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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 23: Sujata Bhatt

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Background

- Diaspora---- a universal phenomenon.
- Indian diasporic poetry is not limited to male poets alone.
- Many female poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Imtiaz Dharkar are representative female voices of Diasporic poetry.
- Female Diasporic poets wrote about gender inequality and female body in much greater detail.
- Their writing is not limited to gender discrimination only but they also write about other social issues and political events of their contemporary time.

Sujata Bhatt

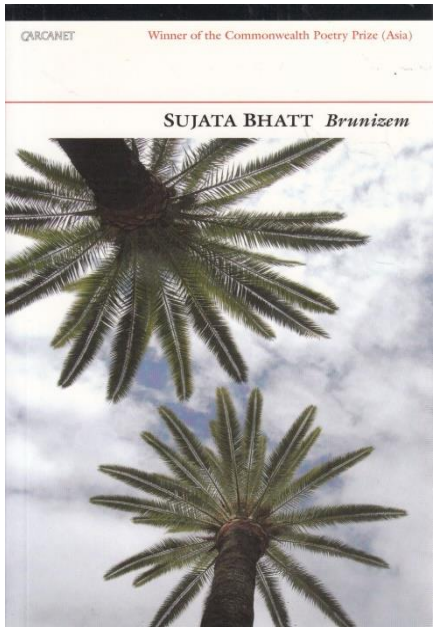
- Born in 1956 in Ahmadabad, Gujarat.
- Immigrated to U.S.A. in 1968.
- A bilingual poet who writes both in Gujarati and in English, translator, and a freelance writer.
- MFA from the University of Iowa, and for a time was writer-in-residence at the University of Victoria, Canada.
- Married to the German writer, Michael Augustine, settled in Breman, Germany.
- Translated Gujarati poetry into English.
- She has been broadcast in British, German and Dutch radio.



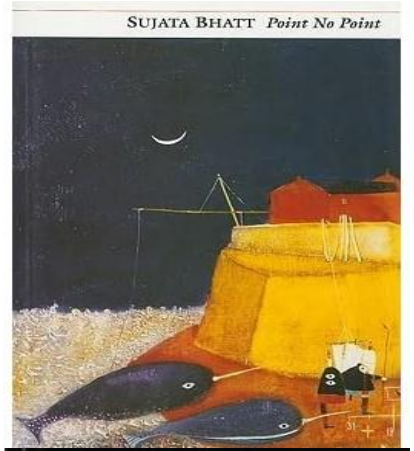
- Received Commonwealth Prize (Asia) in 1988 for *Brunizem*.
- Italian Tratti Prize in 2000.
- More an Indian poet than a diasporic poet.
- Her poems give importance to Indian tradition, regional language and various religions of India.
- Explores both Indian and diasporic experiences.
- She delineates the experience of being a South-Asian woman in postmodern Europe.

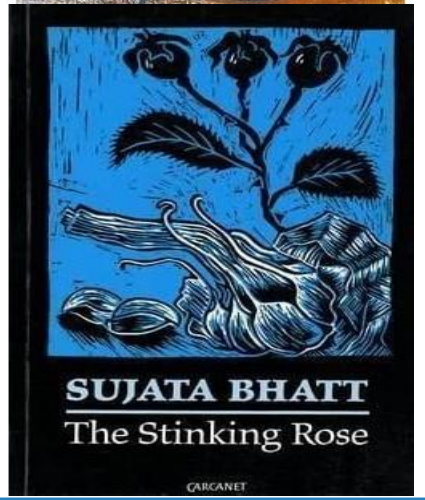


Poetry Collections



- *Brunizem (1988)*
- *Monkey Shadows (1991)*
- *The Stinking Rose (1995)*
- *Point No Point (1997)*
- *Augatora (2000)*
- *The Colour of Solitude* (2002)-a long sequence of poems about the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, his wife the sculptor, Clara Westhoff Rilke, and their common friend Paula Modersohn-Becker, the painter.
- *Pure Lizard* (2008)





General Themes of Her Poetry

- Rootlessness
- Dislocation
- Nostalgia
- Amnesia
- Composite culture
- Indian rituals, and religions
- Marginalization of gender
- Feminine consciousness

Why name a place Point No Point?

