

# Study of themes in the poetry of Sujata bhatt

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## Abstract

Post - independent English poetry written by women poets is replete with diversified themes. Women poets of this period have their own way of expressing voices that are different from the voice of pre-independence period, and this seems to be very obvious because in general it had undergone tremendous changes after the independence. The present research paper explores various themes presented in the poems of Sujata Bhatt. Post-independence Indian English poetry developed as a new form of expression of Indian poets in general whereas this period also witnessed the growth of Indian women poets with their unique inimitable style of expressing their feelings in the poems.

Key words: Social equality, feminism, humanism.

## Assertion of Self

One of the most powerful themes that emerge from the poems of Sujata Bhatt is the continuous struggle and search for one's identity. Born in India, grew up in U.S.A., now living in Germany. Sujata Bhatt truly represents a multicultural outlook, the same multicultural dimension on language; literature, culture, history and art basically are her own experiences of life. There is constant search for "the difficult truth of experience" in her works which moves from India towards America and Europe. But India remains "a necessary obsession" in her works. Though she is settled in Germany, her native culture identity about places, family, sight, memory, sound, and smells run through her poem. That sense of belonging and love for nativity seems to be reflected in her poems. She longs for her connection with India. She cannot be the same in Europe and America. In her poem, "Search for My Tongue" there is a clear search for an identity based on language when she listens to the tape recording sent by her mother from India. "What would you do / if you had two tongues in your mouth" (Brunizem 91-92). Bhatt is extremely concerned about linguistic identity of her children and grandchildren. Her concern about future generation is quite evident when she writes: "which language / has not been the oppressor's tongue? / ... And how does it happen / ... [that] ... grand." ("The Different History" (Brunizem 19-22). The poet shows how the protagonist in the poem "She Finds Her Place" desires to establish herself as a poet and find her place. The woman makes her way ahead confidently; "the tall woman, her dark shawl/pulled out, walkson anyway. The tall woman walks alone, / deeper into the woods" ("She Finds Her

Place” 21-24). Sujata Bhatt writes that finally the protagonist woman stamps her presence. She writes; “she finds her place/ad looks at the moon” (26-27). Sujata

Bhatt’s nostalgia for her Indian identity and origin is very much seen and quite understandable when she herself becomes a translator from Gujarati to English. Bhatt writes in English for non- Gujarati readers and her treatment of India is quite sentimental. Quite good number of her poems is about her own identity and the

language that she speaks, her mother tongue. The agony of ruthlessness is quite evident in the writings of Sujata Bhatt. A sense of displacement makes her feel that she neither belongs to her and nor the host society. This sense of displacement is reflected in her poem “One who Goes Away”; “I am the one / who always goes / blood my home Away with my home” (The Stinking Rose 3). She Further writes “Which can only stay inside / In my blood my home which doesn’t fit / with any geography” (5). It has been rightly remarked about Sujata Bhatt; “While her Poetry alludes to a world of drugs, sex, bad food, broken relationships and sleepless nights, there is also wit, irony, knowingness, and a marvelous imagination” (Bruce King 313).

### **Feminism**

Many poems of Sujata Bhatt are concerned with position of woman in the society. The lives of the woman, gender concern and the relation between man and woman are some of the thematic aspects of her poems. Sujata Bhatt is concerned about the existence of women in a world where the women are not allowed to be free and need alive of their own choice but Sujata Bhatt is revolutionary poet who speaks for women empowerment and freedom. Sujata Bhatt’s experiences in India have made her develop into a strong woman poet. She is concerned about the life of a Girl confine to only domesticated affairs and nothing more. She writes: “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” (“Muliebrity”, Brunizem 1-3 ). She sweeps as if cow dung is a big sense of achievement for her “Cheekbones / Each time she found a particular promising / mound of dung” (16-17).

Bhatt portrays a woman who is not ready to become a victim of man’s tyranny. Though a married woman’s life after the divorce is not easy but according to Bhatt woman should not continue with marriage. In her poem “A Story for Pearse” Which is based on the life of Sujata Bhatt’s aunt Hirabhen who being tortured by her husband decided to take a tough decision in Indian scenario to take divorce and become free from all exploitation. “My great aunt Hirabhen / .../from her mother-in-law / her husband/Her mother-in-law used to beat her... (“A Story for Pearse”, Point No Point 79-80) Sujata Bhatt raises a very sensitive issue related to women to convey the message that women are not untouchable when they are menstruating in the poem “Udaylee”. The poem is an attack against the treatment women get during their menstruation. She writes; “Only paper and wood are safe/from a menstruating woman’s touch./so they built this room/for us, next to

the cowshed.” (“Udaylee” 1-4). The poet beautifully depicts the scene of a girl collecting the cow dung on the streets without hesitation of surroundings asserting herself and making her presence felt amongst others. She represents a picture of an Indian woman who knows her work and does it quite passionately without any

concern and thought of what others think about herself. She is an epitome of a strong Indian girl who celebrates her little household achievements. The poet writes; “. . .

