CHAPTER III

Diasporic sensibility in the poetry of Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt

Meena Alexander  Sujata Bhatt
CHAPTER - 3

Diasporic sensibility in the poetry of Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt

"When the time came for her to learn all the knowledge from her past lives returned to her, as wild geese in autumn to the Ganga River".

- Kalidasa, Kumarsambhava 1:30

"It seems to me that lyric poem is a form of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem I have to enter into a dream state. But at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense location to reflect the world."

- Meena Alexander. Fault Lines

"Every time I think I've forgotten,
I think I've lost the mother tongue,
It blossoms out of my mouth."

-Sujata Bhatt (From Search for My Tongue)

Modern age is the age of prose. As science and technology advance, poetry seems to be pushed aside. Many people think that poetry is irrelevant and useless. In the age of information technology, many think that it has lost its significance. Reports say that poetry is the least read form of literature and students do not like to study poetry. Teachers do not like to teach poetry. Those who teach poetry paraphrase it instead of reciting poetry. This has led to the loss of ear for poetry. Publisher does not like to publish poetry as there is no market for it. In such a scenario, it is quite relevant to discuss the role of poetry and its validity. Is science anti-thesis of poetry? In fact, poetry is a higher science. Science was always considered a part of philosophy in the earlier times. Galileo, Descartes and Newton regarded God as ‘the chief mathematician of the universe’. For Einstein also,
A serious scientist is always a religious man. He advocated that scientist should never forget man and his fate while working on diagrams and equations.

Ancient Indian sages were also endowed with scientific spirit. Their questionings were highly rational and scientific. Later Buddha and Charvaka also made inquiries that were promoted by reason and scientific spirit. It is a fact that the best thinking and poetic sensibility went hand in hand in India. Gandhi’s law of non-violence and equal distribution have scientific basis. Lord Buddha is called not only Buddha the enlightened but also Buddha the Compassionate. Total man is a fine amalgam of reason and emotions.

Swami Vivekananda saw a very scientific connection between science and morality. He said that as long as even a single insect lived on earth, he too lived. He saw and understood the unity of life among all creatures. Lord Buddha told his disciple Ananda that till a single man suffered in the world, his search for ‘Nirvana’ was meaningless. In fact, life contains everything. It refuses to fall into categories and compartments like science, literature, philosophy and so on. Thoreau did not feel lonely and exclaimed: ‘why should I feel lonely? Is not my planet in the milky way?’ Henry Vaughan too proclaimed with pure delight.

"I saw the eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light".

Sigmund Freud had to admit that it was not he but poets who discovered the ‘unconscious’. William Wordsworth declared in his poetic manifesto that, "poetry is the impassioned expression of all sciences". Science limits itself to physical world while poetry amalgamates desperate experiences. S.T. Coleridge called it esemplastic function of imagination that organizes the disparate elements into the whole. Ambiguity is one of the characteristics of the poetry. It uses words in connotation manner. It uses images and symbols to represent ideas or feelings. Wallace Stevens, the famous American poet said that poetry should have certain amount
ambiguity. Poetry is both pragmatic as well as transcendental. As Mathew Arnold says, it is a criticism of life and therefore it encompasses everything that is included in LIFE.

In modern time, poetry has played the role of an instrument of change. It cannot connive at the realities of life. It must disrobe and dismantle if necessary. The new poets carry wounds in their hearts. These are the wounds of the teeming toiling millions. Their hearts bled for those who suffer, those who are deprived and exploited, those who are alienated and exiled. Tolstoy believed that art must have communicability. It must never be the hand maiden of aristocratic tastes.

True poetry rises above the clamour of the chaos, violence and trivialities of life. It teaches us how to live meaningfully. Albert Camus said that there is only one philosophical question: whether to commit suicide. Further he says the point is not live and not to escape from life. Gulzar gives a time portrait of a poet in the following words:

"Seated on a branch of the mulberry tree
weaving threads of silk
Uncovering each moment
Picking each leaf
A mad man, listens to every breath
unravels each and wraps it around his body
A prisoner of his own breath
This poet of silken sounds will one day die
chocked by his own threads." ¹

Poetry is the loftiest form of literature. It is the supreme utterance that mankind is endowed with. The soul of all arts is enjoyment but it must be disinterested and lofty transcending the physical and the material world. However, if this enjoyment loses its touch with life and humanity, it loses its worth. Man possesses knowledge which leads him to inner freedom, the freedom of mind and soul. His love for beauty transcends utility. Men as
well as animals need to express their feelings of pain or pleasures. Man has a fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with self preservation. This surplus finds outlet in the creation of art and human civilization is built upon this surplus. Rabindranath Tagore in his essay *What is Art?* remarks,

"The principal object of art, also, being the expression of personality, and not of that which is abstract and analytical, it necessarily uses the language of picture and music. This has led to a confusion of our thought that the object of art is the production of beauty: where as beauty in art has been the mere instrument and not its complete and ultimate significance".  

Mathew Arnold in his famous *The Study of Poetry* says that poetry is the religion of the future and more and more people will turn to it for the understanding of life. Science is complete and even dangerous without poetry. He prophesied that what now passes as religion and philosophy will be accepted by poetry. Arnold gives the highest status to poetry when he remarks,

"The future of poetry is immense because in poetry where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as our time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact, it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for the poetry, the idea is everything, the rest is the words of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today in its unconscious poetry".  

R.W. Emerson, the famous American poet, Philosopher and transcendentalist puts poets on the highest pedestal. He says that among the incomplete men, the poet stands as a complete man. He is isolated from his contemporaries by the virtue of truth and art. All people need to express themselves and without expression, man is only a half man. Emerson says,
"The universe has three children, born at one time which reappear under different names in every system of thought whether they be called cause, operation and effect; or more poetically, Jove, Plato, Neptune; or theologically, the Father, the Spirit and the Son; but which we will call here the Knower, the Doer and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good and for the love of beauty".  

Emerson calls the poet a Sayer, a namer who represents beauty. He is sovereign standing erect at the centre. Poetry existed before everything else. The poet is a beholder of ideas. He is an announcer and proclaimer of the necessary and the eternal. A true poet is never detached from life. It is the detachment from life and God that makes things ugly. It is the task of the poet to reattach things to nature and the whole. He uses forms according to life and not life according to forms. He does not stop at facts but employs them as signs. The poet is the Namer and Language Maker. He names them after their appearances or essence. Language is fossil poetry. Emerson says:

"Poets are thus liberating gods, Men have really got a new sense and found within their world another world, or nest of worlds, for the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop"  

Poets are free and they have the capacity of making others free. Their basic concern is man because man is the Supreme Being among all creatures. An Indian poet, Chandidas said that man is above all being and no being ever surpasses him. New poetry also aims at a abolition of the self to achieve higher self. It destroys the language in order to recreate a language. To modern man, God is irrelevant because He is now replaced by man. New poetry is a protest against the predicament of man. Poetry may not be able to provide cure for social ills but it is not a mere verbal game. New poets attempt to present human beings, their anguish and alienation
from their roots. New poetry is an endeavor to discover the true identity of man. The questions that confront modern man are - To Whom does man belong? Does he really belong to any place, anything, any anchor? For whom does he write? Does his writing have any impact on betterment of humanity?

Poetry aims at seeking the answers to these questions. Man belongs to the world, the universe and his anchorage lies in his fellowmen. His ultimate salvation is not in abstract idea of soul but in being a part of the humankind with all its ordeals, sufferings and struggles. His salvation is not freedom from the world of sufferings humanity. In fact, it lies in his being with them and for them. In his very identification with all creatures, he will find his home, the home that we call ‘Soul or God’. Poetry, above all, is a door for this understanding and realization. In my research, I have undertaken the study of poetry of some diasporic women poets who are highly sensitive to the sufferings of humanity. Their sense of exile is not personal but universal.

These women poets have been called here ‘Cassandras in exile’ because like Cassandra, they are condemned to speak out but often not listened to or believed. These women poets belong to South Asian region who have migrated to other countries and have experienced the sense of dislocation and displacement from their roots. Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Chitra Banerjee Divakarani are Indian women poets who have lived abroad. Moniza Alvi is a young poet from Pakistan and Jean Arsanayagam is a Dutch Burgher women poet who has experienced double exile being a woman married to Tamil and Dutch Burgher in Sinhala dominated Srilanka.

The myth of Cassandra is well known in Greek literature. It is one of the saddest tales of ancient classical literature. Cassandra was a princess of the legendary City of Troy; the daughter of king Priam and Queen Hecuba. She was so charming that she attracted both gods and mortals alike. Apollo, the Sun God lusted after Cassandra and to win her, he promised to bestow
upon her the gift of prophecy. Unable to resist the gift, Apollo offered, she relented but she was not at all convinced that she wanted to take Apollo as her lover. Apollo gave her the gift of prophecies and taught her how to use them. However, once his promise was fulfilled, she backed out and refused to give her body to Apollo. Furious at being rejected by a mere mortal, Apollo decided to punish her. He could not take back the gift he had given her, he could alter it. So he leveled a curse upon her that she would be able to foresee the future but no one would believe her. On the contrary, they would call her a liar. The cruelty lay in the fact that she always saw the truth but could not communicate it.

True to his word, Cassandra could foresee the future but each time, she tried to warn people in advance, her words were ignored and labeled as a liar. Her father was now ashamed of her daughter's supposed madness and pronounced her insane. She was locked inside her own chambers. He even went to the extent of declaring that she was dead. One of the Cassandra's most important prophecies involved the fall of Troy at the hands of the Greeks and the Trojan Horse that caused the downfall of Troy.

Cassandra managed to escape from Troy eluding atrocities of the Greeks. She hid within the temples of the Goddess Athena who promised to protect her. However, Ajax found her there clinging helplessly to the statue of Athena. Ajax forced himself upon her and for this act, he was cursed by Athena that he would never return home. Ajax died with the crash of his ship against in the rocks in mighty ocean. Labeled as liar and insane, Cassandra gave into her fate and accompanied Agamemnon as his concubine. Upon their return, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra greeted the couple warmly embracing Cassandra. However, Cassandra could foresee her own death at the hands of Clytemnestra alongside Agamemnon.

Cassandra represents the fate of women in male dominated society. Greek society did not recognize the woman's right to say no. She has been portrayed as insane as she refused to play by the rules established by undeserving gods. Cassandra symbolizes an impassioned outburst by the
woman who feels the terrible burden of her gift of poetic speech. Her knowledge is apocalyptic, her urgency daemonic. For her, poetry assaults and afflicts her, setting her off from human kind and rendering her the doomed and solitary witness of destruction and death. This suggests that poetry from its hidden source creates speech which is profoundly 'other' and 'opposed' to the received notions of men. In Cassandra, the poet can see herself who recognizes a culture's ‘tricks of lust and pride’. Cassandra denigrates the hierarchy of traditional authority and disrupts allegiance to male gods. Her role is to create the poem as prophecy. The society tries to paralyze its female poets who through the intensity of their language create songs like screams. Cassandra's mad screaming voice differs from other prophets of Greek mythology. It expresses the anguish of a woman and a poet who foresees impending dangers and death and tries to warn humanity of these disasters only to be unheeded and ignored.