Does it mean we are nowhere
when we reach it?

Does it mean that we lose our
sense
Of meaning, our sense of direction
When we stop at Point No Point?

“Search For My Tongue”

“The Peacock”
The Women of Leh are such”
“A Different History”
Something for Plato
Iris

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue.
I ask you, what would you do
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.
You could not use them both together
even if you thought that way.
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
until you had to spit it out.
I thought I spit it out
but overnight while I dream,

Contd…

munay hutoo kay aakhee jeebh aakhee bhasha
may thoonky nakhi chay
parantoo rattray svupnama mari bhasha pachi aavay chay
foolnee jaim mari bhasha nmari jeebh
modhama kheelay chay
fullnee jaim mari bhasha mari jeebh
modhama pakay chay

it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,
it ties the other tongue in knots,
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,
it pushes the other tongue aside.
Every time I think I've forgotten,
I think I've lost the mother tongue,
it blossoms out of my mouth. (from *Brunizem*)

Food For Thought

- ‘Tongue’ is metaphor for language.
- What if you have two ‘tongues’ (two languages)?
- One is native (Gujarati), another is foreign (English).
- Foreign language is dominating the native one.
- But this desire for first tongue comes out in dream.
- It suggests two types of identity where one dominates but the marginalized one is always the part of consciousness.
- Language equates identity.
- Elements of migration and assimilation.
- Mix of Gujarati (in Roman script) and English

“Voice of the Unwanted Girl”

Mother, I am the one
you sent away
when the doctor told you
I would be
a girl — In the end they had to
give me an injection to kill me.
Before I died I heard
the traffic rushing outside, the monsoon
slush, the wind sulking through
your beloved Mumbai —
I could have clutched the neon blue

no one wanted —
No one wanted
To touch me - except later in the autopsy room
when they knew my mouth would not search
for anything - and my head could be measured
and bent cut apart.
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.
Afterwards, as soon as you could
you put on your grass-green sari -
the orange stems of the parijatak blossoms
glistened in your hair –

Contd…

Afterwards
everyone smiled.
But now I ask you
to look for me, mother,
look for me because
I won’t come to your dreams.
Look for me, mother, look
because I won’t become a flower
I won’t turn into a butterfly
And I am not a part of anyone’s song.
Look, mother,
look for the place where you have sent me.
Look for the unspeakable.

Contd…

for the place that can never be described.
Look for me, mother, because
this is what you have done.
Look for me, mother, because
this is not ‘God’s will’.
Look for me, mother,
because I smell of formaldehyde-
I smell of formaldehyde
and still, I wish you would look
for me, mother.

Food for Thought

- Articulation of a child who is not yet born
- Female foeticide
- Feminine sensibility
- Social evil
- Critique of patriarchy
- Dangers of modernity and sterility of thought
- Tone- melancholic

A Different History

Great Pan is not dead;
he simply emigrated
to India.
Here, the gods roam freely,
disguised as snakes or monkeys;
every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book.
It is a sin to shove a book aside
with your foot,
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
a sin to toss one carelessly
across a room.

Contd…

You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made.

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with the long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face --
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language. (From *Brunizem*)

Idea Behind the Poem

- Effect of colonization
- Cultural assimilation
- Transaction of religion and rituals
- “painful legacy of inheriting colonial language”
- Loss of cultural identity
- Loss of linguistic control
- Concern for the next generation who will suffer the lack of cultural and linguistic identity.