most of all unwilling/ to forget her or to explain to anyone the greatness/and the power glistening through her cheekbones” (“Muliebrity” 14-16)

“

## Loneliness

Smita Agarwal reveals that even in the company of friend and lover there is loneliness when probably there is a lack of true intensity of love for each other. Modern life is responsible for such condition of people where there is time for material objects but not for the emotions of the near and dear one. In the poem “Enchilida” the lover and beloved feel in no company even in the company of each other. They are not able to understand each other; “She wonders if she’ll ever know/This man” (Wish-granting Words 11). The beloved tries to understand her lover but in vain; “She’s read up the pages of/His desires, aches, insomnia;/His fear of loneliness” (11) The poet uses the imagery from the process of spinning of yarn to understand the relationship between the lovers in the poem. Just like the lump in the spinning of yard becomes an obstacle in the proper spinning similarly there is a kind of lump of misunderstanding between these two lovers which is disturbing their relationship; “Through separations and miraculous/Recoveries, misery and camaraderie,/ The yarn they’ve spun has slubbed (11)

## Indianness

Sujata Bhatt’s poems reveal her sense of Indianness. Her Indian spirit is reflected in the depiction of village life when she writes “cow dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies, / the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed cloths.( “ Muliebrity”, Brunizem 7-8 ). Her poems are replete with Indian God and Goddess, myths, birds, and animals. “Here, the gods roam freely, / disguised as snakes or monkeys and goats, peacocks lions/ every tree is sacred” (“a different History”, Brunizem 4-6). Sujata Bhatt celebrates the Indianness in her poetry. She presents India through her poems in different hues and shades. In her poem “A Different History” she presents strong Indian values and cultural richness. Her fascination with Indianness is quite clear when she reveals the secrets of Indian kitchen and its spices. The poet creates the scene of a typical spicy rich Indian kitchen when the ingredients of spice are added during the process of frying “(cham cham vaghar) ; “(rai methi lasann gheema ladhay. . .)/ Mustard seeds popping in hot butter,/crushed garlic whispering urgent” (“The Garlic of Truth” 1-4). Her Indian sensibility is clearly on the surface where in India the feet touching book is considered to be sin because it is believed that books aboard of Sarasvati ‘The Goddess of Wisdom’ she further writes “It is a sin to show a book aside /with your fort, /...you must learn how to turn the pages gently / without disturbing Sarasvati”(“A Different History”, Brunizem 9-16). He love for own language and Indian culture is quite evident in her poetry. “Many of her poems are about the language and culture of her blood. You can say that you are more at ease or more competent in a language, but not that it is a form of racism” (King 329).

## Nature

Sujata Bhatt’s poems are a bounded with the objects and images of nature. Birds and animals serve the purpose of expression towards nature seems to be finding expression in her poems through animals who are believe to be form of God themselves in Indian mythology: “Here, the God’s roam freely / disguised as snake or monkey”. Nature in Sujata Bhatt’s poem is the natural ‘home’ for woman. She writes “Among a crowd of trees / she find her place / looks at the moon.../ finally come home” (“She Finds her Place” 23-26). Similarly in the poem “The Peacock” she describes the presence of peacock and its influence on her.” “His load sharp call / seems to come from nowhere” (“ The Peacock” 1-2). Further she writes that “I was told / that you have sit Veranda / and read a book” (9-11) which she was occupied reading a book nature attracts her and she writes “The wind will change direction / the study hum of bees / in the bushes nearby” (17-19) At the same time the

poet is attracted towards the cat and she writes “The cat will awaken and stretched” and finally she was told: “if you look up in time / you might see the peacock” (21-23). Similarly the poem “Buffaloes” the wood cut etc show her love for nature and the minuteness of her description of animals, birds, insects and the objects of nature. She finds the presence of God in the nature’s creation.

### **Love and Romanticism**

Sujata Bhatt is a romantic poet and at times erotic in her approach. Poems like “White Asparagus” And “Kerkorian lake” Sujata Bhatt seems to be quite different poet in expressing love with erotic elements. “White Asparagus” is one of the poems of such kind where “The poet moves again between object and subject and the fascination in ways that catch both the singularity of the object and the fascination it inspires” (Eunice de Souza 71). In this poem, physical desires are expressed: “Who understands the logic / behind this desire? / who speaks of the rushing tide” (“White Asparagus”, Monkey Shadow) Romantic elements and flight of imagination run beautifully in the poems of Sujata Bhatt. Romantic sensibilities find expression in her poems when she talks about her childhood, her grandmother, her family, pictures of rural and urban richness of India. Her descriptions of places, people, animals, lakes, birds, give her poem a romantic flavor. “In “The Peacock” for instance, she catches the singularity of the bird, its miraculous beauty, and the sense of stillness one feels in the presence of such beauty” (Eunice de Souza 71). There is blend of natural and nonnatural elements in her poem “The Hole in the Wind” natural elements are ‘things’ such as lightening and see and super natural forces like ghost, voices, souls, together give this poem super natural elements. The feeling of love is expressed by Sujata Bhatt in different ways. In the poem “Buffaloes” she shows the motherly love where a young window wants to die at her husband’s pyre but couldn’t do that because she has to live for her “three-week-old son” who has to be looked after by her. In her another

