate identity through the medium of poetry. Memories of the past, longing for the much coveted homeland are well articulated in her poems. Apart from female patterns of identity, prevalent in many of her poems, Bhatt writes poems that convey her awareness of 'being the Other' and at the same time present a kind of split identity, or ambivalence, as well as a sense of belonging to the 'West' and its specific historical, regional and linguistic backgrounds. Marked by an experience of "unstable cultural identity."*

Key Words: *Identity, social justice, rootlessness and home.*

Poetry being an indispensable part of Indian Literature has always been dynamic and vibrant. Poetry being the most characteristic and powerful form of literacy expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in the Indo – English Literature. It by women poets constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. In fact Poetry has always been an effective instrument in the hands of mankind since time immemorial and contributed for the all-around development of the human beings and for bringing harmony among different cultures and societies. We have attempted to understand the productive tension of social justice. Like any ideological concept embraced in earnest, social justice can be put forward as a non-problematic objective.

The battle for emancipation was taken over by few educated women themselves who in their effort to communicate to the world their own bitter experiences as women as well as their ideas of social reform turned writers. The modern Indo-English women poets exhibit their ideas and opinions on a few common themes like identity crisis, diaspora, feminism, women empowerment etc. There is always the feeling of anxiety and extremity, rootlessness, of loss of belonging and the search for one's self and one's roots in the writing of the Indian English women poets. To fight for the dignity and true emancipation of women is the most difficult task especially because it involves values and attitudes that are deep rooted not only in the minds of men but also in the consciousness of women. Sujata Bhatt has done justice to the poetry of anxiety and extremity, which indeed is laudable.

The major motivation of the poetry from its birth had always been a projection of the social situation and social consciousness. The reflection of poetry has always been a social comment of social criticism. The early poetry by Indian women in all Indian languages was an effort to give expression to their agonies and suffering of which they never had any dearth.

Today Diaspora and Diasporic writing is a standard word in literary criticism. Talking about Diaspora as an expatriate experience, there are issues of rootlessness, and dislocation, experiences of both nostalgia and amnesia, which need to be answered. The movement of feminism has many facets. It doesn't mean getting of equal rights which men & women for the recognition of their creative talent. In fact, it is more than that knowing the reality, feminism is not definitely some kind of chauvinistic or aggressive way of living, dressed up like man. A definition like feminism is therefore, a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome.

The present research paper proposes to investigate identity as a site of resistance in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt. The main objective of the paper is to explore the social justice through the identity in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt. This article argues for a raised awareness of the possibilities of social justice. This paper is also an attempt to justify that social justice must be followed by everyone. Sujata Bhatt discussed very well social justice in her poetry. This article presents a case for reading and writing poetry of social justice in literacy learning. In more contemporary times, the term identity has taken a broader view to include social justice concerns.

Born in Ahmedabad, in India and then moving to America at the age of twelve and presently living in Germany after her marriage with a German writer, Sujata Bhatt (1956) is bicultural by birth and migration, and tricultural by marriage. Thus three countries India, America and Germany and their respective languages and cultures have gone into the making of her poetry. Her poems are multicultural, multifocal, multilingual and about multiple identities. She has published five collections of poems: *Brunizem* (1988), *Monkey Shadows* (1991), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Point No Point: Selected Poems* (1997) and *Augatora* (2000) which is reprinted in India under the name *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari*. Her first collection *Brunizem* won her two prestigious prizes: the **Alice Hunt Barlett Prize** and the **Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia)**. She received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the first collection of poems, *Brunizem*.

Sujata Bhatt along with other set of contemporary poets are aware of female sensibility in security feelings of women in social fabric as well as domestic setup. Sujata Bhatt's journey originates from her loneliness and restlessness. She exploits history, society, politics, religion, memory, relations, and multiple languages, to portray her constant struggle to harmonize multiple identities – resulted out of her multicultural background. Her multicultural identity complicates the situation.

This was the feeling I had while reading the poetry of Sujata Bhatt, especially her latest collection of poems, *Augatora*. This present paper examine Sujata Bhatt as an expatriate Indian poet, and how she negotiates the issues of Diaspora: language, colour, culture, identity and homeland/s (both imaginary and real), her memory and her share of amnesia. Unable to bare some bitter realities of the world of course caused by male dominant, society, she wants to live in an imaginary world. In *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Saree*, she opens windows to real and imagine land and cityscapes. In her poetry we have an expression of female sensibility at its best.

