Chapter-IV
Sujata Bhatt: Moving Across Cultures

Sujata Bhatt is one of the most promising Indian women poets writing in English. The international recognition of her work confirms her valuable contribution to contemporary Indian English poetry. She was born in Ahmedabad, her parents moved to the USA when she was twelve and is now settled in Germany. Her husband is a German writer and radio producer and since 1988, she has been living in Bremen (Northern Germany), working as a freelance writer translating Gujarati poetry and prose into English. Bhatt has been recognized as a distinctive voice in contemporary poetry. Her poem “A Different History” dealing with the issues of globalization and westernization has featured in poetry anthology used for IGCSE English Examination. Her extensive movement across cultures makes her a fit subject for analysis within the contemporary discussions of globalization and diasporic identity.

As of now, Bhatt has produced six poetic volumes. These include Brunizem (1988), The Monkey Shadows (1991), The Stinking Rose (1995) Point No Point (1997), Augatora (2000) and A Colour for Solitude (2002). Her first collection Brunizem won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Barlett Award. Subsequent collections have been awarded a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and in 1991, she received a Cholmondeley Award. A large number of her poems display the conflict of the self between different cultures besides articulation of subjective thoughts, experiences and feelings.

Like other contemporary women poets her incessant search for identity forms an important theme of her poems. Loss of identity is a recurrent theme in her poems. Even though English is the language she speaks and chooses to write in, she describes Gujarati culture and the Indian childhood which clings to her as the deepest layer of her identity with a lot of intimacy. The repercussions of this divided mindset, divided heritage and fragmented personality are explored and discussed in her work, most explicitly in her landmark poem “Search for My Tongue” which alternates between the two languages – Gujarati and English. The complex status of English – its beauty and colonial implications are beautifully explored in the moving ironies of “A Different History” and “Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison” about her grandfather who read Tennyson to comfort himself during his incarceration by the British authorities. Such
dichotomy finds geographical expression in the poems which explore the ideal of home. (“The One who Goes Away”) and questions our mental mapping of the world. It is present in her voice too, with its musical melding of Indian and American inflections.

Her poems display her continuing interest in etymology and problems of shifting across languages. The title of her first collection ‘Brunizem’ takes the word for a soil type that runs across the northern hemisphere connecting many countries of her residence. ‘Augatora’ is an old high German word for ‘window’ and the history and different associations of the terms are traced from the perspective of her global movements and cross-cultural personality.

A large number of her poems in the poetic volumes under study i.e. Brunizem, Monkey Shadows, and Augatora display her cross-cultural identity. Her works constitute an interesting talk on how to find one’s place in the world. Her symbols are powerful and highly evocative. Images like ‘fish’, ‘moon’, ‘river-god’ ‘lake’, ‘asparagus’ and ‘crocodile’ etc. express her keen interest and deep faith in various objects of nature. Like a true successor of Kamala Das, her poems wholeheartedly participate in such life and yearn for a freedom of articulation. They raise a voice against discriminations and oppression that the women have to face all over the world in general and in India in particular. However, her cross-cultural identity and the element of Indian diaspora are the first things to grasp the attention of the readers.

If her poems are put in the perspective of contemporary situation of the world, they disseminate a lot of ideas. If at all freedom is of essence, corresponding social responsibility also matters. Art and culture are the ennobling forces of humanity and true art brings rejuvenation and enlightenment. Needless to say, the poet not only represents regional as well as natural culture but also reminds the humanity of their inextricable relationship with nature which is an everlasting source of health and vigour. A number of her poems talk about the loss of natural surroundings and the pain emanating out of it. This is yet another aspect of her poetry which attracts attention from the beginning to the end.