In fact, poets both men and women suffer like Cassandra. They are taken as mad and their cries go unheeded. The famous author of The Mahabharata, Ved Vyas had written that he had been crying out loudly raising both his hands but people never took him seriously. This is probably the destiny of all poets, seers and all wise men. The diasporic women poets of my dissertation are prophetic in the sense that they cry against the evils of terrorism, racialism, war, ethnic violence and gender discrimination. Like Cassandra, they say 'no' to easy complacence of our age. They speak out fearlessly and boldly. These diasporic women poets are displaced from their Troy and experience the agonies of exile and the loss of language and communication in one or the other way. Like Cassandra, they denigrate the hierarchy of traditional authority, the set stereotypes and political and cultural subordination. They oppose false cultural pretentions of their own countries and also the racial hegemony of their host countries.

Meena Alexander (1951) is a genuine diasporic voice expressing her own lived diasporic experiences in her poetry- uprooting and exile, migrant memories and trauma, separation and loneliness - all the way from India to
Sudan and USA. Mary Elizabeth Alexander was born in 1951 on February 17. She christened Mary Elizabeth but she has been called "Meena" since her birth and in her fifteenth year, she officially changed her name to Meena. It was not a mere act of defiance but of liberation. She writes:

"Mary Elizabeth" I was baptized, the names of my two grandmothers strung together, anglicized Mariamma and Eli as befitted our existence in the aftermath of colonial era whose English was all powerful. Fifteen years old in Khartoum, I changed my name to Meena, what everyone knew me as, but just as important to me, the name under which I started to write poems.  

Her appa was dismayed. He felt that she would be confused in public records and no one would know who she was. But she felt that in the change of name, she was her truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden. In Sanskrit, Meena meant ‘Fish’ and in Urdu, it means ‘enamel work or jewelling’ and in Arabic, it meant ‘port’. Meena's father George Alexander had a job in the Central Government while her mother was a housewife. Her maternal grandmother Ilya was a distinguished Keralite. Her grandmother was a distinguished woman in Kerala who had gained M.A. in English literature in those days from Presidency College, Madras and joined YMCA which was quite active in India during the early decades of the 20th Century.

She had travelled extensively visiting Peking, London and other places. She was married at the age of twenty eight to a Nationalist and a follower of 'Mahatma Gandhi'. After her marriage, she diverted her energy to work for freedom of women, children's education and social work. She was quite active in removal of untouchability in the early years of 1930's. Mahatma Gandhi had visited their house in Kottayam in 1934. Meena had two sisters Anna and Elsa both younger to her. Meena's early childhood was spent in Allahabad and Tiruvella. Meena says that though she was born in Allahabad, it was not her home. Tiruvella, her mother’s home and
Kozencheri, her appa's home together composed her nadu, the dark soil of self. Nadu in Malayalam is a word for home and homeland.

In 1956, the Sudan gained independence and asked the Third world countries for assistance in establishing its government and administrative set up. Meena's father applied for a job with the Sudanese Government and he was selected for the job. The family moved to Khartoum where Meena spent her childhood years and days of youth between five to eighteen. However, the family used to visit Kerala each summer. Her journey to Sudan was the first ocean crossing which she felt could be described as figuration of death, of loss of sense and being blotted out. The sands of the Sahara swept into Khartoum city. This was her first shock of transition. She received her degree from Khartoum University and they moved to England to study at Nottingham University where she earned her Ph.D.

She returned to India where she worked at Delhi University, Central Institute of Hyderabad and Hyderabad University. It was in Hyderabad she met her husband David Lelyveld. In 1979, they moved to New York City where they live with their two children Adam Kuruvilla Lelyveld (b.1980) and Swati Mariam Lelyveld (b.1986) Meena Alexander’s husband David Lelyveld, a Jewish scholar in a history of India and South Asia. Meena Alexander teaches at Hunter College and at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Meena Alexander began her literacy career at the tender age of ten when she started writing poetry. Her first book, a single lengthy poem The Bird's Bright Wing (1976) was published in Calcutta. She is better known as poet but she has attempted other genres of literature also. Her works include:

1. The Bird's Bright Wing (1976)
2. Without Place (1978)
3. I Root my Name (1977)
5. The Storm (1989)

Meena Alexander's poems and prose writings have been widely published in magazines in the USA, UK and India. Some of her poems and prose writings have been translated into Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French, Italian, Spanish and German. Meena Alexander is an internationally acclaimed poet. She truly represents the history of global culture. She expresses her first hand experiences of how it looks and feels to have a split identity. Most of her writing explores themes of migrant, displacement, exile, multiple, identities and allegiances. Some of these themes are introduced in her early works of poetry - *The Bird's Bright Wing* (1976), *Without Place* (1978), *I root my Name* (1977) and *Stone Roots* (1980). These themes continue to appear in her subsequent works also. As the title of many of her books reveal, her major preoccupation is the reason for roots through evocation of local landscapes, events, persons, family members and events. In her later collections of poems, she deals with the issues of defining a strong female self especially through matrilineal memories. Her grandfather Ilya, her grandmother and their house in Tiruvella dominate her memories. Ilya was a sort of intellectual social reformer who was quite close to E.M.S. Nambudripad. Her grandmother Kunjn was also a powerful woman, highly educated Christian who adored Gandhian values. She was quite liberal minded and worked for women's liberation through education.
Meena Alexander recalls her:

"I was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak. I skipped a whole ring of life and made up a grandmother figure, part ghost, part flesh. She was drawn over what I had learnt of grandmother Kunju. Imagined her: a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had a tradition, and a history - precisely what I lacked; a woman who had lived to witness the birth pangs of a Nation".

Meena had never known her as she had died and untimely death. She was like a Sapphire to her buried in a strip of earth or the shifting aureole of pollen on a Champak flower. She had gleaned facts and events of her life from Ilya and other family members. She was quite close to Ilya who narrated the stories from the Bible and the Mahabharata. She says that it was he who nourished her intellectually and emotionally. He instilled into her a restless idealism that the earth could be transformed and the world could become a place of peace, love and happiness.

Meena saw her grandmother's face through Ilya's eyes. Recalling the tragic death of her dear Ilya, Meena Alexander writes:

"Had Ilya lived longer, I might have outgrown that world, like a skin that no longer fit, like a garment that was to tight. But as it was, the torment of his death plunged us into grief and rage. I think neither amma nor I have ever gotten over it. With the death and duties and loss of cardamom and rubber estates, our lives changed. A whole world shivered and cracked. The hoarse sounds of his last breathing, the rattle in his throat as died, filled my ears."
violence that took place during the partition. Ilya said that he too fasted on some days and wore Khadi, a hand spun and hand woven cloth made by ordinary hands. All such childhood incidents nourished and shaped Meena Alexander's poetic sensibilities. She has recorded all these memories in her memoir Fault Lines (2003). Her memoir helps us in understanding he works better, which are marked by the sense of loss, the pain of exile and dislocation.

In *House of Thousand Doors* (1988) is a collection of poetry mixed with imaginary letters to her grandmother and mother and short lyrical prose pieces. Meena Alexander tries to seek her identity through the figures of her maternal grandmother Kunju who defied the dictates of conventional feminine behavior and became an influential political activist. Her poems are often personal as well as political as in 'Art of Pariahs' from *River and Bridge* (1996). In this poem, she deals with the issue of racial tensions in the United States:

"Back against the kitchen store Draupadi sings;  
In my head Beirut still burns-  
The unseen of Nubia, God's upper kingdom the Rani of Jhansi, transfigured, raising her sword are players too. They have entered with me to North America and share these walls'.

Meena Alexander is one of the foremost diasporic poets today. Her writing is lyrical, pageant and sensual, dealing with large themes including ethnic intolerance, terrorism, fanaticism and interracial tensions. Her poems are intensely self conscious and with minimum of words, she evokes layers of meaning. For her, poetry has an important role to play in modern violence ridden world. She says in an interview with Ruth Maxey in *Kenyon Review*:

“In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some ways to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist.”
As child, Meena wanted to be a circus performer after she had seen circus artists doing balancing acts in Gemini Circus. Then her grandfather and mother wanted her to be a medical doctor and her father who was a scientist encouraged her to be a physicist. However, Meena turned to poetry at the age of eleven or twelve. For her, it was the music of survival. She admits that there is an inner voice that speaks to her. She feels that there is a girl child that resides inside her and she refuses to die. She writes in a chapter titled *Lyric in a time of Violence* in *Fault Lines*:

"It seems to me that the lyric poem is a form of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem, I have to enter into a dream state. But at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense location to reflect on the world."  

Meena Alexander poetry is marked by diasporic sensibility which finds highly emotion, charge expression in sensual, lyrical and metaphoric language. She has undergone multiple identities in multiple places. Her poems express her own lived experiences-uprooting and exile, migrant memories traveling to different places in India, Sudan and America. She has lived in different cities and towns like Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Khartoum, London, New York, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Trivandrum etc. In her memoir *Fault Lines* she writes about ethnicity and writing of poetry. The whole chapter *Real Places or How Sense Fragments: Thoughts on Ethnicity and Writing of Poetry* is a manifesto of her relationship with poetry. She asks herself: who am I? Where am I? When am I? These are the questions all diasporic writers are required to mix amidst violent densities of place. In modern times, world overlap and one has co-existed in fluid diasporic world. The biggest challenge for a creative writing is to make a real integration between one's personal history and the experience in alien countries.

Meena Alexander asks:

“What does it mean to carry one's house on one's back”?  

11
In America, she has to explain herself all the time, her origin, her occupation and so on. As a poet, she has to explain whether she is a poet writing in America. If she is, is she an American poet like Robert Frost or Wallace Stevens? or is she an Asian-American poet. She feels that everything that comes to her is hyphenated and incomplete. She says that she is a women poet, a women poet of color, a south Indian Woman poet who makes up lines in English a past colonial language as she waits for the red lights to change on Broadway. 13

The multicultural world in America has been described very poignantly in her poem *News of the World*.

“We must always return
to poems for new of the world
or polish for the lack
Strip it
block it with blood
the page is not enough
unless the sun rises in it
Old doctor willily writes
crouched on a stop
in Paterson, New Jersey
I am torn by light
She cries into her own head
The players fields of death
are far from me. In Cambodia I carried
my mother's head in a sack
and ran three days and nights
through a rice field
Now I pick up vegetables
from old sacking and straighten
them on crates: tomatoes
burning plums, cabbages hard
as bone. I work in Manhattan.
The subway corrupts me
with crates the robed Muslims sell
with white magazines
with spittle and gum
I get lost underground
By onkee stadium
I stumble out
hands loaded down
fists clenched into balls
A man approaches
much on his shirt
his head, a battering ram he knows who I am
I stall:
the tracks flash
with a thousand suns  

Meena Alexander says that Frantz Fanon speaks of the barbed wire that exists in a colonized state. She believes that this "zone of occult instability" must be expressed in poetry of the diaspora which will act as a process of decolonization. The Asian Americans grapple with violence, disorder and injustice and they are bartered in capitalist society of the West. Wallace Stevens said somewhere that imagination is a form of violence from within that presses against the actual, the violence from without. Meena Alexander says that in America, the diasporic poets and artists press against the barbed wire of the racialism.