The poet feels at the beginning she has lost her mother tongue because she is living abroad. The truth that Bhatt is of South Asian origin may perhaps declare that she is speaking about how the English colonized area, impacting laws and regulations and dialect. The feelings of the poet are at first distress that she is losing her mother tongue. At first she talks about the two languages as though they were at war, and is fearful the foreign tongue seemed to be winning. She seems to think that the foreign tongue is winning because she is not using it (she talks about how it will 'rot and die') or because she is consciously not using it ('I thought I had spit it out'). However, she finishes confidently, reasserting her knowledge of her Indian identity. The message of this poem is trying to communicate is that no matter how well learnt a language is, you will always be from another country, who speaks a different language naturally and that no matter how long you spend in the other country, you will never be allowed to forget that you were not born there.

The poet writes about losing her tongue and forgetting how to speak her Mother tongue. But then, as she dreams, her mother tongue re-asserts itself. However, she finished confidently reasserting her knowledge of her Indian identity. Mrs. K. Rekha, and Dr. A.S. MOHAMED Rafee writes in *Structural Analysis of Sujata Bhatt's Poem, "Search for My Tongue"*:

In her poem "Search for My Tongue" (1988) Sujata Bhatt was afraid that she was losing her identity as a Gujarati speaking Indian. The poem comes from a time when she was studying English in America and feared she was being 'Americanized'. Feelings of the poet at the start she speaks as if the two languages are at war with each other and she scared that the foreign language is winning and will result in her forgetting her Mother Tongue. However she ends the poem optimistically because she is assured that her mother tongue will grow back every time and she will maintain her Indian identity. (373)

Sujata Bhatt, the winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia), in her poetic volumes such as *Brunizem* (1988), *Monkey Shadows* (2001), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Freak Waves* (1992), *Point No Point* (2001), *Nothing is Black, Really Nothing* (1998), *Augatora* (2000), *A Colour for Solitude* (2002) and *Pure Lizard* (2008) celebrates/elaborates the process of pregnancy and denotes that she is the first woman who traversed the "experience of child-birth" (*Monkey Shadows* 110). Again expressing the female identity Bhatt writes:

delicate feet walk up my neck
over my forehead, /through my hair,
I can feel/their long slender tails trail across my skin
Let's finger paint with all your tongues and lips
and sperm across our hips. (*Brunizem* 29)

Sujata Bhatt's poem is about what it is like to live in a foreign country feeling disconnected from the cultural background. The poet feels at the beginning of the poem that she has lost her original language now that she is living abroad. The poet feels that she has lost an important part of herself that she needs to recover to feel herself again. Poems like *Augatora*, *Brunizem*, *Gazpacho*, *New Orleans Revisited*, *Honeymoon*, etc reflect the diverse representation of culture

and society. Sujata Bhatt draws the attention of readers, by quoting the accidental killing of children in United States. Her poem, *Walking Across the Brooklyn Bridge, July 1990*, shows her concern for the killing of children through guns either by their brothers, sisters or by their fathers. The poem begins as:

In New York
children are being shot
to death this summer.
It's usually an accident.
Someone else, no doubt an adult,
was meant to be killed instead.

The 'trauma' of being an Indian in the world is absent here. She has found a solution for herself in *History is a Broken Narrative*:

History is a broken narrative
Pick a story and see where
It will lead you
You take your language where you set it
Or do you
Get your language where you take it?

Many have discussed Bhatt as a poet of diaspora. Due to her multicultural background and multilingual poems, she has been included in a diaspora anthology: *Our Feet Walk the Sky* [1993]. Ch. Aruna writes in *The Impact of Feminism on Sujatha Bhatt's Poetry*:

Her poetry sometimes questions the fundamental things of human lives. She questions can we go beyond love? A sense of loss, sorrow, a deep human suffering rules her mind off and on. She deals with everyday reality but it is deeply reflective and meditative, seeking to pierce the dazzling on humdrum surface realities to arrive at core of experience. (13)

Sujata Bhatt's poetry is also of no exception. Sujata's fabric of poetry women not only with the elements of feminism but also with different outlook and approach. No doubt she speaks of the common women and her basic need for love and security with inside knowledge. She likes to be a social rebel, sometimes to go against social norms, frustration and disillusionment with her were lot in life. Yet herself expression in her poetry is not herpetic. Her poetry doesn't reflect the mirror of women life though they suffer under horrors and rare joys of love. Moreover, in terms of the process of pregnancy, Sujata Bhatt renders the way how one can examine the idea that woman is able to conceive or not. In this regard, she contrives the idea extensively:

