

'Imaginary Homelands' and resistance to Melting Pot in the poetry of Sujata Bhat

Sabbir Galariya

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

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Corresponding Author

Email: [sabbirgalariya\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:sabbirgalariya[at]gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

The Indian Diaspora creates a major impact in world culture. The sense of yearning for the motherland is the most overwhelming sentiment of the Indian diaspora wherever it exists. Their nostalgia, together with a curious attachment to the homeland's traditions, religions and languages gave birth to diaspora literature. The writers of diaspora deal vastly with themes of loss/gain of identity, nostalgia of the past/history/homeland, remembrance of religious & community rituals, details of imaginary landscapes, childhood events, sense of alienation, etc. The paper tries to explain how the writers of Indian diaspora resist the cultural assimilation offered by the foreign land and how they recreate their unique Indian identity. Countries like America attracted large number of immigrants with the help of the concept of '**melting pot**' – the cultural integration of the immigrants by making them lose their own language, tradition and culture and thus create a homogenous society. But diasporic writers like Sujata Bhatt resist such tendencies by creating an '**Imaginary Homeland**' (a concept given by Salman Rushdie in his collection of essays '*Imaginary Homelands*' - 1992) i.e. Imaginary India in her case through her poems based on the themes of her childhood experience in India, women's issues, history, mythology and polylingualism. She conflates her Indian identity with the alien culture and her poetry shows the signs of her understanding of time, history and cultures and exhibits the impact of these forces on the construction of self and identity. The poetry collection taken for analysis of resistance to the idea of melting pot in the poetry of **Sujata Bhatt** is **Brunizem (1988)**, the first volume of poetry written by Sujata Bhatt

Sujata Bhatt and the Indian Diaspora:

The writers of Indian Diaspora occupy a central stage in World literature. They are constantly involved in expanding and redefining India and Indianness. They are engaged in constant construction and deconstruction to root the self and when an irreconcilable cultural crisis is reached on account of failure to become part of a much larger alien culture, the misery only increases. While the first generation immigrants from India constantly nurse their grievances against the homeland, the second and third generations look at India without prejudices and take pride in India's accomplishments. For them, India is a brand name, which they can use for their own advancement and they become true assets for the country. Their writings retain and conserve the Indianness through different literary techniques.

The Indian Diasporic writings flourished right after the Indian Independence. The foremost characteristic features of the Indian Diasporic writings involve the quest for identity, nostalgia, memory, familial and marital relationships, and sense of loss of culture, traditions and an attempt to create an imaginary homeland. It is important to note that writers of Indian Diaspora resisted the idea of '**melting pot**' (used to describe the cultural integration of immigrants to the United States) that was highly promoted by America after the World War years. The Indian Diaspora writers are known for articulating and hence creating a unique image of India which, on one hand resists cultural assimilation and on the other hand, negotiates with the foreign culture. The idea of '**melting pot**' is a monocultural metaphor that focuses on the creation of a

homogeneous society from a heterogeneous society. America invited scholars from all around the world in the Post-war years to come and lose their culture, thus assuming an American identity. The term "**melting pot**" gained prominence in America after it was used as a metaphor describing a fusion of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities in the 1908 play of the same name. (The '**Melting Pot**' - a play by Israel Zangwill, depicts the life of a Russian Jewish immigrant family, the Quixanos. David has survived a pogrom that had killed his mother and sister. In order to forget this horrible event, he composes an "American Symphony" and eagerly wants to look forward to a society free of ethnic divisions and hatred, rather than backward at his traumatic past).

Writers of Indian Diaspora resist this assimilation in various ways. Indo-American writer such as Bharati Mukherjee, in her *The Middle Man and other stories (1988)* presents the theme of immigration while in the novel *Jasmine (1989)*, she presents the story of an Indian woman in the United States who is not ready to accept the outdated traditional society and adapts herself according to the American society. In her novel *Wife (1975)*, she presents the story of Dimple Dasgupta who has an arranged marriage to Amit Basu, an engineer, instead of marrying a neurosurgeon as she had dreamed about. They experience culture shock and loneliness as they move to the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri, in her debut novel, *The Namesake (2003)* explores the tension between two conflicting cultures with highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences and hence articulates a unique Indian-American experience. Anjana Appachana, in her debut novel *Listening*

Now (1997), deals with the themes of female bonding, female sexuality and mother-child relationships spanning three generations. We find nativity in the rhythms of language and the metaphors. V.S. Naipul, in his *An Area of Darkness* (1964), focuses on the post-Independence problems like poverty, caste system, neglected area of sanitation and disillusionment with the ancestral land. Salman Rushdie, in his *Midnight's Children* (1981), deals with the themes of post-colonialism, independence and partition. Similarly, writers such as Anita Nair, Manjula Padmanabhan, Sujata Bhatt, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Meena Alexander, Vikram Seth, etc – all weave a unique image of India along with the Indian experience in conflict with the foreign culture.

Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in 1956 and brought up in Pune until 1968, when she immigrated to America with her family. In an interview with Vicki Bertram, Sujata Bhatt states that she started writing at the age of eight. She spent her childhood in Gujarat and in Pune and these places play an important role in invoking her childhood memories in her debut poetry collection – *Brunizem*. This childhood experience helps her in creating an '**Imaginary homeland**'- a concept given by Salman Rushdie in his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands* (1992). Rushdie states –

"It may be that writers in my position, 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 also 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 the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind"

(*Imaginary Homelands* – Pg 10)

The idea of '*Imaginary homelands*' focuses on reclaiming an exclusive Indian experience, that exists no more in India, through creation of fictions. It highlights the fact the homeland which the writers wish to see and experience, is no longer a permanent entity in reality but a transient and temporal one. Bhatt, in her debut poetry collection, creates an imaginary homeland (India) with the help of her childhood experience and thus resists the melting pot culture. She left India twice: first to New Orleans from the time when she was 5 until she was 8, when they returned to India - and then later to Connecticut when she was twelve.

For some reason she tends to ignore her first visit to America and feels that she truly left India only when she was twelve. Bhatt started composing poems for *Brunizem* when she was in her early 20s. In America, 1960s and 70s was the period when second wave feminists advocated against inequality and discrimination. The slogan – "*Personal is Political*" highlighted the link between that cultural and political inequalities committed against women. It encouraged women to understand the relation through which their personal lives mirrored sexist power structures. Betty Friedan was a prominent figure in second-wave feminism as she published

her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 that criticized the idea that women could find fulfillment only through childrearing and homemaking activities. Bhatt, being aware of such upheavals, represented women through a feminist perspective in her poems. She presents a harsh critique on the suppression, social taboos and cultural restrictions imposed on women by the Indian society. Thus, she blends her representation of women with a feminist undertone.

Sujata Bhatt, in her poems, asserts her unique identity with her trademark characteristic – i.e. polylingualism (using two languages in the same poem). In *Brunizem*, she uses English and Gujarati in the same poem (Eg: The poem '*In search of my Tongue*') to present the conflict between the two languages and thus two cultures. Out of this conflict, she presents the tension between the conflicting cultures in an innovative way. It also makes the narrative 'polyphonic' in Bakhtin's terms as it presents diversity of point of views and voices. Hence, in this way, Bhatt resists the cultural homogenization (melting pot culture) offered by a developed nation like America.

It is also important to note that this idea of imaginary homelands defines or controls and regulates the position of women. The women are regarded as a source of cultural influence and hence assigned the responsibility of protecting the interests of the cultural group from western influences. The home then acquires a spiritual character, something sacrosanct that needs protection against western influence, and hence reproduces this conception of a rediscovered "Indian" identity in the family. As women are considered as the transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine and the mother tongue, it becomes their responsibility to transmit such cultural and traditional values in a diasporic society. Such a cultural identity prescribes fixed roles for women and becomes regressive as it seeks to contain them in repressive socio-cultural traditions. But, women writers of Diaspora like Sujata Bhatt resist such ideas and articulate a sharp feminist stance by presenting a sharp critique against the exploitation and suppression of women.

Analysis of '*Brunizem*':

Brunizem is the debut poetry collection of Sujata Bhatt. It was published in 1988 by Carcanet Press. The title *Brunizem* is the name of a fertile soil found in Asia, North America and Europe. It makes perfect title for this poetry collection as the poems reflect on Bhatt's experiences living in Ahmedabad and Pune during her childhood days, and then migrating to New Orleans at the age of 5 and again to Connecticut at the age of 12 and finally settling in Germany after her marriage to the Michael Augustin. The title thus provides space for expressing the three worlds in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt.