Meena Alexander says that people call poets "the creators of that small despised art". As a poet, she picks up strands of memories and evokes them all. She feels that her ethnicity demands it. Past memories haunt her. In India, everything is colored with hierarchy, authority, and traditions. No one feels its burden. Only in America, she read about the pain of the post colonial heritage and the sufferings of women in India she says:
"There is a violence in the very language, American English, that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned. After all, for such as we are the territories are not free. The world is not open. That endless space the emptiness of the American sublime to worse than a lie. It does ceaseless damages to the imagination. But it has taken me ten years in this country even to get to think it." ¹⁵

In America, she came face to face with subtle form of racism and violence. She felt that true poetry must figure out this violence and give expression to it. For a writer, there are many kinds of death for example the loss of one's language or the forgetfulness of the body. In her collection of poems *House of a Thousand Doors*, the past took the form of an ancestor, a grandmother figure. She wanted to tear herself free from the past but it sucked her back in its vortex. Meena Alexander says that her ethnicity as an Indian American and in broader sense, an Asian American requires her to hold on to past resisting fracturing. For her, poetry has a higher role to play. She writes:

"The struggle for social justice, for human dignity, is for each of us. Like ethnicity, like the labor of poetry, it is larger than any single person, or any single voice. It transcends individualism. It is shape by forces that well up out of us, chaotic, immensely powerful forces that disorder the brittle boundary lines we create, turn us towards a light, a truth, whose immensity,
far from being mystical-in the sense of a pure thing far away, a distance shining - casts all our actions into relief, etches out lines into art."  

River and Bridge (1996) contains poems that express nostalgia for homeland, memories of childhood and also monotonous life of a migrant in the USA. In a poem Softly My Soul, the poet describes the American Milieu:

"Softly my Soul, softly my soul o so softly
the herons have fled, but the planes keep coming.
Above Liberty's torch the sky is pink
And George Washington would laugh in his sleep
to mark the gazelles on Fifth Avenue
tiny miniskirts hoisted to their thighs."  

In Everything strikes Loose, the poet laments over the bygone when there was 'grace in the young poet's mind, leaves flickered in the golden Pamba river.

"Now the river trickles
through low hills
it tastes of childhood
the boats fly no flags
the races are all done
and flat barges driven by men
bear cinnamon, cloves, dried pepper"  

Women poet face double burden of the diasporic destiny. They face hostile racialism and displacement in alien countries and at the same time they suffer at the hands of patriarchal society. In addition to these, women poets also face the borders that their bodies create- racial as well as sexual borders. As a teenager in Khartoum, Meena kept journals that contained quotes from Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, Wallace Stevens and her own
poetry. Her mother insisted that women should accept the limitations imposed by their bodies and honour their femininity. Arranged marriage was a narrow gate that all women had to enter and learn certain skills required to run a household. In Kozencheri, girls could not get out without proper escorts. They were often molested in market places of Kerala. Meena had heard that sometimes women committed suicide to do away with their shameful bodies. These terrible images haunted her mind in her childhood. In her poem *Passion*, she poignantly describes the life of a woman:

“I am she
the women after giving birth

life
to give life
torn and hovering

as bloodied fluids
baste the weakened flesh

For her
there are no words
no bronze, no summoning.

I am she
smeared with ash
from the black God's altar

I am
the sting of love
the blood hot flute
the face
carved in the window,
watching as the god set sail
across the waters
risen from the cape
Sri Krishna in a painted Catamaran.

I am she
tongue less in rhapsody
the stars of glass
nailed to the southern sky

Ai ai

She cries

They stuffed
her mouth with rags

and pulled her
from the wooden bed

and thrust her
to the broken floor.

River and Bridge, the title poem of the collection portrays the pain of crossing borders. The poet describes her new life in New York in a landscape of mist and burnished trees she says:

“But Homer knew it and Vyasa too; black river and bridge summon these whose stinging eyes crises cross red lights, metal implements, battlefields: birth is always bloody”. 

In a poem Muse, Meena Alexander laments the ruin of ‘our language’ and the sense of having ‘no home’. She says:
"Our language is in ruins
vowels impossibly sharp
broken consonants of bone
She has no home". 21

*Muse* (2) is a poem in sequel to the former poem in which she continues with the same theme. She says:
"creatures of here and there
we keep scurrying
Madurai, Manhattan, who cares?

When she turns it is etched on her:
Words, sentences, maps,
her skin burns bright;

Sheer aftermath". 22

Meena Alexander has written several poems on the burden of English and illiteracy in one's own language. In fact, she knew several language Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French, and English but she always felt that English had alienated her from what she was born to; the language of intimacy. When she was working at the Central Institute of English at Hyderabad, there were lots of discussion and debate about the status of English in India. It was argued that English was superior to any other Indian language as it could be a powerful medium for technical knowledge and modern science and commerce.

However, everyone felt that the future of English depends upon its ability to the needs of the masses in India. From Susie Tharu who had been her close friend, Meena Alexander learnt about the strength of femaleness, resistance and possibility of political activism. Jayanth Mahapatra, the famous Indian English poet from Orissa taught her to understand the poet's bond with place and how to accept the ravages of time. She always felt that
Colonialism was quite intrinsic to the burden of English in India. She too felt that she was robbed of literacy in her own mother tongue. She feels that multiple speeches surround her making her dream of barbed wire. In her poem *Night Scene*, the Garden, she talks of "ferocious alphabets of flesh", the burden of female body. There are images of blasted terrain of the West Banks, bombed out streets of Aden, the ravaged hill sides of Sri Lanka and the killing of the people in the field of Punjab. She writes:

"My back against barbed wire
snagged and coiled to belly height
on granite posts
glittering to the moon

No man's land
No women's either
I stand in the middle
of my life.

out of earth's soft
and turbulent core
a drum sounds
summoning ancestors
They rise
through puffs of grayish dirt
scabbed skins slit
and drop from them

They dance
a top the broken spurts
of stone

They scuff
the drum skins
with their flight heels"  

Later in the same poem, she summons "ferocious alphabets of flesh" to "splinter and raze her page". She cries out:

"Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
splinter and raze my page

That out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me

I claim my heritage."  

In a poem titled *Lost Language*, she expresses an intense longing for the lost language. She writes:

"It comes in flight
towards me
brushing against
an old stone wall
father's father raised
Language so fine
it can not hold the light
for long and beats
as water might..."  

Meena Alexander searches for her own identity amidst a world that always labels and identifies people by race color and nationality. Even her son Adam had an experience of this kind when a man asked him: "what are you?" Adam, the son of mix heritage, chose the identity him as neither American nor Indian but a Jedi knight. In a poem *Brown Skin, what Mask?*, she describes a free make over in America only to turn herself into "a hyphenated thing":

"No flim-flam now; card sharp, street wise
I fix my heels at Paul's shoe place for a dollar fifty"
get a free make over at Macy's eyes smart, lips shine
Shall I be a hyphenated thing, Macaulay's Minutes
and melting pot theories notwithstanding?

Shall I bruise my skin, burn up into
She Who Is No Color. whose longing is a crush
of larks shivering without sound?”  

Meena Alexander deals with the theme of violence, war, terrorism and intolerance very poignantly. In the poem *The young of Tiananmen*, the sacrifices of the young men and women of China have been eulogized. The description of the rolling tanks, coughing guns is highly evocation. The poet writes:

"Tanks rolled, guns coughed
tear gas choked them in pitiful
sobs: the young of Tiananmen
from a far country I sing

As blood swallowed them whole
they become our blood
as the sun swallowed them whole
they become children of the sun

What ink can inscribe them now
the young of Tiananmen.”  

Safdar Hashmi, a Young Marxist playwright was beaten to death on January 1, 1989 while performing a play titled *Hallabol* in support of striking women. Two days after this death, the players of the Jane Natya Manon with Safdar's wife Moloyshree returned to the spot and performed the play. There are two poems in the *River and Bridge* that deal with the death of
Safdar Hashmi; one For Safdar Hashmi Beaten to Death Just outside Delhi and the other addressed Safdar's brave wife Moloyshree. Safdar held the door tight so that other actors might escape while he was attacked by armed goons.

In a poem addressed to Moloyshree, Meena Alexander describes the place where Safdar Hashmi was beaten to death:

"There
there they beat him by the tap
on scalp and skull with bits of rack
lathis tipped with steel, wrought iron
broken from the construction site.

You point out the spot, so silently
drawing your palms apart as if your
soul and his still hung on a thread

So hot only the dead could work
that needle, crawl through its eye" 28

The poet expresses the tyranny of patriarchy and colonization in many of her poems. Compulsory acquisition of a colonial language splits the subject's body and her sense of self. Her collection Illiterate Heart (2002), won the 2002 PEN open Book Award. The book opens with the ten couplets work Provenance meaning "the place of origin" in two of Alexander's languages French and English. The central theme of the collection is how identities are shaped by languages and they merge with and inscribe female bodies. In a poem titled Fragments Alexander writes:

"I want to write:
The treasure bursting in to bloom
I felt it, though it did not come in that particular way, the sentence end-stopped
could sense come in feverish script
finicky with rhyme, sharp as a wave?." 29

Three languages loom large in the poet's psyche English, French and Malayalam. She describes the impact of these three languages on her body and mind.

"What beats in my heart? who can tell?
I can not tense my writing hand around
that burnt hole of sense, figure out the quick step of syllables.
On pages where I read the words of Gandhi and Marx, saw the light of the Gospels, the script started to quiver and flick.
Later grew fins and tails
swords sprang from the hips of consonants
vowels grew ribbed and sharp
pages bound in to leather
turned the color of ink
My body flew apart:
wrist, throat, elbow, thigh,
knee where a male rose
bone scapula, blunt cut hair,
then utter stillness as a white sheet dropped on nostrils and neck.
Black milk of childhood drunk
and drunk again!" 30

However, she says that by using these languages and creating poetry in theme, she is able to bind body and self into a unified whole. It is a
movement towards self-definition. The language is both cruel and painful but also heavenly. It is a means of subjugation but also of liberation. In a poem *An Honest Sentence*, the poet turns to Greek mythology of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, the sacrificial lamb who is sacrificed by her own father. She stands for both a mythological figure and a violated woman. Her vocal cords having been cut, she unable to utter words. The poet identifies herself Iphigenia who like the tragic Greek mythological figure tried to “forge an honest sentence” (53). Iphigenia the poet and 'women' merge and emerge as injured voiceless sacrificial lamb of human history - *The Female*. In Meena Alexander's writings women is brought back to life again and again.

In a poem *Like Mirabai*, she refers the poem expresses the longing of Meerabai who left Mewar in Rajasthan former the poem expresses the longing of the speaker in the poem to leave an alien land forever. She says:

"History makes me hoarse! she tried,
"I'll never set foot in a house again like Meerabai!"
And by the river, she set her clattering burden down.  

Meena Alexander, on seeing a painting by Edward Hopper at Whitney, experiences the loneliness of living in a flesh of a woman.

"Still nothing comes out of her mouth -
I am she, I want to cry
to the thin air of Nyack, Hopper painted on pale tremulous ground, stiff meadow grass.
The loneliness of living in the flesh draws us out, half naked, to the edge." 

Meena Alexander is a highly sensitive poet who does not remain silent even on sensitive issues like 9/11, Babri Masjid, Godhra Carnage and Hindu-Muslim riots in Ahmedabad. *San Andreas Fault* is a long poem in five
parts. In part IV Package of Dreams, she refers to tragic lot of women in human history:

"Late at night in half moon bay
hair loosed to the glow of traffic lights
I slit the moist package of my dreams.

Females still, quite metamorphic
I flowed into Kali ivory tongued, skulls nippling my breasts
Durga lips etched with wires astride an electric tiger
Draupadi born of flame betrayed by five brothers stripped
of silks in the banquet hall of shame.

In the ghostly light of those women's eyes
I saw the death camps at our century' end.

A woman in Sarajevo shot to death
as she stood pleading for pot of milk,
a scrap of bread, her red scarf swollen
with lead hung in a cherry tree.