Bhatt’s poetry like that of many other Indian women poets writing in English reads like an important social document in which one finds struggle, search for identity, dignity and enlightenment and a yearning for a world in which the women are not secondary, not at the periphery, but as central as men. This yearning for equality, struggle for amelioration of the lot of women is another important theme that
places her in the fold of feminist poets. It brings out the conflict of gender through the Indian female psyche. Different groups of people are depicted as strong, rational and patriarchal while women and migrants are seen as weak, emotional and feminine, less developed, undermining the social fabric. She recollects her memories of childhood in India and locates her persona in the role of a perpetual traveller who stands ironically commenting on the good luck rituals of her mother culture. A number of her poems describe the penury, diseases and hunger in the ‘Third World Setting’ and show the community surviving despite adversity. Her poetry reflects the pain from an awareness of her own distance from those around her. A number of her poems talk about the ravages of colonial economics, anti-female violence or globalizing warfare. In her well-known poem, “Search for My Tongue” the poet’s original language is central to her identity whereas in “Presents from My Aunt in Pakistan” her family customs form the core of her identity. The woman in “Search for my Tongue” feels uncertain of her identity and thinks that by living in another country, she may lose her Indian culture, language and identity. Similarly, the teenager in “Presents from My Aunt” feels that she does not know her real self and seems ‘an alien in the sitting room’.

In her poetry, we find a sense of restlessness, loss resulting from displacement and uprooting from one's own home, country, culture, language and environment. She experiences the pangs of displacement but does not exhibit it the way other diasporic poets do. She carries with her the seeds of home wherever she goes. Despite her extensive travels, a sense of continuity of relationship with home remains uninterrupted and unbroken. It pervades through her poetry and she expresses her sense of home flamboyantly in the following lines in her poem “The One Who Goes Away”:

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. (Point No Point 107)
For Bhatt, home is not a mere geographical entity; it is a part and parcel of her identity, her inner psyche. Even when she is away from home, she is in home all the time. She does not let it part from her yet she feels the pangs and ruminates:

But I never left home
I carried it away
with me- here in my darkness
in myself. (106)

Home remains central to her consciousness in all circumstances. It is true that her concerns are global, but she returns to the local or native again and again relating herself to them intimately. When she writes about Hindu-Sikh riots in Delhi, she remembers how she used to play with a Sikh boy in her childhood. Whenever she paints poverty, she evokes the picture of penury and squalor she had witnessed in Ahmedabad – her home town. For Bhatt, home and nation are not just places but a unique blend of memories of individuals, legends, relationships, 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:

History is a broken narrative.
Pick a 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. (Augatora 40)

In her poems in Brumizem and Monkey Shadows, she evokes the images of home and country through birds, animals and insects like peacocks, lizards,
crocodiles, monkeys etc. They are not merely physical entities but a part and parcel of her subconscious. In Indian mythology, animals play a very important role. They are often taken as gods or the vehicles of gods. They possess divine powers and she seems to be fascinated about such myths and refers to them extensively in her poetry.

She also revokes the past through personalities like Swami Anand, Nanabhai Bhatt, Devibhen Pathak and her grandmother. She 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. Her sense of identity is ascertained and strengthened through the images of the past and history of her country. Like most of the diasporic writers, she draws images from 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 a low key referring to her permanent sense of home within her. Her poems like “A Memory from Marathi,” “Honeymoon”, “My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari” express her preoccupation with her childhood and past very strongly. Like a diasporic poet's identity, her language is constantly in a flux. This idea of changing identity finds expression in “The Dream”:

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. (Augatora 16)

Like Kamala Das again, a large number of her poems talk about her childhood days in India. In her poems, Bhatt remembers her sweet old days spent in Poona. The school (St Helena founded in 1918), she recollects, was all right. The memories of her school days reveal her feminist longings:

The atmosphere there was quite oppressive and stifling. We were instructed to be meek and submissive and had to walk about with our heads bowed down to avoid being accused of pride or arrogance. In subjects such as History and English, we had to memorize many texts and we were told what to think about them. I remember feeling terribly
disappointed that my own thoughts were not really welcome and all along one was made to feel that being a girl was a great misfortune.