The book is divided into 3 broad sections:-

- 1) *The First Disciple* – This section contains 18 poems and most of the poems represent Bhatt's childhood memories. But, it is important to note that she infused the themes of menstruation, widow and child birth in order to subtly comment on the suppression of

women. She also invokes Indian mythology by drawing parallels between his brother and the mythological Nachiketa. The setting of most of the poems is India – more specifically Sanosara, Ahmedabad, Kosbad, and Pune.

- 2) *A Different History* – This section contains 20 poems that articulate Bhatt's American experience at different places. She begins this section with a poem titled as – '*A Different History*', indirectly hinting to the different history of America. She also mentions different Russian writers such as Anna Akhmatova and her husband Shileyko, Vasily Aksyonov which she would have studied in America. It is in this section that she presents her masterpiece – '*Search For My Tongue*' where she articulates her tension about losing his tongue i.e. native Gujarati language.
- 3) *Eurydice Speaks* – This section contains 22 poems which provide voices to the women characters such as Eurydice - the wife of Orpheus, the French-Polish physicist – Marie Curie, and the German sculptor and wife of Rainer Maria Rilke – Clara Westhoff. Many poems present the then history such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the 1984 anti-Sikh Riots. The section ends with the invocation of places such as Ahmedabad and Baroda.

⇒ Theme of childhood experience and women issues

Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad. Her father was working in Pune then and her parents used to live in a flat there. Some of the crucial years of her childhood were spent in India - in Gujarat and in Maharashtra to be more precise. Her childhood experience can be found in many of her poems. Poems such as 'Muliebrity', 'The Doors are Always Open', 'Buffaloes', 'Udaylee', deal with her childhood memories. It is very important to note that she conflates her childhood memories with women issues such as widowhood and menstruation.

In '*Buffaloes*', Bhatt deals with the traditional concept of widowhood. She presents a widow who failed to end her life by burning on her husband's pyre (hinting to Sati tradition) because she was insisted by her mother-in-law to raise her only son. The widow is denied bodily autonomy and is assigned the task of child rearing. This idea of gaining bodily autonomy was one of the main agendas for the second wave of feminism. Bhatt, in her interview with Vicki Bertram, states that she invented this character of widow and infused it with a daily memory of watching the buffalo from her childhood. The dreams of the widow are compared with the swishing tails of the buffalo. The metaphor is furthermore complicated with the introduction of the owner of buffalo who can be considered as the patriarchal symbol of the widow's husband.

*"The young widow
thinks she should have burned on
her husband's funeral pyre
She could not, for her mother-in-law
insisted she raise the only son
of her only son"*

*"Her dreams lie
lazily swishing their tales
in her mind like buffaloes"*

In '*અડલી* (*Udaylee*), Bhatt presents the traditional idea of menstruation prevalent in the Indian society. The speaker of the poem argues that only pen and wood are safe from a menstruating woman's touch. In many places, women are also not allowed to enter any sacred place during menstruation even today. The speaker also informs us of a room built next to a cowshed for menstruating women and it is in this room that they can express- they can write and they can set themselves free. This room serves as the symbol of liberation for women.

*"Only paper and wood are safe
from a menstruating woman's touch.
So they built this room
for us, next to the cowshed.
Here, we're permitted to write
letters, to read, and it gives a chance
for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal"*

In '*Muliebrity*', Bhatt describes the image of a girl who gathers cow dung on a daily basis. This domesticated image of woman was seen by her during her childhood. Therefore, the speaker in the poem highlights the difficulty in finding an apt metaphor to describe her or to capture the power glistening through her cheek bones when she found a suitable sized mound of dung.

*"- I have thought so much
but having been unwilling to use her for a metaphor,"*

*"-but most of all unwilling
to forget her or to explain to anyone the greatness
and the power glistening through her cheekbones
each time she found a particularly promising
mound of dung-"*

In poems such as '*She Finds Her Place*', '*Marie Curie to Her Husband*', '*Clara Westhoff to Rainer Maria Rilke*', '*Eurydice Speaks*', Bhatt provides a voice to the otherwise silenced women characters. A similar attempt was also made by the British poet and playwright – Carol Ann Duffy through her '*The World's Wife*' (1999) where she provides voice to King Midas's wife, Freud's wife and many such known and legendary personalities and highlights the complexities of gender relations and the role of women.