I would bleed at least
the blood would heal
me' at least the blood/would soothe
the garlic scrubbed cuts.
Every month I bleed/too much-
too much- and then he comes
with his clove of garlic/and then I must keep
this clove of garlic deep inside me where it burns. (The
Stinking Rose 132)

Bhatt as a poet attacks the conventional role of woman in the patriarchal setup with subtle sense of irony and satire. Being aware of the Indian situation Bhatt dwells upon Hindu rituals and symbols which have cultural significance. For instance; bangles are not merely ornaments but symbolize 'the auspiciousness of wifehood'. Sujata in her poem, "White Asparagus" throws light on the female desire which is as important as the male's. In this poem, she enters into the consciousness of pregnant women who erotically relieves her state of sexual fulfilment. She asks: "who understands the logic behind the desire?" (22-23) she shows the argument that in a society where both the male and female have equal contribution as well as participation, why is the female desire not recognized whereas the male-desire is looked upon with proper respect? In one of the poems titled "Udaylee" she reveals the traumatic experience of an upper caste Hindu woman during her menstruation period:

Here we're permitted to write

letters, to read, and it gives a chance
for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal. (15)

For one thing, Bhatt's memories of her mother are interrelated with her memories of language. When she learnt to speak English and forget her Indian languages, she did not notice the change, but her mother did: Bhatt Sujata's poems are like sparks struck from a whirring flint, they did not add up to a sustained illumination. Many of others poems spring from her personal life what it may be remorse loss or mere loneliness. Her personal utterances are used mark to conceal her true tragic personality. They are individual poems showing great moral insight, pity, concern, sweetness and moral philosophy in her life. Suab Ahmed writes in *Female Body as a Site of Resistance: A Study of the Select Poetry of Eunice De Souza and Sujata Bhatt*:

“The Kama Sutra Retold” which is from her poetic volume Brunizem, in terms of female body holds out fearlessly the first sexual intercourse between two teenagers and makes an effort to constitute a perfect symbiosis between the lovers and nature, but involving that, in the act of love, the girl “must have swallowed the sky/ the lake, and all the woods/veined with amber brown pathways” (Brunizem 40). Therefore, such articulation of female sexuality is an expression of resistance in a male-centric Indian society. (591)

Sujata Bhatt's poem 'A Story for Pearse', based on her aunt- Hirabhen has similar representations; where a woman is tortured, beaten up, whipped. All these tortures led her to take a decision in which she is free from all the boundaries:

My great-aunt Hirabhen
was rescued from her mother-in-law
rescued from her husband
soon after she was married.
Her mother-in-law used to beat her
with a bamboo pole.
She made her work all day
with little food,
then whipped her every night
until her pretty skin turned ugly

Many have discussed Bhatt as a poet of diaspora. Due to her multicultural background and multilingual poems, she has been included in a diaspora anthology: *Our Feet Walk the Sky* [1993]. The title of the poem, 'Muliebrity', is a Latin word that aptly describes the theme that Bhatt explores. It stands for the state or quality of being a woman, or the features of a woman's nature. In particular, it describes the feminine form of an adult woman, forming a contrast with maidenhood. Perhaps, the poet felt a revulsion, or she felt compassion for the girl as maybe that was something she wouldn't have wanted to do. She didn't need to, distanced from the girl, perhaps by social class, and her urban upbringing:

I have thought so much about the girl
who gathered cow-dung in a wide, round basket
along the main road passing by our house
and the Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar.
I have thought so much about the way she
moved her hands and her waist
and the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna
lilies,
the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes
and the dust from crows' wings which smells different –
and again the smell of cow-dung as the girl scoops. (10)

For instance, when asked to write a poem that he would have written on the talking walls if he stood in the shoes of a young Chinese immigrant poet, Andrew, a fourth grader, penned the following poem of social justice:

Why should I be locked behind this great big fence
When it is sunny not even raining?
I miss my mother
And I miss my father.

I'm locked behind this fence
As tall as a gifaffe [sic]
I can't even laugh.
I thought I would strike rich
with gold.
Instead I'm sad
And miserable.

In the first part of the poem A Different History, she concentrates on respect for education and learning. She has written poems about the position of women in society; but the question of gender is not central to her poetry. She uses symbols, images to explore the cry of “women problems” at the same time she did not give any brand to her claim. Thus, the close reading of her poetry reveals that Sujata Bhatt uses history, society, politics, religion, memory, relations, and multiple languages, to portray her constant struggle to harmonize multiple identities. She is a success story, for she has learnt the secrets of the command over the language and everything else related to it.

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