Turks burnt alive in the new Germany
a grandmother and two girls
cheeks puffed with smoke
as they slept in striped blankets
bought new to keep out the cold."  

And then she refers to violent riots and massacre that took place in the name of Lord Rama who is called Karuna Nidhan and abode of mercy. It is a pity that people kill one another in the name of religion and God even today:

"In Ayodhya, in Ram's golden name
hundreds hacked to death, the domes
of Babri Masjid quivering as massacres begin,
the rivers of India rise mountainous,
white veils of the dead, dhotis, kurtas, saris,
slippery with spray, eyed from their bloodiness." 34

No Man’s Land is a poem about the aftermath of war, women washing their thighs in the bloodied river. The poem contains highly evocative, moving images:

"Infants crawl
sucking dirt from sticks
whose blunt ends
smack of elder flesh
and ceaseless bloodiness"
And,
"Women wash their thigh
in bloodied river water
over and over
they wipe their flesh
In stunned
immaculate gesture
figures massed with light" 35

Mena Alexander met Ramu Gandhi in 1974. He is grandson of Mahatama Gandhi and his mother’s father was Rajagopalachari, a distinguished statesman and thinker. He pointed out to her how children picked rags by the truck stops and how beggars squatted and bugged by the piles of garbage outside St. Stephen’s college. In Delhi, Meena Alexander met Swati Joshi, the daughter of renowned Gujarati poet Umashankar Joshi, Swati and Meena became good friends, reading Pablo Nerula, attending poetry reading, theater festivals etc. Meena met Umashankar Joshi whom she called Bapuji. In Fault Lines, she writes about her indebtedness to Umashankar Joshi.
"From Umashankar Joshi, I learnt of the fine pleasures of poetry, of a life bound to the creation literature. As he cut vegetables to make khichdi or stirred the rice and dal, we spoke of poems and the political world. A follower of Gandhi even as a Youngman, he had lived and worked in Sabarmati Ashram, I sensed that Bapuji belonged to the same world as Ilya had, filled with a shining belief in how India could be made anew. It was a world I appreciated deeply, though I did not see how I could be a part of it. There was an amazing quality of light about Umashankar, a true refinement of soul that touched all those around. It was clear that poetry for him was part of the illumination that comes from the shared world. It was inconceivable that it should be something cut apart."

In *River and Bridge* there is a long poem titled - *Paper filled with Light*, written in memory of Umashankar Joshi (1911-1989). The poem was composed during September 8-18, 1990. For Umashankar Joshi, poetry was 'paper filled with light': it was an illumination. It was not escape from harsh realities of the world and life. He was aware of violence, terror, inequality, displacement and despair. He had witnessed the massacre of 1947, the killing of partition. He had seen Gandhi praying and fasting. Meena Alexander writes that she too has witnessed traumatic events lie massacre of Shikhs in Delhi, rapes and riots in our times. She is unable to reconcile these with lofty ideals of art and poetry. She asks:

"Umashankar I ask you now, what is the sun at midnight?
The spirit's flight? The gold roof of heaven?
What is death doing in the throats of those
from your Bamna, my Tiruvellea, crouched in Jordan's deserts?
What is death scribbling on their cheeks
as they stumble to a water truck long run dry?
I am here to Isamu's garden, by an old warehouse,
by a children's park, by the East River- rusty gasoline tanks - the packed cars of new immigrants, the barbed wires
of Meerut, Bensonhurst, Baghdad, strung in my brain."
How could I sing of a plum tree, a stone that weeps water?
How could I dream of paper filled with light?" 37

The events of 9/11 and aftermath: military retaliation, racial profiling of immigrants and international students made indelible impact on the psyche of the immigrants in the USA. Three Indians were taken off the Boston train in handcuffs. They were quite innocent but they were taken for terrorists. Meena Alexander was worried about her children Adam and Swati Mariam. An acquaintance cautioned Meena Alexander to be careful as her skin was black. She would be taken for an Arab. She wrote a cycle of elegies for dead titled Aftermath, Invisible city and Pit fire. These poems are included in the collection of Raw Silk (2004). The poems in this collection mainly describe the poet's emotions upon revisiting India after a long period and finding many wounds and victims following ethnic violence in Ahmadabad, Gujarat in September, 2002. Other poems are set in New York in the aftermath of September 2001 terrorist attacks popularly known as 9/11.

Thus the collection can be seen as an attempt to negotiate a dual trauma both for the poet herself and her subjects. In her piece Fragile places: The poet's Note book, Alexander reflects: "What does it mean to belong in a violent world?" Alexander explicitly says that the experiences of violence, war and terrorism were a palimpsest. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word palimpsest means "something used again or altered but still bearing the traces of earlier form". She insists that these poems were flesh, torn out of her body. Though she was born after Independence, the violence of partition was there in the memories of those who raised her. Then she witnessed a long genocidal Civil War in Sudan where she spent her adolescence period. She had heard of teargas, torture, and shooting by the police and army. In India, she saw Emergency and later the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and riots and massacre of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. And then the terrorist attack on Twin Towers in New York and Hindu Muslim riots in Ahmedabad.
Aftermath is the first of the three poems composed after 9/11 under the title Late, There was an Island. The poem describes New York skyline and Hudson river after 9/11 in highly poetic images:

"There is an uncommon light in the sky
pale petals are scored into stone
I want to write of the linden tree
that stoops at the edge of the river.
But its leaves are filled with insects
with wings the color of dry blood.
At the far side of the river Hudson
By the southern tip of our island
A mountain soars, a torrent of sentences
syllables of flame stitch the rubble
An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms
sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky." 38

The second poem Invisible City begins with the last line of the first poem. The city becomes invisible full of 'bruised trees' and the sky becomes a 'Silver of mist' or 'bolt of beatitude'. The poet says:

"Tall Towers, twin towers I used to see
A bloody seam of sense drop free
By liberty street, on a knot of rubble
In altered light, I see a bird cry". 39

The Pit Fire, the third poem in this sequence commences with the last line of the second poem.

"In altered light I hear a bird cry
By the pit, for of metal, strait of death.
Bird song yet, Liturgies' de Cristal
Flesh in fiery pieces, mute sediments of love.
Shall a soul visit her mutilated parts?
Howch shall a body be home?" 40
After 9/11, South Asians were targeted. There was a pall of suspicions all brown people who looked like Arabs. Meena Alexander had to attend a meeting of the Asian/Americans Research Institute in October. Usually, she wore Sari while attending such a meeting but she was warned by friends and students that it was not safe to put on a Sari. So she put a Sari in a plastic bag and slipped out of her slacks and put on her Sari for the meeting. When she looked into the mirror in the fourth floor ladies' room, she heard Kabir, the medieval saint-poet singing to her. She felt that he was giving her the courage to struggle to live. She wrote a poem titled *Kabir sings in a City of Burning Towers*

"What a shame
they scared you so
you plucked your Sari off
crushed into a ball,

then spread it
on the toilet floor
sparks from the tower
fled through the wave of Silk

With your black hair
and sun dark skin
you're just a child of earth.
Kabir the weaver sings:

*O men and dogs*
*in times of grief*
*our rolling earth*
*grows small.*

*The Color of Home* is a poem about the death of Amadou Diallo, an innocent African immigrant, who was brutally shot to death by the police as
he was standing in his own doorway. Amadou's father was a trader in gemstone and Amadou studied English travelling all the way from Guinea on the West coast of Africa to Manhattan where he met his death. Fire Fly portrays a victim of violence whose brother is 'a field of hurt wheat', his father 'a singing ruin' and mother 'crying with a mud in her mouth'.

“Something is scrawled on doors
I cannot see,
A firefly threads my eye.
Who am I?” 42

Green Parasol, as addressed by the poet to her daughter Swati Mariam. The poet describes her birth and her growing-up in to an independent, intelligent young girl. She says that all that she can gift her:

"It's all I have
this moist quilt work
of rooms an balconies,
continents torn, tampered with, blood thirsty." 43

The poet wants her to 'soar over the Bronx River/set fire to old straw/light up the broken avenues of desire.

"Then be a girl like any other,
in soft mist, in flowering sunlight,
at the rim of stone gates,
raise a green parasol
under a green tree." 44

The title poem Raw Silk sings of countries, home and abroad, the visions of raw silk from Varansi, bonfire of foreign goods ordained by Mahatma Gandhi, Verlaine and Rimbaud, of ‘red dates clustered on the bough of immortality’, smoke rising from island in the Nile and Silk worms dancing in the firmament. The poet says:

"When I open the drawer
to search for silk
I touch smokes
raw silk turned to smoke in the night's throat" 45

*Rumors for an Immigrant* refers to Gandhi in Central Park with “smoke in his palms, raising his Charkha, fluttering out of his dhoti”. The rumors spread that:

"There is no homeland anymore
all nations are abolished, a Youngman cries" 46

*Petro Glyph* is based on Kant's notions of geography. He talked of erasure of borders and cosmopolitanism. It is a long poem in eight parts. The poem talks about the supremacy of the whites, racialism and the poet's journey on the Indian Ocean in childhood.

“Now I live on an island by the mid-Atlantic shore
Home is where when I go, they let me in" 47

The poet describes the 9/11 terrorist attacks on twin towers. She describes herself standing by the "burning pit, a burial ground for thousands of people killed in the attack". The poet says:

"I hear names for ancient places: Istalif, Kabul, Kandahar.
I see women shrug off their veils, let sunlight
strike their cheeks. Women casting burkas
into flames no water can check. Children poking bits
of metal in unplowed land, a necklace of sorrow
mothers bear, throats parched with blood". 48

Alexander says that out of fire and ruin, a new world might immerge, the world adorned with ornaments of unity. At the end of the poem, she writes:

"Elsewhere in the meadow of hot bones,
grown up girls make implacable plans
than rise on tiptoe with lost larks to sing." 49
Triptych in a Time of War refers to Farokh Zad (1933-67), a poet of Tehran who wrote dazzling poems. The poet also refers to Enheduanna (2300 B.C.) the earliest poet known in recorded history. The word ‘Triptych’ means a picture or carving on three panels hinged together vertically. The poem evokes the terror and tragedy of war.

"O the bomb is fears flower
there is no love in the bomb,
only chaos the sea must swallow.
The flowers of Mesopotamia are tiny, blue edged,
driven under the skin of earth. But where can children hide?
The mouth of the cave is rimmed with red." 50

The poets are messengers of love and peace. They are always “in search of language that could tell of love" and justice. Alexander concludes the poem referring to Enheduanna, the poet of love and brotherhood:

"you hear her words unfurl on the screen,
bare sound, filled with longing
syllables of raw silk, this poem." 51

The poem Amrita is inspired by photomontages of Vivan Sundaram’s Retake of Amrita. The poet here imagines Amrita Shergil speaking after Gujarat atrocities. The poet had seen a child named Yunus in a relief camp in Ahmedabad. Amrita Shergill is the speaker in the poem. Yunus, a Muslim child victim of communal riots in Ahmedabad cites:

"My mane is
Yunus
Yunus can you hear me?