In '*She Finds Her Place*', Bhatt gives voice to the Russian poet – Anna Akhmatava who is known for expressing the terror of Stalinism through her poems such as *Requiem* (1935-40). Bhatt highlights Akhmatava's suffering caused by her husband Shileyko, Russian poet and orientalist who stopped her from writing her poems.

*"Oh but he wanted a wife,
Shileyko did –
a wife, not a poet,
so he burnt Anna's poems
in the samovar"*

In *'Marie Curie to Her Husband'*, the well known Polish-French physicist and chemist – Marie Curie who is known for her works in radioactivity, states that though she has inhabited the French tongue, she still counts in Polish at night. The Poles in France forms one of the largest Polish diaspora communities in Europe. This poem, in a way, highlights Bhatt's resistance to English language like Marie Curie's resistance to French.

"But at night, I still count in Polish"

In *'Clara Westhoff to Rainer Maria Rilke'*, Bhatt gives an authoritative voice to the Clara, German sculptor and the wife of Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist – Rainer Maria Rilke. Clara authoritatively asks Rilke to spend some time with her so that she could show her a new stone which she found near a dead tree.

*"Tomorrow
come downstairs,
it has been a month, will you,
I want to show you
the new stone I found
stuck in the mud by the dead tree."*

In *'Eurydice Speaks'*, the mythological Eurydice, the wife of the legendary musician and poet, Orpheus comes to life when she talks to her husband. According to the Greek mythology, Orpheus travelled to Underworld to retrieve her wife Eurydice who was bitten to death by a viper. Eurydice, in the poem argues that she's not in the underworld (hell) but she is in a place called Maine (U.S. State). She states that she wanted to stay there because she has found someone who is not God but a quiet man who listens to her talks. Eurydice, in the poem wants someone who could listen to her thoughts and feelings.

*"Orpheus, I tell you I'm not in hell,
This place is called Maine".*

*"Orpheus, I want to stay here
with the smooth pebbles,
I want to stay here, at the ocean's edge
I have found someone new –
no god, but a quiet man who listens."*

It is also important to note that Bhatt wrote a poem about the German painter and one of the most important representatives of early expressionism – Paula Becker. She is also regarded as the 1st known female painter to paint nude self-portraits. The poem *'For Paula Modersohn-Becker'*, Bhatt recollects her experience of visiting the museum where Becker's self-portraits are kept and how she was charmed by the depth of the colours.

Bhatt also presents a mesmerising picture of her childhood in the poem *'The Peacock'* where she describes how the beautiful peacock would grab her attention and wouldn't allow her to read. In *'Sherdi'*, Bhatt teaches us how she used to eat sugarcane with one's teeth when she was in Sanosara. In *'Swami Anand'*, she recalls her experience when she was 17 years old in Kosbad (Maharashtra) and used to recite her

poems to Swami Anand who would always say after listening to the poems – "just continue".

In *'The Difference between Being and Becoming'*, she describes a beautiful garden that was next to her house in Pune.

Therefore, Bhatt captures her childhood experience and infuses it with the women issues and hence creates an imaginary homeland to resist the cultural assimilation or melting pot. Her poems can be regarded as polyphonic as it has diverse voices – voice of a woman, of a person who has left her homeland, of identity struggle and of conflicting cultures.

⇒ **Theme of history and mythology:**

Another important technique used by Sujata Bhatt to resist cultural assimilation is the interweaving of history and mythology with the contemporary present. In the poem *'Written After Hearing About the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan'*, Bhatt describes the consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War that lasted for 10 years, beginning in 1979 and ending in 1989. She describes a woman character – Bibi Jamal who has recently lost her child. Bibi Jamal is presented in a domestic setting where she kneads dough and the co-wife cooks the bread. The speaker also presents Bibi Jamal's misery by informing us that her husband has been napalmed while he was travelling to the Khyber Pass. The poem ends with an unhappy and sad picture of Bibi Jamal. It highlights the brutality of war.

*"What do you know of Bibi Jamal?
Her husband, napalmed,
ran burning across the rocks.
Crisp shreds of skin, a piece of his turban,
a piece of his skull were delivered to her."*

In *'3 November, 1984'*, Bhatt states that she would not buy the *New York Times* as it would have the news of the Sikh massacre that happened on 3rd November, 1984. The anti-Sikh riots were triggered in India because of the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Bhatt argues that she wanted to divert her attention to the 5 Americans who successfully reached the Annapurna – a compact group of mountains in Himalayas.