(Cacanet Interview with Bhatt, online)

A large number of her poems talk of her childhood days and her Indian upbringing. Besides numerous rituals, mythical figures and personalities, she recollects various superstitions, corrupt practices prevailing in the country. Speaking of her childhood experiences in her poems, she recalls:

I was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956 and spent my first childhood months in my maternal grandmother’s home. My father was working in Poona and my parents lived in a flat there. Some of my crucial years of my childhood took place in India – in Gujarat and Maharashtra to be more precise. In a way, it is all there in my poems. The poems such as “Muliebrity”, “The Doors are Always Open”, “Buffaloes”, “Udaylee”, “Living with Trains” (from Brunizem) and “Maninanger Days”, “Understanding the Ramayana”, “The Daily Offering”, “The Echoes in Poona” (from Monkey Shadows) and more recently, the poems “A Memory from Marathi”, “After the Earthquake”, “The Pope”, “Tito” and “My Mother’s Way of Wearing a Sari” (from Augatora) draw heavily upon my childhood experiences. (Interview with Bhatt, online)

Her poetry is also deeply meditative and philosophical coloured by her quest for difficult truths of life. It deals with Indian landscapes and moves towards Europe and America but India remains a necessary obsession. As a poet and translator of Gujarati poetry into English, her major concern has been language or languages. She is passionate about the use of languages and interrogates in “New Orleans Revisited”:

What happened when the Gujarati
and the Marathi and the Hindi
I spoke
made room for the English words. (Augatora 45)
Such rhetorical questions recur in her works and they express the poet's genuine quest and concern for her fluid identity. Her poetical world is full of colours, sounds and fragrance. Her maiden volume *Brunizem* has almost half of the poems set in India where she recalls her family, childhood memories, sights, sounds and smells of village life. She returns to her city Ahmedabad after ten years and experiences mixed feelings of nostalgia and confusion. Her poems draw upon Indian myths, deities and especially animals. Bhatt's metaphors often give erotic plays to language though her preoccupation with language is also political. Her thoughts and ideas emanate from Indian culture. In her poem "A Different History", she delves deep into the Indian culture and expresses her attachment to the minutest details:

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.  

(*Brunizem* 37)

Moving between countries and cultures, Bhatt is mainly concerned with construction of the ‘self’ and its relationship with memory, history and identity. While honouring the importance of her heritage, she also seems to striving to discover who she is. She fosters both the values of her birth place and her western self-confidence but at the same time she reveals her sense of alienation in the environment of the country of her domicile. She seems to be obsessive about the transformation and growth of languages. She wonders how the language of the colonizers lose the bitterness and becomes dear to the future generations. Referring to colonial nature of the languages, she exclaims:

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. \((Brunizem 37)\)

Interestingly, the oppressor's tongue becomes the language of the oppressed. Bengal was the first province where English was introduced and its impact was almost revolutionary. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the first social reformer, undertook the comparative study of all religions in English. English, which was considered the language of the colonizers, has proven to be a window upon the world. It has opened vast vistas of knowledge for the Indians. This validates that the tongue of the colonizers acts as a catalyst for freedom and renaissance in a colonized country.

Her poem “Search for My Tongue” was written after listening to a tape recording sent by her mother from India to her in Maryland, USA. She conveys her anguish and fears about losing her native language and identity. She is concerned that her own unique personality will fade and cease to exist in the US. She speaks in graphic terms how the metaphor of the tongue would rot in the mouth until it had to be spat out. It has a crescendo like progress made possible by extensive use of Gujarati, with words transcribed into English within the first part and the third part in English while the second part in Gujarati with English transcription 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. \((Brunizem 65)\)

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 in her dreams. It blossoms and blooms like a
flower on her tongue and ripens like a fruit in her mouth. Thus, the pull of the mother
tongue is so strong that it reasserts itself despite all odds. She ponders over this dilemma:

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

(Brunizem 66)

The poem comes from a time when she was studying in America. The
allusion to her dreams has two meanings – one that she speaks in Gujarati in her
dreams and also that it is her dream and longing to speak in her mother tongue. The poem presents a fine example of the expression of diasporic sense of a loss of
language and cultural identity. However, 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 languages 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 a Gujarati Indian.

A large number of her poems recollect her childhood memories and bring her
close to India which remains in her heart and soul. “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 sick for several days and slept till late dreaming of a snake
that was green at first, then changed 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 and advised her not to fight
with the snake:

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

(Augatora 15)
“Augatora” is the title poem about the loss of the word when languages collided bitterly and bloodily. ‘Augatora’ means an 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 fade away from the poet's mind. The poet was three years old and felt thirsty in the middle of the night. Her mother was sleeping with her newborn 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. She recollects:

It bled and bled-

I could never forget

the redness streaming out

of the broken skin.  