He stands there
half naked
his green shirt
torn, flapping
His belly and ribs
smoking

He skips away
I see his bottom
burst like a raw fruit
with the flames
they tossed him in." 52

Amrita, the artist feels that her paints and brushes are bright as bone. Violence of any kind offends the artist who feels at least for a while that her art has no meaning, no relevance in the world torn by violence, inhumanity and cruelty. In Naroda Patiya is another tragic poem describing communal violence in Ahmedabad. The poem is truly heart trending that describes killing of a woman carrying a child in her womb:

"Dark eyes
the color of burnt
almonds, face
slashed, lower
down where her belly
shone
a wet gash
Three armed men
out they plucked
a tiny heart
beating with her own
No cries
were heard
in the city.
Even the sparrows
by the temple gate
swallowed their song" 53
Searching for a Tomb over which they paved a Road is based on the pulling down of the tomb of the 17th century Muslim poet, Wali Gujarati(also known as Wali Deccani) by Hindu extremists. The Hindu fanatics forgot the fact that he loved his city Surat dearly and "he sang her praises to the moon". His tomb was razed and they paved a road over it. The Hindu extremists wanted to erase his name from the records of history and poetry. Wali cries out:

"I am the poet of a city
in ruins
burnt by the sun
bound to the moon
They reeds
by the river
are lashed to swords.
My dust is in the mouth
of the bloodied rose.\textsuperscript{54}

Meena Alexander was in Ahmedabad on September 11 to visit the relief camps for the survivors of ethnic violence. Letters to Gandhi contains four poems depicting bloody carnage in Ahmedabad, Babri Masjid demolition and Ramu Gandhi's conversation with the poet. The poem Slow Dancing opens with a question to Mahatma Gandhi:

"Dear Mr. Gandhi
Please say something
about the carnage in your home state

How did you feel when they shut the gates of Sabarmati Ashram that February night and wounded clung outside?
What lips, what soles swarmed across the river?
Is it hot on the other side?
Oh, so many questions, sir,
I cannot help myself
I cannot shut my mouth.

It's hard to hear you,
birds peck at sounds,
maggots gnaw since
even syllables have skin
the kingdom of heaven
is tiny as a mustard seed

and you have crawled there in."

Gandhi's Bicycle (My muse comes to Me) is the fourth poem in Letters to Gandhi. The words in the poem are put into the mouth of Ramu Gandhi, Gandhi's grandson and addressed to the poet. He says to the poet that he has come to her "with a jute bag filled bits of cloth marked with the colors of heaven. He tells her that the earth is cut from underfoot". He refers to Swami Vivekananda who on September 11, 1893 in Chicago addressed the audience as "sisters and brothers of America". He asks her harmony of us would dare to say' that now? Ramu Gandhi, a true heir of Gandhiji tells her that they should continue to spread the message of love, harmony, peace and humanity even in the teeth of war. He says:

"But we need to say that you and I
even in the teeth of war. Come closer now.
Do you hear the still sad music
of children killed in Godhra and Naroda Patiya?
Come closer to this table, cut
from a tamarind tree in my grand father's garden.
You can write your poems here
so they gather the sour sweet light of eternity."
"Fragile Places" is a key poem in the collection which has partly set in Gujarat where Mahatma Gandhi lived and partly in Kerala where the great Vedantic philosopher was born in 8th century A.D. He declared that only Brahman (the Ultimate Reality) is true while the phenomenal world is Maya, an illusion, the zone of the unreal. The poem begins with Sankaracharya's quote: "The world is a forest on Fire." It is the central theme of the poem with the images of fire of violence in the world. Meena Alexander quotes Tagore's words: "I lay with you at the water's edge/ a red rose blossomed in my breast" that suggest love amidst violence and war. Juxtaposing Sankaracharya, Gandhi and Tagore is suggestive of the ideals of unity, peace and liberal, secular view of religion. In modern times, "Identities are pulled apart/ on the tongs of war." The poet recalls her matriarchal lineage and her birth place Kaladi where the great Sankaracharya was born. Another important figure in the poem is of a woman who responds to the killing of an innocent child in bombing by turning to write instead of washing rice in the kitchen. The woman is the poet herself who has a faith in the power of creativity and poetry:

"Who dares to burn
with the stamp of love?
Words glimmer
then the slow
march to sentences.
Sankara speaks to me." 57

The poem displays diasporic sensibility in "Fragile Places" by calling the places 'fragile'. The poet is rooted in India, in Kerala her home. She lives in the USA but returns to India to mourn its state. She says:

"I have come to ground
in my own country
by the Pemba's edge"
in a field of golden rice
where shades gather." 58
She visits her grandmother's house her inheritance and yet she feels like an interloper. She is "unable to reconcile those that are scattered/ with those bound in fragile places". Thus migrants are destined to be scattered and yet bound and this creates an identity split. Gender, religious and national differences are the dominating forces that create violence and war. Men have failed to provide peace. On the contrary, they have perpetrators of violence and war. Women have acted as the guardians of lineage transcending race, caste, religion and beliefs. Women poets right from Sappho refused to be silenced and they voice the thorny realities of their own lives and the lives of the people all around them. Despite the onslaught of soul-crushing patriarchy, colonialism, race and religion, women poets have expressed the anguish of the world paving the way for love, peace and harmony in the world.

Meena Alexander in an interview with Ruth Maxey for Kenyon Review on February 25 and 28, 2005 said about the task of poetry:

"Camus says in the Myth of Sisyphus that there's only one philosophical question: whether to commit suicide. And he says, "the point is to live." He says that we must imagine Sisyphus happy as he pushes the stone up. Seen in that way, that act of writing is intrinsic to the act of living."

For Meena Alexander, poetry is the music of survival and place is the instrument on which that music is played. She did not have a one single place to live, a place called home or the language she could call her own language. She felt stranded in the multiplicity that marked her writing and her life. The first border that a woman poet has to cross is that of her body. This border of flesh and bone becomes a boon into existence. Memory has played a very important role in her creation of poetry. She knows about the oral power of poetry and scriptlessness. The title poem Illiterate Heart is
about a women who falls between language and has no script. Alexander
says that "for her writing a poem is like rinsing the language". 60

It can be summed up the words of Meena Alexander that tells how
migrant memory shaped and gave birth to her poems:

“Home for me is bound up with migrant's memory and the way that
poetry as it draws the shining threads of the imaginary through the
crannies of everyday life, permits a dwelling at the edge of the
world." 61

Sujata Bhatt, like Meena Alexander, is a remarkable diasporic woman
poet. She was born in Ahmedabad, India in 1956. She graduated from
writers' workshop, University of Iowa. At present she lives in Germany with
her husband and a daughter. She has worked in the United States of
America and in Canada. She was a visiting writer at the University of
Victoria, British Columbia. Her poetical works includes:

Brunizem (1988)
The Monkey Shadows (1991)
The Stinking Rose (1995)
Point No Point (1997)
Augatora (2000)
A Colour for Solitude (2002)

Her poems have been widely anthologized and also have been
translated into more than a dozen languages. She has received a
Cholmondeley Award in 1991 and the Italian Tratti Poetry Prize in 2000.
Sujata Bhatt has lived in India, the US, Canada and Europe. She has also
widely travelled across different cultures. She is a highly perceptive artist
and art lover. Her collection of poems A Colour for Solitude shows her deep
sensitivity and understanding of paintings. In this collection, she deals with
Paul Modersohn Becker (1876-1907), a young, energetic woman who went
her own way against all odds and carved her niche as a painter. Modersohn
Becker belonged to an artists' colony in Worpswede, near Bremen. She died at a young age after giving a birth to a daughter. She left behind her a remarkable body of work which has made her one of the greatest modern painters of her time. Sujata Bhatt was fascinated by her self-portraits and in her poems in *A Colour for Solitude*, she imagines the painter's inner and outer worlds. The poems also explore her friendship with Rilke and his wife, the sculptor Clara Westhoff. Sujata Bhatt herself lived in Bremen and visited Worpswede frequently. She explores in these poems not only the painter's inner and outer worlds but also the weather, the landscape, the language and music of Northern Germany. Her perspective, however, remains that of an outsider, an alien visitor.

Sujata Bhatt's poetry shows the signs of her understanding of time, history and cultures. It exhibits the impact of these forces on the poetry self and identity. In her first three volumes of poetry, we find a kind of Tensional quality resulting from displacement and uprooting from one's own home, country, culture, language and environment. Sujata Bhatt experiences the pang of displacement but does not exhibit it the way other diasporic poets do. She carries with her the seeds of home wherever she goes. A sense of continuity of relationship with home remains uninterrupted and unbroken. It pervades through her poetry and she expresses her sense of home in the following way:

“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.”

For her, home is not a mere geographical entity; it is the part and parcel of her identity, her inner psyche. Even when she is away from home,
she is with home all the time. She does not let it part from her - she says in the same poem:

“But I never left home
I carried it away
with me-here in my darkness
in myself.” 63

Home remains central her consciousness in all circumstances. It is true that Sujata Bhatt's concerns are global but she returns to the local or native experiences now and then relating herself to them intimately. When she writes about Hindu-Sikh riots in Delhi, she remembers how she used to lay with Sikh boy in her childhood. Whenever she paints poverty, she evokes the picture of poverty and squalor she had witnessed in Ahmedabad, her home town.

For Sujata Bhatt, home and nation are not just places but amalgam of memories of individuals, legends, relationships, legends, anecdotes, family rituals and history of one's own country. However, she knows that for her, history is a broken narrative, fragmented by post-colonial consciousness. The poem titled History is a Broken Narrative depicts the agony of displacement. Sujata Bhatt says:

“History is a broken narrative.
Pilka story and see where
It will lead you.
You take your language where you get it
or do you.
Get your language where you take it?
I got my in New Orleans.
In New Orleans, when I was five.
A whole new alphabet to go with the new world.” 64

Then her mother tongue her through the old alphabets and,
“I felt as if the different scripts be longed together; I felt them raw, clotting together in my mind, Raw, itchy - the way skin begins to heal.”

At the end, she frames an equation between history's broken narrative and the narrative of the diasporic self. A diasporic self makes a language when he/she changes it. Bhatt says:

“History is a broken narrative
Where you make your language
When you change it.”

In her poems is *Brunizem* and *Monkey Shadows*, she evokes images of home and the country through birds, animals and insects like peacock, lizard, crocodile, monkeys etc. They are not merely physical entities but the part of her psyche. She also revokes the past through the personalities like Swami Anand, Nanabhai Bhatt, Devibahen Pathak and her grandmother. She also refers to ancient mythological figures like Lord Hanuman, Goddess Kalika, Nachiketa and so on. As a diasporic poet, she connects herself with her home and nation through these figures. The diasporic writer's sense of identity is ascertained and strengthened through the images of past and history of his/her country. Most of the diasporic writers draw images from their home and nation amalgamating memory and nostalgia. The sense of exile is often very strong in some diasporic poets while Sujata Bhatt keeps it in low key referring to her permanent sense of home within her. In her poems like *A memory from Marathi, Honeymoon, My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari*. She expresses her preoccupation with her childhood and past very strongly. In the poem *My mother's Way Wearing a Sari*, she uses language as a metaphor for diasporic reality. Like the diasporic poet's identity, her language is constantly in flux. She expresses this idea of changing identity in *Augatora*:

“Constantly changing its colours
as if trying to win me over
with its simmering starlets and blacks
then always slipping out of my grasp - and yet
refusing to go away “ 67

Sujata Bhatt's multicultural perspectives on language, literature, art and culture arise from her own multicultural experiences. Born in India in Gujarat, her mother tongue Gujarati, she has studied in England and the USA, taught in Canada, travelled widely, delved in various arts such as painting, sculpture, literature and so on and now lives in Germany and works there. Her poetry is deeply meditative and philosophical. Her quest is for difficult truths of experiences. Her poetry deals with Indian Landscape and mores towards Europe and America but India remains a necessary obsession. Her preoccupation with cultural identity runs throughout her poetry about places, memories, various art forms, politics and science. As a poet and translator of Gujarati poetry into English, her major concern has been language or languages. She asks in Augatora (2000).