*"I won't buy
The New York Times today."*

*"Today I don't want to think
of Hindus cutting open
Sikhs – and Sikhs cutting open
Hindus –"*

*"I'll think of the five Americans
who made it
to Annapurna without Sherpa help."*

Bhatt also talks about her paternal grandfather, Nanabhai Bhatt who was an intimate friend of Mahatma Gandhi in her poem *'For Nanabhai Bhatt'*. Her grandfather founded schools in many villages in Saurashtra (a part of Gujarat) in the rural areas for farmers who were mainly illiterate. These

schools were Gujarati schools designed to help young people who would be living in farming communities. And that was a very radical step. Thus, she blends the history of the reforms that were taking place during the struggle of Indian Independence.

Bhatt uses the character Nachiketa, the son of Vajashrava and the child protagonist of a story told in the Katha Upanishad. Nachiketa visited Yama at his house and as he was not there for 3 days, Nachiketa sat outside Yama's house without food and water. As Yama was happy with Nachiketa, he granted him three boons. For the first wish, Nachiketa asked for peace for his father and himself. Then, he wished to learn the sacred fire sacrifice, which also Yama elaborated. For his third boon, Nachiketa wanted to learn the mystery of what comes after death and to know the true Self. Bhatt uses this character of Nachiketa in her poem – 'Nachiketa' where she draws parallels between Nachiketa and her brother. Bhatt's brother would have experienced close encounter with death and hence Bhatt compares him with Nachiketa, who himself visited Yama.

*"The first time Nachiketa returned
from the house of Yama, his skin was yellow
and he slept in an incubator for a month.
The second time Nachiketa returned
from the house of Yama,
he found the bird wheezing and croaking
by the dirt road.
The eighth time Nachiketa visited the house of Yama
I followed, cursing every god, every being
every spirit that could possibly exist.
I followed cursing until Nachiketa returned
safe again"*

⇒ Theme of Identity

When Sujata Bhatt went to America, she was confronted with the American tradition and was attracted to completely different sorts of writers such as Eliot and Williams or Bishop and Stevens along with English writers such as Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf. At the same time she was also reading Yeats, Joyce, Neruda, Rilke, as well as Akhmatova. She was also in touch with Gujarati poetry. In her interview with Vicki Bertram, she states that no writer really spoke for her and no one had a life as strangely disjointed as hers - and so she felt alone in her writing. She continuously felt that her writing did not 'fit in' with either the Eastern or the Western tradition. The poem 'Search for My Tongue' grew out of this feeling.

In 'Search for My Tongue', Bhatt practises polylingualism by using English and Gujarati language in the same poem. The Gujarati is translated into English within the poem itself. The speaker of the poem highlights how she is losing her (mother) tongue. She argues that she can't think of the image of the girl carrying clay pitcher on her head and sold

water at the railway station in English, she can't imagine her mother singing songs for her in English. She believes that she has lost her mother tongue and could not really know the foreign tongue. This relation between both the tongues is complicated when she mixes both the tongues (English and Gujarati) at the end of the poem.

*"Days my tongue slips away
I can't hold on to my tongue.....
મારી જીભ સરકી જાય છે
I can't speak. I speak nothing"*

*"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"*

*"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"*

*"And my mother in the kitchen,
my mother singing :
મોન મોર મેઘેરે શેગે ઉઠે ચોલે ઠિગાઠિગાંતેર પાને
I can't hear my mother in English."*

*"But do you know
how I miss that old woman, crying રીંગણા રીંગણા"*

"You say સુજ બેન તમરા માટે હવે તબલા વાગડુ છુ"

*"I can't forget I can't forget
ધા ધીન ધીન ધા"*

This poem also highlights the identity crisis generated with the thought of losing the mother tongue (Gujarati). The poem also can be explained through Bakhtin's polyphony as it has voices from two different languages – English and Gujarati and hence present two different world views. (Refer Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis)

Conclusion:

Sujata Bhatt creates a life-like picture of her childhood experience through her poems. She conflates this experience with the prevalent women issues and hence also provides us a feminist perspective. She also blends history and mythology in her poems which help her to assert her identity. The conflict of losing one's culture and tongue is expressed innovatively by using two different languages in the same poem. Thus, all these experiences help her to create the 'Imaginary Homeland', assert her unique Gujarati-Indian identity and resist the cultural assimilation or the melting pot process.

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