“A White Asparagus” (from *Monkey Shadows*)

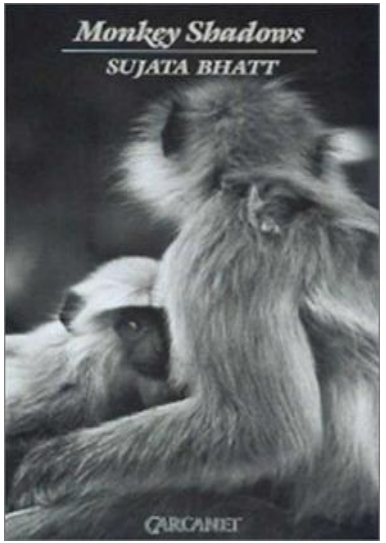
Who speaks of strong currents
streaming through the legs, the breasts
of a pregnant woman
in her fourth month?

She’s young, this is her first time,
she’s slim and the nausea has gone.
Her belly’s just starting to get rounder
her breasts itch all day,

and she’s surprised that what she wants
is him
inside her again
Oh come like a horse, she wants to say,
move like a dog, a wolf,
become a suckling lion-cub -

Come here, and here, and here –
but swim fast and don’t stop.

Who speaks of the green coconut uterus
the muscles sliding, a deeper undertow
and the green coconut milk that seals
her well, yet flows so she is wet
from his softest touch?



Who understands the logic
behind this desire?
Who speaks of the rushing tide
that awakens
her slowly increasing blood – ?
And the hunger
raw obsession beginning
with the shape of the asparagus:
sun-deprived white and purple-shadow-veined,
she buys three kilos
of the fat ones, thicker than anyone’s fingers,
she strokes the silky heads
some are so jauntily capped...
even the smell pulls her in–

From *Augatora*

Today, unravelling the word
Augatora – and thinking of the loss
of that word – imagining the days
of a thousand years ago when these languages collided
bitterly, bloodily –
Old English, Old Norse, Latin,
Old German – I turn
to your Danish grammar book – (Augatora, 17-18)

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?

("History is a Broken
Naarrative",Augatora 40)

On Women's Question

"For most of human history, girls and women's stories, if told at all, have been told by men, usually from a male perspective and sometimes from an actively misogynist point of view. So in a way, I feel I am "writing back" to history. . . I always felt that I should be able to write about whatever concerned me, without being censored. I've always felt a need to break certain silences and yes to bear witness." (In an interview with Helen Tookey)

As a Poet

- She delineates the experience of being a South-Asian woman in postmodern Europe.
- Writes about Indian traditions, lost identities, and cultural difference for creating regional effect in her poetry.
- Engages gendered identity as well as cultural identity.
- Writes about female body without any reservations.

Sadness of recurrent miscarriage-
"Fetus after fetus lost
Can't you take me away from this city?" (*More Fears about the Moon*)

Contd…

- Female sexuality has been the dominant theme of some of her poems. (White Asparagus which deals with the subject of female desire during pregnancy)
- No shame in admitting bodily needs.
- She has written about female feticide and female genital mutilation.
- She wrote about history and historical symbols, like ‘swastika’.
- Contemporary issues find great space in her poetry.

“How can you bear witness with words, how can you heal anything with words?”

Influence of Different Cultures

- “My work reflects my life so what I have experienced and seen does enter into my poems, and, for example, if I had lived all my life in India and had never really gone abroad, then my poems would be very different. I would not have written about Germany, I wouldn't have written about Italy or England or the United States, nor would I have written about experience which occurred in those places, sometimes in the natural landscapes of those countries. I feel that I'm an outsider wherever I am, and I think that being an outsider gives me a different perspective on life and on any culture including my own. And, so yes - my travels and the fact that I've lived in so many different places have really determined and influenced my writing.”

I am the one
who always goes
away with my home
which can only stay inside
in my blood - my home which does not fit
with any geography…
But I never left home
I carried it away
with me - her in my darkness
in myself. (“The one who goes away”, *The Stinking Rose*)

Thank You

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