“What happened when the Gujarati
and the Marathi and the Hindi
I spoke
made room for the English words.” 68

Such rhetorical questions recur in her works and they express the poet's genuine quest for fluid identity. Sujata's poetical world is full of colours, sounds and fragrance.

Her first collection Brunizem (1988) has almost half of the poems set in India where she recalls her family, childhood memories and sights sounds and smells of village life. Here she recalls “how long and road-dust and wet canna lilies / the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes”. She returns to her city Ahmedabad after ten years. She experiences mixed feelings of nostalgia and confusion. They draw upon Indian myths, deities
and especially of animals: “Here, the gods roam freely / disguised as snakes or monkeys.” In Indian mythology, animals play a very important role. They are often the gods themselves or the vehicles of gods. They possess divine powers.

Sujata Bhatt compares the dreams of a young widow with buffaloes 'lazily swishing their tails, dozing.' In a poem *Something for Plato*, a wreck a rhinoceros symbolizes ‘philosophical conundrums of soul and body’. Some of her poems are highly erotic. In *Kamasutra Retold* invokes Yeast’s famous Swan to dramatize a 17 year old girl's first act of love. In another poem titled *Sherdi* (sugarcane), love-act is described

“they why I learned  
to eat sugar cane...  
suck hard with my teeth, pressdown  
and the juice spills out.”

Sujata Bhatt's metaphors often give erotic plays to language though her preoccupation with language is also political. In her poem she *A Different History*, she says:

“Great Pan is not dead;  
he simply migrated  
to India.  
Here, the gods roam freely  
disguised as snakes and 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.
You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose woods the paper was made." 69

Sujata Bhatt refers to Indian way of looking at animals, birds and other elements of nature. She refers to colonial nature of language when she says:

“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?” 70

The oppressor's tongue becomes the language of the oppressed. History is a strange phenomenon where quite often the language of the colonizer becomes the weapon for freedom from colonialism for the colonized as has been the case with English. English exercised a tremendous influence in intellectual life of India. Bengal was the first province where English was introduced first and its impact was almost revolutionary. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the first social reformer, patriotic pioneer undertook the comparative study of religions. He was a pioneer of Bengali prose which later influenced other vernaculars of India also. Bengal produced great patriots, social reformers, literary writers and thinkers under the influence of English. This shows that the tongue of the colonizers act as a catalyst for freedom and renaissance of an oppressed country.
Her poem *Search for My Tongue* arises from listening to a tape recording sent by her mother from India to her in Maryland, USA. It has a crescendo like progress made possible by extensive use of Gujarati her mother tongue, with words transcribed in to English within the first part and the third part are in English while the second part in Gujarati with English transcript in brackets. The poet asks:

“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.” 71

The poet says that one cannot use both the languages together and if one has to use a foreign language all the time, one's mother tongue would rot and die in one's mouth. She says that she felt like spitting out her mother tongue completely. But at night, her mother tongue returns to her in her dream. It blossoms and blooms like a flower on her tongue and ripens like a fruit in her mouth. Then,

“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.
Everytime I think I've forgotten,
I think I've lost the mother tongue
it blossoms out of my mother.” 72

The poem expresses the poet's fear that she was losing her identity as a Gujarati speaking Indian. It comes from a time when she was studying in America. She feared that she was being Americanized and she was forgetting her mother tongue Gujarati. As she had to use English all the time, she felt that her mother tongue would not and die in her mouth. Then,
however, as she dreams, her mother tongue reasserts itself in her first language. In the beginning, she expresses her distress that she is losing her mother tongue in USA where she had to speak in Americanized English. She fears that the two languages were at war and the foreign language seemed to be winning. But at the end, she feels that her mother tongue reasserts itself at the centre of her life and she is proud of it. The allusion to her dreams has two meanings: one that she speaks in Gujarati in her dreams and also that it is dream and longing to speak it always. Thus the poet is proud and happy at regaining her identity which she was afraid she had lost. The poem is a fine example of the expression of diasporic sense of a loss of language and cultural identity. However, Sujata Bhatt reconciles English and Gujarati finally asserting that one can never forget one's mother tongue as it would blossom out of one's mouth pushing other language aside. The initial feeling of anguish at the loss of mother tongue is finally replaced by the confident reassertion of the mother tongue strengthening the identity of the poet as Gujarati, Indian.

_The Dream_ is a poem about childhood memory of a dream on a windy morning. The poet was about ten or eleven years old. She had been ill for several days and she slept till late dreaming of a snake green at first, then changing into blue and orange. It was trying to win her over with its shimmering starlets and blacks. It slipped out of her grasp and yet did not leave her. Her father watched her from the door-way said:

“Don’t resist
You must accept it
Then is no point
in fighting with the snake.”

Sujata evokes sensuous imagery that symbolize longing and nostalgia. There's always a lost for life in her poems.
Angatora is the title poem about the loss of the word when languages collided bitterly, bloodily. Windoge or vindauga means wind eye, the hole, the opening out into the wind. The wind blows into the house through it. Augatora means eye-gate, the hole for the eye to measure the sun, the gate opening to the sun and light. The poet says:

“Keep an eye on the house
Keep an eye on the child.
Don’t let the child fall out of the window.
Don’t throw your house out of the window.”

A Memory from Marathi recalls the poet's childhood memory of sound of water, the memory that would not go away from the poet's mind. The poet was three year old girl and she was thirsty in the middle of the night. Her mother was sleeping with her new born son. The poet's father went to fetch water for her in the kitchen but it took a long time and she saw that there was a snake between her and her father. The poet's father killed it with a stick and poured kerosene over it.

“It bled and bled-I could never forget
the redness streaming out
of the broken skin.”

Many years later, he told her that it won lucky that he killed it. The poem evokes violent image of killing a snake probably suggesting unwelcome memory or disgusting emotion. There is yet another poem referring to snakes titled The Snake Cather Speaks. The poem says that the best way to catch a northern water snake is to corner it in a lake and let it bite on one's arm. It will hold on tight even as one raises one's arm out of water. It hurts as six rows of teeth cut into one's flesh but it is a non poisonous snake, shy and elusive, aggressive only when it is conformed. The speaker in the poem shows the snake to the students and finally let it
loose in the woods. Memories like snakes cling to one's mind hurting and yet harmless. Once one let stream loose, they bolt in a flash out of one's hands.

*History is Broken Narrative* contains poem referring to partition, Pope, Tito and the WHO, earthquake, New Orleans, killing of a girl child, Shirodkar Suture, Jerusalem, Red Army and other events and personages with political or historical context. *Partition* is a poem describing the horrible experience of partition of India in 1947 by the poet's mother who was nineteen years old then. She could hear the cries the people stranded in Ahmedabad railway station. Her father's sister went to the railway station with food and water everyday but she stood in the garden listening to strange horrible sounds. She had no courage of go with her aunt. The poet's mother tells the poet that she wished she had gone with her aunt to feed the people stranded at the railway station. She, at the age of seventy and India with fifty years of independence, feels guilty for her lack of courage. She says that India was older than that and it was always there. And at the end, she asks the poet:

“How could they

have let a man.

Who knew nothing

about geography

divide a country?”

Sujata Bhatt in one of her short poems *Diabetes Mellitus* says that if Gandhiji had acute diabetes, he would not have his fasts unto death and like the poet's mother's mother, he would have gone into a coma. Sujata often used medical and scientific terminology in her poems. This is indicative of her knowledge of various subjects like science, medicine, geography and so on. The poem *The Pope, Tito had the Who* refers to the trio who were mentioned over and over on All India Radio in those days. Children became quiet as they listened to their names. The boy decided to be the Pope, the girl wanted to be a doctor but Tito remained a mystery for the children. This
is a poem in a lighter vein about the days when children were highly influenced by radio news.

_Voice of the Unwanted Girl_ is a moving poem about a girl who has been done away with before birth. The dead girl addresses her mother saying that when the doctor told her that she was a girl child, the doctors gave an injection to kill her. She says:

“Before I died I heart
the traffic rushing outside the on soon
Slvsh, the wind sulking through
your beloved Mumbai.”

The girl's mouth did not search for anything and her head was cut apart like a sliced pomegranate. The girl’s mother put on her grass green sari and orange stems of Parijatak blossoms adorned her hair. Afterwards, all were happy and smiling. The last part of the poem is profoundly appealing.

“But now I ask you
To look for me, mother,
look for me because
I won’t come to you in 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,
for the place that can never be described.
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." 77

Kalika deals with the theme of loss because of the protagonist’s mother’s death and the continuity of the matrilineage through mother’s nurturance.

The title poem History is a Broken Narrative is an intelligent discourse on language and history. Sujata Bhatt in this long poem in three parts present broken narratives in different slots of time 1996, 1953, 1963 and 1968. She says:

“History is a broken narrative.
There is more than one way
to cut out a voice
more than one way to make a tongue bleed.
Where is the myth?
And where is the emblem?
You make your language when you change it.” 78

The poet further says:
“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
and the way to the neighbor’s house is endless
with your mouth like a bird.” 79

The poet says that she has a clear memory of her life before English and her life after English. She adopted English quietly and easily without even noticing. She asks:
“What happened when the Gujarati
and Marathi and Hindi
I spoke
made rooms for the English words."  

Sujata Bhatt is diasporic poet stands for assimilation and acceptance. Human history, she thinks, is a broken narrative with the phase of fragmentation, assimilation and renewal. Her approach to her diasporic entity is marked by understanding, assimilation, and reconciliation. In Jerusalem, she states a universal truth:
"It is so hard to describe the truth".

Her poem 'Language' is addressed to Johannes Bobrowski, a German poet. She reads his poems translated into English but she finds herself remembering her direct way to the poet's German sounds.

“In the end, the birch tree
did n't break and the ice melted
and I could walk beside the river
with your words
an mediated, un-translated in my mouth.”  

Sujata Bhatt returns to her favorite subject of language again and again. In Jane to Tarzan, Jane writes to Tarzan:
“Already you have changed
my language, my sleep
At first
I thought I should teach you
English - return to you
what you have lost
But you have changed the sounds
I listen for
the sounds I want to keep
near me.”
The poem has erotic, sensuous description. Jane tells Tarzan that he has changed her sleep and also the darkness within her dreams. She says:

“Hunter, ravisher, you are more
that that - with your raw speech
you have tracked me down
with your raw speech you have changed
the way I look at trees
the way I hold a stone
the fruits I eat.

Homeland is always green,
Homeland is nice word
to exercise your jaw.

Still we circle each other
wary of our needs, wary
of our meanings -
the word I know
cannot help me.

You have changed my smell
and my sweat and yes,
my skin which sleeps with language.

How could you - how could you
change my language, my sleep?

How could you make me want
to change myself so much.”

Sujata Bhatt says that homeland is a sweet word for one’s tongue to speak. It is always green in one’s memory but the language, the sounds may change with the environment, and with the place you live in and love.
In *Ars poetica*, there is a fine poem on women titled *Is it a Voice?*

“It is a voice
or is it a women?
or shall I say: there is a voice
that is a women?
She greets you
with her Smokey eyes and her head held high
she stands where the trees are slender.
She is so silent
for someone who is a voice.”