Contemporary images and historical events, too, have been taken up by Bhatt as these are important influences on her sense of identity. “History is a Broken Narrative” is a landmark poem referring to partition, Pope, Tito and the WHO, earthquake, New Orleans, and other events and personalities with political or historical context. “Partition” describes the horrible experiences of partition of India in 1947 by the poet's mother who was nineteen years old then. She could hear the cries of the people stranded at 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 painful sounds. She, at the age of seventy, and India with fifty years of independence, still feels guilty for her lack of courage. She says that India was older than that and it was always there. The poem beautifully expresses the pain of partition:
How could they
have let a man.
Who knew nothing
about geography
divide a country?

(Augatora 34)

Distance cannot separate her from her motherland. She displays an openness
to different cultural environments and their inherent possibilities. She thinks her
exile in a way is a blessing in disguise. Ruminating on her creative freedom and the
notion of openness related to living in the world, she comments:

In a way, exile brought me closer to India. I could find about Indian
History, mythology, art, sculpture, sociology etc. I missed the
Gujarati language as well and started reading Gujarati books…I
consider myself to be an Indian writer, but I like to think of myself
as living in the world as opposed to in any one country. (“From
Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen”, (qtd. in Sandten 89)

With exposure to the west and its ways of life, recent Indian women poets
writing in English like Intiaz Dharker and Eunice de Souza, Sujata Bhatt exhibit
signs of reprisal against the long existing patriarchal set up. A number of poems by
Bhatt express her feminist concerns. Ruminating on Bhatt’s feminist inclinations,
Sutapa Chaudhary observes:

Intellectually stimulating, deeply sensuous and fearlessly unusual,
Sujata Bhatt’s poems are rich with powerful sensory images. The
violence, which is systematically perpetrated on the objectified
homeless female body to curb her potential is vividly delineated in
Bhatt’s writings. (The Poems of Sujata Bhatt, online)

Raped when a mere child and compelled to bear her ‘secret’ silently the girl
in “Straight Through the Heart” feels helpless, insecure and alienated in her own
‘home’ unable to link of the human world that surrounds her as ‘family’:
Straight through the heart, she knew she would be shot.
She knew too much for girl of eight.
She knew she was being raped and she knew.
that if she spoke, if she spoke out and named that sin
She would be killed. (qtd. in Sutapa Chaudhury online)

An undercurrent of feminist consciousness runs through her poetry and she seems to be advocating for the rights and dignified living of women in the society as a true successor of Kamala Das. In her poem “Buffaloes” she compares the dreams of a young widow with buffaloes 'lazily swishing their tails, dozing' (Brunizem 13). Young widows in India have to lead a pathetic life. They have to suppress their feelings as they cannot think of remarriage. They cannot express their longings and have to smother their desires. Some of her poems are highly erotic. In “The Kama Sutra Retold”, one of Bhatt’s strongly erotic love poems, she breaks the long silence that shrouds female sexuality and recognizes the silenced voices when the lovers come close to each other by their unspoken spontaneous desires. They both discover new facets of their beings, novel aspects of feeling and response they were unaware of till then:

When he touches her nipples
he does not know
who is more surprised
(Year later he remembers that look,
the way her eyes open wider). (Brunizem40)

In another poem titled “Sherdi” (sugarcane), the love-act is described in an erotic manner:

The way I learned
to eat sugarcane

suck hard with my teeth, press down
and the juice spills out. (Brunizem17)
Like other post-feminist poets, Sujata Bhatt has also used mythss to negate the power of patriarchy. Like the well-known feminist Virginia Woolf, she feels that dependency on male narrows down women’s individual energies and potentialities as a dependent person cannot claim authority and even equality. In one of her poems, “Parvati”, she accuses Parvati of giving all her energy, all her shakti to Shiva, her husband, and thus, accepting the male protection and subjection. She criticizes women for surrendering to fulfil the needs and urges of male God. Like Germaine Greer, she seems to be suggesting that “to be emancipated from the helplessness and need to walk freely upon the earth that is your birthright, you have to fight for it” (qtd. in MK Pandey 80). On the other hand, like de Souza, Bhatt refashions the myth of wild goddess in her famous poem “Well, Well, Well” as a strategy to grab the male space. The poet, like girls, is in search of the wild goddess who holds the key to the powers of understanding of knowledge. Bhatt realizes that if a woman has to progress she must wrest from men what they do not want to give: control, power and privilege and hence, aspires to get knowledge, wisdom and power:

I need words like witch, power
may be even, gypsy.