poem there is an innocent love of “an eleven-year-old girl” (“For My Grandmother”<sup>1</sup>) for her grandmother who had recently died but the girl “would not cry or eat/sleep or speak” (25). The bond of love between a daughter and her mother is quite natural. The same bond is seen in the poem “Kalika” where the protagonist Kalika remembers her mother when “the sun falls on the bright red ribbons” of her daughter and visualizes “there is her mother in a red sari” (“Kalika” 21-23). Later she “sees her daughter on the lawn/struggling with her doll’s matted hair” (31-32). Motherly love for her child in the womb is beautifully expressed in the poem “Pink Shrimps and Guesses”. Mother speaks to her baby in the womb; “Hey, are you there/already, already/am I your mother?” (“Pink Shrimps and Guesses” 1-3). Mother imagines the appearance of her child; “Today I tried/to imagine your nose,/your eyebrows/ the shape your legs will take”(4-7). She also wants to fulfill the wants of the unborn child; “Today I wanted you/to talk to me./Tell me what you want”(10-12).

### **Marriage and Man and Women Relationship**

In Sujata Bhatt poetry the “tall woman walks alone” and “finds her place among a crowd of trees” show that relationship between man and woman is that of equality based on equal dignity and respect for each other; “It must meet you/It must be half the way”. In portraying man and woman relationship it is quite evident the typical Indian attitude of man towards a woman. A woman thou working ‘has to perform all the duties as a woman a man views his wife from his own perspective and

not from the woman’s perspective This man and woman relationship is portrayed by Sujata Bhatt:” Oh but he wanted a wife,/did-/a wife,/ not a poet,/so he burnt Anna’s poem /Samovar”. (“She Finds her Place”, Brunizem 1-4).

## Sense of spirituality and Moral Values

“Reincarnation” is another philosophical poem by Sujata Bhatt where she conveys the prevalent belief that there is always return of our actions even if one takes the rebirth; “The wise old men of India say/. . . one often dreams/of the life one led before” (“Reincarnation” 1-15). Sujata Bhatt discusses the philosophy of human existence in her poem “The Difference Between Being and Becoming”. She asks questions about human body and soul in the poem; “Where does the body house the soul?/Locked in the attic,/wings whirring against glass” (“The Difference Between Being and Becoming” 1-3). The philosophy is that soul wishes to fly like a free bird and doesn’t want to be confined to any body; “. . . roam beyond the neem tree/. . . throbbing with the hummingbird inside” (25-29). Sujata Bhatt breathes an air of spirituality in her poems. She makes her readers feel elevated when she philosophizes the simple thoughts into ideas of deeper meanings. 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 writes;

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. (“Sad Songs with Henna Leaves” 1-4)

The poet’s spirituality has its roots in the ‘Bhagavad Gita’ and the teachings of Gautama Buddha. Sujata Bhatt advocates the significance of moral values through her poetry. Moral values create a strong system of honesty, truth and respect. She writes in one of her poems; “it is a sin/to be rude to a book/ It is a sin to shove a book aside/with your foot” (“A Different History” 7-10). The books are considered as sacred because books belong to Goddess Sarasvati (the goddess of knowledge) so the poet says; “You must learn how to turn the pages gently/without disturbing Sarasvati” (15-16). “Sujata: The First Disciple of Buddha” is a poem that conveys the message that the one who thinks for humanity is not able to sleep and eat. The man who visits the poet in the poem is very shabby and hungry for a long time. He is taken care of by the poet and then she asks the question; “how did you get this way?” the man replied. “I haven’t slept for years,” he said. “I’ve been thinking, just thinking./I couldn’t sleep or eat/ until I had finished thinking” (“Sujata: The First Disciple of Buddha” 18-20). The life of great soul like Buddha shows the path of humanity and values. The poem entitled “The First Meeting” shows the poet’s sensitiveness towards the philosophy of letting others live their lives. Through the example of King Cobra the poet tries to convey a strong message where the poor creatures are hurt and harmed by others. A sad and troubled cobra says; “Everywhere I go people pester me with their prayers/ their hundred bowls of milk a day” (“The First Meeting 28-29). The poor creature wants to live and not be disturbed by anyone; “I want to live in your garden,/to visit you, especially those nights you sing,/let me join you”(41-43). The poet is quite sensitive to human suffering and pain. She wants people to help

those who need food and help. She says;

As a girl I learned

Never to turn anyone away

From our door. Ma told me

give fresh water, good food,

Nothing u wouldn't eat. ("Go to Ahmedabad" 9-13)

The poem is about helping the deprived class and especially those who are in need of food more especially children; "the children must always be fed" (23). The poem is a strong message to those who wish to help the poor; "instead of handing out/coins to

everyone/you give them tomatoes, cucumbers" (29-31).

- 1 . Bhatt Sujata " One who Goes Away" *The Stinking Rose*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1995.3-5 print.
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