*My mother's way of wearing a Sari* depicts memories of the poet's mother in the poet's mind. The picture of the poet's mother wearing Sari arises before her mind's eyes. She is quite fast at wrapping her Sari round her body, measuring each plant and aligning them carefully, tacking them into her waistband. The poet feels that she would have wore silk instead of coarse handspun khadi. It is ordinary, plain, sturdy and clean. It smells of sandal wood. The poet reminds her of her reddish yellow sari but she only nods but does not wear it. She has put them away in the wardrobe occasionally stroking them while showing them to her daughter. The poet's mother gets up early in the morning when it is still dark. She has to fill all the clay pitcher and vessels with water. The poet's younger brother is still asleep and mother has to finish all her daily chores before her mother-in-law calls her for the kitchen. The poet is unable to sleep thinking about the duties and toils of a dutiful Indian woman. ‘Sari’ here represents not a mere cloth for wearing but symbolizes, power, blessing, curse, personality and so on. The poet's reminiscences of her mother present her diasporic longing and memory of her mother and home. The poem had graphic description of how the poet's mother wears a Sari:

“And then I watch
my mother balance
the pleated part of her Sari
against her waist-
how she measures
and weights each pleat
against each other -
Finally, aligning them into a flowing fan-”

A Detail from the Chandogya Upanishad refers to the Indian metaphor for the sun as the honey of gods, a golden being with red eyes. His red eyes are compared to a red lotus flower and the redness of a lotus flower is compared to a monkey's red bottom. In Sanskrit, these comparisons are compressed in one line. The poet asks:

“Is it innocence - is it
Objectivity?
Or is it simply the reverence?

Will you pray to the Sun?
to the lotus or to the monkey?”

Here Sujata Bhatt, points to the Indian way of looking at life and nature. She refers to all inclusiveness of Indian approach to life. Poem for a Reader Who was Born Blind, shows that the blind people understand colors in their own distinct ways. The poet imagined herself blind and listened to a Mongolian shepherd’s song. She could hear horses, the vast blueness, snow, a fox and a prairie dog in her song. She felt:

“And then - the blueness
started to seep into my chest…”

Multicultural Poem is a manifesto of multicultural writing. The very opening introduces the concept of multicultural poetry:

“How the tongue must change
Its color for every language
little chameleon bruised by your teeth.
Pull it out, pull it out, the silence
the silence between
the cadence and the syntax—"

Further the poet says that multicultural poem is a creature,
“a being
whose spirit breaths
like an or child in the sun
still wet from the rain
one day when the garden tilts slippery, sublime
on a day when
the garden dazzles with bird song.”

The multicultural poem cannot be tamed. It would not be anyone's pet it is meant to be read at the border; it does not expect to be understood as it is used to being misunderstood.

“It speaks of refraction
It wants more dialogue
between the retina and the light
It says, get rid of that squint'

It lives the chapter in history
they can't teach you in school
It likes no wear a mask - everyday
a different face –

The multicultural poem is not afraid to
Photograph
lotuses
It is not afraid to live
inside a nightingale
some days it will eat roses
uncooked - straight from the bush
some days it will eat snakes.”

Sujata Bhatt highlights the inclusiveness and assimilative element of the multicultural poem. It makes its own rules: It has not set rules to follow nor does it follow any. It likes the word terracotta and it uses words like telescope and other scientific terms.

“It is not afraid
to sleep with the muse
Nights it will dream
of kingfishers, it will
dream of bicycles
It will find its words
in the time between the shadows
in the sounds between
the crows fighting in the guava trees…” 88

Meeting the Artist in Durban is a poem about a Black self-taught artist who got wood out of river. He never chopped down trees but sat by the rivers for hours watching for wood. The fished for wood he called 'Koodoo' and then carved it in a shape of a man, women or animals. He stayed silently in a bush and watched birds. He planted new trees. He learnt to speak English on his own. He complains that his people fight among themselves and often beat their women. Therefore, he carved a woman, a big woman, bent down with age and hard humiliating life.

Ars Poetica is a title poem that expresses Sujata's love for vowels in poetry. She says:

“You asked me who envied most
which writer? which poet?
who would I want to be
if I could choose
to be other than myself?"

Then she replies that it is not necessarily a writer but the poem that she envied. It is not simply the poem but the cadence that moved her. It is not only the cadence but the way certain lines are sung by certain singers that appealed to her. She says that she would like to be Fredrika Brillembaury who played the role of orphans in Berlioz version of Gluck's opera. She says that she would like to be the song that accompanied her as she strode across the stage in her black suit, her body like a huge wounded wing. She envied Fredrika Brillembaury acting as orphans singing all these vowels full of loss and hope, screaming for his beloved wife Eurydice. Sujata Bhatt concludes the poem saying:

"Envy? Oh yes.
Oh yes
I would like to disappear
into these vowels." 89

Of *Monkey Shadows* (1991), Bhatt wrote in the poetry book society bulletin that her baby daughter was its muse and most of the poems were written during the first two years of her life. The collection contains poems expressing how parent's protective anxieties in the wider context of issues affecting Europe and America. *The Stare* is one of the beautiful poems set in India, observing small children staring at a monkey child.

"There is that moment
when the young women child
stares
at the young monkey child
who stares back
Innocence falling
innocence in a space
where the young monkey child
is not in captivity.
There is purity
clarity
there is transparence
in the stare
which lasts a long time...

Eyes of water
eyes of sky
the soul can still fall through
because the monkey
has yet to learn fear
and the human
has yet to learn fear
let alone arrogance."

The monkey child looks at the human child not in the same way as it
would look at its siblings. The human child also looks at the monkey child as
a totally different being. And yet, there exists good will and curiosity on their
faces. Sujata Bhatt says:

“I would like to slip inside
that stare, to know
what the human child thinks
what the monkey child thinks
at that very moment.”

The human child is at the age when he begins to use words. For him,
the word is the thing itself.

“Language is simply
a necessary mark
suddenly connected
to the child's own heart beat.”
However, the young monkey child grows at a different rate. It looks at a tree, a bush or at a human child. What it must be thinking is a mystery. It has no words like the ones in human languages. It does not define things as human do. For the monkey child, the word is not a thing but a thing is a thing without definition.

“What remains burning
is that moment
of staring:
the two newly formed heads
balanced on fragile necks
tilting towards each other.
The monkey face
and the human face
observing each other
with intense gentleness...” 91

*Maninagar Days* present the poet's childhood memories of Maninagar in Ahmedabad where monkeys jumped from trees into cool shadow spots. There were rhesus monkeys that travel in large groups with their extended families. Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins fight among themselves while the grandmother sat far away holding on to the sleepy newborn. Before every meal, however, truce took place. Hanuman monkey the langur with thick tufts of silver grey eyebrows remained aloof unbothered. Children and monkeys feel closer to each other though they do not play with each other and monkeys are often a verse to children.

“Still, the children treat the monkeys
as if they were children newly arrived from a foreign country, unable to speak the language yet”

Without monkeys, trees look barren to the children. They climb up the Gulmohur trees refusing to come down. The children are jealous of monkeys for they too like to eat the Gulmohur flowers. They try to coax the monkeys to throw some flowers down.
“Oh with monkeys like that
the children believe an Hanuman.
In their secret wishes the children reinvent
the perfect monkey. Hanuman
wild and fierce and loyal and gentle.”

Hanuman is in Indian mythological character the son of wind God Maruti and Anjana, a goddess turned into a monkey by a curse. Hanuman is considered the most powerful, most intelligent and the most learned. He is also considered to be the ideal of perfect servant who finds full realization of manhood, faithfulness and obedience. He exemplifies the ideal of egolessness, humility and obedience to Sri Ram.

“Some people have monkeys
in their dreams, monkeys in their nightmares
monkey crossing their shadows
long after they have dropped being children
long after they have left such a garden...” 93

The Glassy Green and Maroon presents nostalgic memory of the poet's mother wearing sturdy thick green and maroon glass bangles that accompanied all her daily chores reflecting morning sun, afternoon sun and evening light. Sujata Bhatt says that such sturdy bangles are no more available in Ahmedabad or Delhi. Now everything is fragile and breakable like rusty tin shack, raw spaghetti' and dry twigs of the termite emptied trees.

Ajwali Ba was Sujata's grandmother (her father' mother), Nanabhai Bhatt, a great educationist, freedom fighter, social worker and Gandhian was her grandfather. Sujata here presents a fine portrait of Ajwali Ba and Nanabhai. It was an oft-told story by her father as a sort of preface to some philosophical point. It was repeated so many times that the scene unfolded before her eyes at the mere mention of it. The story was like this: Nanabhai returned home at 1.00 a.m. spending whole day with Harijans, the
oppressed caste among the Hindus. Ajwali Ba blocked his way saying that he could enter only after taking a bath outside. Nanabhai was too tired and pleaded for admission, but she insisted maintaining distance so that he could not pull her with his slightest touch. She did not want to change her rules and stuck to her orthodox Brahmin principle. Nanabhai decided to sleep in the garden. Then there was a pause after a few minutes, Ajwali Ba rushed outside running across the courtyard leading to the mango orchard to join him. The poet says

“We'll never know what
made her change her mind
perhaps she doesn't know herself
But I can feel her sweeping gesture
her brisk strong arms
tearing into the air
and crescent eyebrows that I've inherited
and impatience to understand him...”

Sujata Bhatt says that soon Nanabhai was asleep but Ajwali Ba continued to keep awake even without bothering to close her eyes.

“I see her staring at the sky
enjoying a private game
of untangling the stars
and counting them
into their correct constellations.”

Nanabhai Bhatt, Sujata's grandfather was a thinker, writer and educationist. He participated in freedom struggle under Gandhiji's leadership. He was a founder of Dakshinamurti in Ambla Bhavnagar (Gujarat) and later Lokbharti, Sanosara in Gujarat. These educational institutions are modeled on Gandhian values like Nai Talim, Basic Education and cultivation of three H's viz., 'head, heart and hands'. *Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison* reminisces Nanabhai in prison in 1942-43. He was thrown into the
prison for helping Gandhiji for Civil Disobedience. Then Sujata was in college, Baltimore, USA reading literature. She pictured Nanabhai in prison in the middle of the night in the middle of writing. He paused to read from Tennyson, his favorite poet. The poet wondered which lines of Tennyson gave him the most comfort as he sat in a dark cell of a prison at the age of sixty. The poem depicts the poet's admiration and adulation for her grandfather who lived the life of principles in turbulent times.

Sujata Bhatt in her poem *Kankaria Lake* describes the famous Kankaria Lake of Ahmedabad.

“It is more like a skin, 
a reptile's skin-
wrinkled and rough as a crocodile's
and green
Bacterial green, decomposed
green- opaque and dull.”

Children imagine that crocodiles devour careless men who sleep to close to the lake and,

“There are hardly any trees
near the lake; no friendly monkeys
who would throw fruits down
to the crocodiles, as they do
in one old story.”  

*A Different way to Dance* and *What Happened to the Elephant* refers to Ganesh myth, Ganesh the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati. He is considered a symbol of wisdom and prudence. Ganesh did not always have an elephant's head but acquired one after Shiva through a misunderstanding chopped off his original head. In the poem *A Different Way to Dance*, Sujata Bhatt describes a drive South of Boston on her June night when her mother saw an elephant in a truck. They follow the truck as if they were following
Lord Ganesh himself. Then the poet imagines Parvati, Ganesh's mother dreaming of her son's greenish brown eyes, small nose, straight eyebrows, thick knots of curly hair before Shiva 'interfered'.