But I need witch. Will you grant me that? (Brunizem 106)

The poem “Is it a Voice?” ironically brings out that women are ‘without voice’. They cannot assert and dominate despite their invaluable contribution to families. They are unduly submissive waiting for others to lend them a voice.

Is it a voice
or is it a woman?

………………..

She is so silent

For someone who is a voice. (Augatora 87)

The lines seem to be exposing the real, manipulative face of patriarchy. Though a woman has hundreds of relations, she feels insecure and alienated. She is oppressed, tortured, alienated and raped from her womb to tomb. Her life becomes a pathetic tale of oppression and subjugation and no one comes to her rescue. The entire
social machinery emits the foul smell of patriarchy. She has no one except for a murdered sister who showed her the way “As she had seen a sister killed” she knows the price she would have to pay for speaking out against such a heinous crime perpetrated on her possibly by her own closest kin. As a dutiful, obedient daughter living in mundane domesticity, she finally gathers courage to speak out:

She would persuade them, convince

father, mother, brother that her soul was pure.

I am still innocent, she wanted to say.

She simply wanted to live. In her courage, the battered girl becomes akin to mythical figures of power—Shakti and Medusa. She implores the great deity to save the girl as a mother would, yet in the tradition of ‘honour killings’ rampant in India, the young girl dies, having been shot through the heart. The woman’s body has been a sight of perennial oppression, suppression, bondage and servility. She pays for the crime perpetrated on her body with her own life:

The bullet was straight through her heart

It was perfect, his aim, No mistake

Even though she had asked for their forgiveness

for having been raped.               (qtd. in Choudhury online)

The exploitation of female body and sufferings of a woman because of her physical characteristics are a recurrent theme in Bhatt’s poems. In one of the poems titled “Udaylee” she reveals the traumatic experience of an upper caste Hindu woman during her menstruation period. A menstruating woman is treated like an untouchable. Ironically, man forgets that she is born of the same blood. She is kept isolated, though perhaps allowed to read and write letters. The women have to work day and night like machines and such confinements bring some relief to them. The poet wonders at the ironic advantages that such confinement brings in a woman’s life by chance:

Here we're permitted to write

letters, to read, and it gives a chance

for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal.            (Brunizem 15)
The poetic voyage is constructed on the self, a journey into inner time, which is a creation of subjective order in the male-dictated world. Looking back into her own childhood, she longs for the freedom and autonomy in the poem “The Difference Between Being and Becoming”. What Virginia Woolf suggests that “women should have liberty of experience, that they should differ from men without fear and express those differences openly” (qtd. in Pandey 82) is obviously expressed in the following lines:

So where does the body house the soul?

Locked in the attic;

No

These doors and windows are always open,

As children we lived outside.

In “More Fears about the Moon,” Bhatt voices the plight of a woman who suffers multiple miscarriages. In the agonizing pain and helplessness, the female persona experiences dislocation of her ‘inner voices’ from her body which seems to her as an empty receptacle that cannot retain her beloved children. The lines are reminiscent of Kamala Das who compares women’s wounded heart and soul to an ‘empty cistern’. She becomes numb and mute as she loses ‘fetus after fetus’. She experiences a life shattering rejection as her girls and boys, who couldn’t wait to leave…. they didn’t want to become children, slip away from her. Her ‘inner voice’ dares to speak to her as she witnesses the tiny bodies of the premature fetuses – my crooked fishes, my sea horses, lying limp and trembling in the ‘dish’. She yearns to see their faces but tiny bodies are smothered in blood.’

Each time I looked

There was always too much blood

I could never see the face

Only the fins : limp..

but they glistened and once

the curved spine seemed to trouble

in the dish. (qtd. in Choudhury online)
The poem portrays a pathetic picture of an Indian woman who has no right over her own body. She is considered an object, a mere puppet, a sight of procreation, a property which can be bought and sold. She is compelled to become a ‘mothering machine’. She is subjected to multiple pregnancies and miscarriages with hardly any access to the facilities of health and education. She gives birth to children at the cost of her life but even the children don’t belong to her. Thus, even mothering, suckling and nurturing the young ones becomes an empty, joyless task for her.