“Sometime the elephant head of Ganesh dreams of the life among elephants it knew before Shiva interfered.
How comfortable it was to walk on four legs. To be able to speak with mountains to guess the mood of the wind..
and there was the jungle, cool mud, dripping leaves, the smell of wood-sandal wood and teal. The smell of trees allowed to grow old the smell of fresh water touched by deer the smell of his newly found mate the smell of their mounting passion...”

Sujata Bhatt peeps in to the elephant head of Ganesh who still cherish the memories of the jungle life among the elephant herd. The poem evokes highly sensuous images that appeal to readers' senses of touch, hearing, smell and soon. She returns to the same myth in 'what happened to the Elephant' where she questions:

“What happened to the elephant the one whose head Shiva stole to bring his son Ganesh back to life?”

She prolongs the story by stretching the child's imagination that continues to probe deeper. Ganesh become Ganesh with head of elephant Shiva chopped off but then what happened to the elephant whose head was chopped off. If the elephant was received with, say, a horse's head,

“Who is the true elephant?
And what shall we do
about the horse’s body?

The child wants solution where none should dies. The poet says that one imagines a rotting carcass of a beheaded elephant as she looks at the framed post-card of Lord Ganesh. The elephant invited for Ganesh but the other elephants danced in sadness round the beheaded elephant.

“How they turned and turned
in a circle, with their trunks
facing outwards and the inwards
towards the headless one.
That is dance
a group dance
no one talks about...” 96

Sujata Bhatt's questioning mode raises deeply curious, intellectual and sensitive issues. Her poetry thus differs from other Diaspora poets where one finds a sense of dislocation and displacement from their homeland while in Sujata Bhatt's poetry, one encounters intellectual inquiry often metaphysical in nature. Sujata Bhatt describes tails of monkeys as glorious questions in her poem Understanding the Ramayan.

Deviben Pathak is a poem about Sujata Bhatt's grandmother, her mother's mother. She remembers the year 1938 when her mother was twelve years old. Her mother's mother asked the goldsmith to make a pendent in the shape of Swastika for her. Swastika is a sacred symbol in India symbolizing triangular Parvati and triangular Shiva. Deviben had never heard of Hitler's use of swastika for Nazism. Sujata Bhatt was also fond of Swastika symbols that she drew it them everywhere. However, what shall she say to her German born daughter?

"Oh, didn't I love the Hindu Swastika?
And later one day didn't I start wishing
I could rescue the shape from History?"
But how shall I begin?
what shall I say
oh my German-born daughter,
innocent girl with a Lubecker
Baltic-eyed innocent father.”

The poet feels that there is something wrong about many sacred things. They are not always innocent and holy.

“Something is wrong:
So many old religious fatten
on arrangements, on fresh murders
or do they call that offerings?
Someone’s wife, someone’s son
should not have been touched...”

The poet mixes history, mythology and politics in a very poignant manner connecting it to memory of her grandmother and her German born daughter Baltic-eyed husband. There is a tendency on her past to intertwine the rhythm of vernacular Indian languages Sneh as Gujarati in her poetry in English. Her multilingual abilities create a very interesting effect. In a poem White Asparagus, she enters into the consciousness of pregnant women who erotically relieves her state of sexual fulfillment. She asks: “who understands the logic behind the desire?”

A Story for Pears is a very touching poem about her grant aunt Hiraben. She was divorced and started working as a nurse. She was often seduced by married doctors. Her life was a long, tragic story of sufferings. The poet says:

“I wonder if she ever
spoke to God
I imagined she would have given up
with a Lord who allows torture
And how could she have continued
believing in a God who dwells
in every heart? The Lord
in her mother-in-Law's heart?
The Lord in her husband's heart?"

She felt that her soul had left her. Flowers colors, birdsongs meant
nothing to her. She died a tragic death

"Towards the end
when she was dying
she used to poke her naked chest
with a tired finger
as if to say here here
this is where my soul used to be..." 99

The Echoes in Pune describes how scientists use rhesus monkeys in
search for vaccination and anti-biotic. While the poet's father experimented
with test-tube, her younger brother, a six year old, child feels monkeys with
flowers and berries. After many years, the poet is remained of those
monkeys when her daughter lay hot with fever and tense with anti-biotic.

In Walking Across the Brooklyn Bridge, she remembers the people -
the fathers and mothers from Vietnam who are willing to give their blood,
hair, livers, kidneys to get their children past the statue of liberty. It presents
immigrant's view of subtle form of violence in America.

"In another section
of the Newspaper I read
about the ever growing problems of refuges
who will take them in?
Especially, the ones from Vietnam,
a favorite subject for photographers,
flimsy boats, someone's thin arm in the way -
who can forget those eyes?
And who can judge those eyes
that vision?...” 99

Distances expresses Sujata Bhatt's true diasporic and multicultural sentiment which always insists on embracing universalism and inclusiveness. The poem in fact, presents her philosophy of acceptance of the entire world as one, the world beyond borders. Once swimming in the Atlantic Ocean in Conil, she feels that every place is closer to her.

“Africa, America,
You are not far away
I touch you through the waves
simultaneously –
……………………..
And every place slides
through my fingers with the filthy
just breaking waves, relentless
salty water.” 100

But back out of the ocean again, inland; all is separate, distant. Man made borders come into existence on land in the atlas.

“and this ocean
lies trapped on the page
like a gasping beached whale.”

Need to recall the Journey is a graphic description of the birth of a child by the mother. She recalls the experience.

“When she was about to slide out
safely
all by herself - I felt my heart
go half-way out with her.
like seeing a beloved one off
to a harbor, to a ship
destined to go
to a far away place
You’ve never been to…” 101

The mother says that she was lucky to have felt each step. It was a sharp scalping blackness as if one had swallowed thorns, entire cacti and splinters from a knife

“Is it how it feels
to be almost drowned?
Black black
that old knowledge
from the earth.

........................
And then, I was cold,
cold, as if my bones
had been emptied
of their marrow.” 102

At the Flower Market describes the poet and her six month old daughter’s visit to a flower market not to buy flowers but to just to look around. The poet saw her six mouth old daughter’ face and she stared at colorful flowers. There are explosive hibiscus and bougainvillea, caged in the plastic pots as they sit like laboratory specimens. She recalls her bougainvillea at her Pune house, tall and huge like elephant and bracts flying in the air like paper kites. There were huge hibiscuses in her Pune house like red trumpets with large golden tongues.

In What Does One Write When the World Starts to Disappear, the poet imagines rising up of the earth in the form of a woman at the foot hills of the Himalayas complaining to Shiva that she is unable to bear all those weapons - swords, gun, missiles, satellites and so on. She requests Lord Shiva to do
something. Lord Shiva, the God of destruction with seven hooded cobra paralyzed everything to stillness. The poet asks:

"What would one do
when the words starts to disappear?
where does one go?
what does one take along?
and who will read our books
tomorrow? who will listen
to our music, tune the sitars
and violins?
I mean, what species? 103

The poet imagines that a few lizards and snakes may have managed to survive. The lizard’s tale would be seen dancing through the eyehole of the mask. The snake forked tongue would investigate the nature of plastic. The poem exhibits the modern concerns about war and environmental hazards. The poem possesses universal appeal as it voices the fears of modern world threatened by violence, terrorism, pollution and plastic. The poet uses the Vedic myth of the Earth as a women complaining to Lord Shiva along with scientific terms very deftly.

In *The Stinking Rose*, Sujata Bhatt explores various mythologies and magical aspects of garlic in twenty five parts. The stinking rose is one of the names of garlic. She evokes the hunting memories of India, Europe and Vancouver Island. There is a dialogue between the new world and the old intensifying towards the end of the volume in a series of experimental poems, using Gujarati and English together.

*Fate* is a poem addressed to A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), the poet Sujata Bhatt admired the most. The poet comes to know of A.K. Ramanujan's death while she started rereading his poems unaware that he was in a hospital in Chicago and Sujata was in Bremen, not knowingly why she had that sudden craving for his words she says:
“Forgive me if I call it fate
or some from telepathy
But very soon the phone rang
at an odd hour with the news
of your death.”

Sujata Bhatt's volume of selected poems *Point No Point* (1997), which draws on the first three books would appeal to all those who wish to enter an unusual imaginative world. She shows her wider understanding and empathy across cultures and how she enters the world of the artist, dramatizing the experience of language and its multicultural meanings. Her particular achievement lies in the fact that though she writes in English, often dealing with multicultural settings, and themes, retains Indian cultural richness. Her statement: ‘I never left home / I carried it away with me’ exhibits her internationalism with deep sensitivity and human perspectives. Sujata Bhatt differs from other diasporic poets as her concerns are wider and all encompassing. Her poetry has instinctive sophistication that confronts the contradictions in the world of silence and mythologies. There are also contradictions in her own comparatively orthodox Indian background and upbringing and her extensive travelling and acquaintance with the modern world. She cherishes nostalgic memories of her childhood in India, recalling them again and again in her poetry at the same time, she adapts to new surroundings in new countries trying to assimilate the best from everywhere. She loves German landscapes as much as she does the Indian landscapes. She enjoys and appreciates modern German paintings, music and literature. She is acquainted with several European and Indian languages that prove her with true multicultural identity. She is a sensitive, romantic and even erotic poet with a scientific attitude, wry, wise and searching questioning stance. Sujata's poetry oscillates between her love, her roots and also a certain kind of dislike and disagreement with her homeland with its superstition, poetry, squalor. *Brunizem* refers to a variety of brown prairies soil found in Asia, Africa and North America. It becomes an apt metaphor for dispersal of the self. Thus diaporic poetry is motivated by the sense of
questioning, analysis and shifting attitude towards the process of immigrant life and history.
References:

5. Ibid. p.36.
8. Ibid. p.38.
15. Ibid.p.199.
16. Ibid. p. 203.
22. Ibid p.25.
   p. 29.
27. Ibid p. 36.
30. Ibid. p. 66.
32. Ibid. p. 78
33. Ibid.p. 85-86.
34. Ibid. p.86
35. Ibid. p.49.
39. Ibid p.10
40. Ibid p.11
41. Ibid p.14
42. Ibid. p.28
43. Ibid p.32
44. Ibid p.32-33
45. Ibid p -36
46. Ibid p. 38
47. Ibid p.47
48. Ibid. p. 50
49. Ibid. p. 50
50. Ibid. p.65
51. Ibid, p. 67
52. Ibid. p :73
53. Ibid. p. 75
54. Ibid. p.76
55. Ibid. p. 78-79
56. Ibid. p.837
57. Ibid. p -88
58. Ibid. p. 87
63. Ibid p. 27.
65. Ibid. p. 41
66. Ibid. p.43.
67. Ibid. p.16.
68. Ibid. p.45.
70. Ibid. p.48.
71. Ibid.p.52.
72. Ibid. p.52.
74. Ibid. p.16.
75. Ibid. p.20.
77. Ibid. p.38-39.
78. Ibid. p. 40.
79. Ibid. p. 40.
80. Ibid. p.45.
81. Ibid. p.55.
82. Ibid. p.57.
83. Ibid. p.57-59.
84. Ibid. p. 106.
85. Ibid. p.91.
86. Ibid. p. 97.
87. Ibid. p. 98.
88. Ibid. p.100-103.
89. Ibid. p.106-107.
90. Ibid. p.106.
92. Ibid. p. 16-19.
94. Ibid. p. 31.
95. Ibid. p. 35.
96. Ibid. p. 37-38.
97. Ibid. p. 50.
98. Ibid. p. 69-70.
99. Ibid. p. 85.
100. Ibid. p.100.
101. Ibid. p.110.
103. Ibid. p.120-121.