The heinous crime of female infanticide is movingly addressed in “Voice of Unwanted Girl.” The aborted girl child interrogates her mother and forces her to remember the stark facts:

Mother, I am the one you sent away

When the doctor told you

I would be a girl – your second girl. (Augatora 38)

The scathing yet painful irony of the poem lies in the phrase ‘your second girl’ hinting at a society that renders girls ‘valueless’, ‘unwanted’ and compels a mother to abort her own daughter to escape the shame and guilt of bearing girl children. The rejection meted to her by the society refuses to let her mother go as she repeatedly questions her ‘untouchable’ status. The destroyed fetus, when murdered mercilessly had already acquired a taste for life. Her senses were alive as she desperately tried to clutch the ‘neon blue’ in her mother’s ‘beloved Mumbai’. She wanted to survive, but no one, not even the mother ‘wanted to touch’, the body of the dying girl.

Is it not heart rending to see that these beautiful creatures are smothered even before they are born and that too with the ignominious consent of their own parents?

No one wanted

No one wanted

To touch me…except later in the autopsy room

they knew my mouth would not search

……………………………

I looked like a sliced pomegranate

The fruit you never touched. (Augatora 38)
The girl's mouth did not search for anything and her head was cut apart like a sliced pomegranate. Soon everybody forgot her and even her mother put on her grass green sari and orange stems of parijatak blossoms to adorn her hair. The last part of the poem is profoundly appealing:

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

this is not ‘God’s will’(39)

Hershman echoes similar sentiments about the treatment of a girl child in India, “The birth of a son is greeted quite differently from the birth of a daughter...The birth of a son is an occasion of joy and celebration while the birth of a daughter goes virtually unmarked”(qtd. in Abbi 168). Bhatt as a poet attacks the conventional role of woman in the patriarchal set up with a subtle sense of irony and satire. Being aware of the Indian situation, she dwells upon Hindu rituals and symbols which have cultural significance. For instance; bangles are not mere ornaments but symbolize ‘the auspiciousness of wifehood’. But the way Bhatt recalls mother’s attachment to her bangles, evinces a strong sense of irony as her life has no meaning. In the middle class Indian families, women work like a machine and get no recognition or remuneration. Even petty things like clothes and bangles appear to be more valuable than their own lives. They lead a vapid kind of mechanical life and struggle against domestic drudgery to please the men folk. “The Glassy Green and Maroon” speaks about her mother’s bangles with an ironic touch:

They are green glints and unbreakable I think

Because she can wear them all day

Whether she scrubs glass or clothes,

Or dishes, the bangles stay on.  

(Monkey Shadows 23)
The lines express the miserable condition of women in Indian families. As the wives and mothers, they have to sacrifice everything. Frustration of the poet matches that of T.S. Eliot and WB Yeats. Just as they had lost hope with life in Europe during and after the Wars, she too seems to be losing faith in the present state of affairs of the world.

Among the Indian women poets, her feeling is similar to that of Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgardo, Eunice de Souza, Imtiaz Dharker, Smita Agarwal and Tara Patel etc. She goes to the extent of using Medusean myth and believes that Medusa represents a complexity of contradictory attributes as well as a disturbing rebellious and turbulent persona. The poet ruminates on Medusean myth and thinks of grabbing power and knowledge:

When I say witch I can’t have you thinking of

Medusa

or Macbeth or Salem.

I can’t have you thinking at all. (Brunizem, 107)

Though these figures and images are power-oriented and are ultimately destroyed in the patriarchal structure, the poet here refers to the power charged “words”, and scribbles about the position of a woman’s ‘fall from grace’ into patriarchy. As a consequence, we find miscellaneous persuasive images of dead, muteness, blindness, and the very condition of being manipulated. The young girl tastes love for the first time and feels ecstasy. After being an outcaste, she is finally reintegrated into patriarchal society by aligning herself with a man.

Debibhen is the representation of the silenced voices of the women, who though not much sound monetarily are ever ready to sacrifice their comforts, anything for the sake of their daughters. It is a universal and widespread worry of each mother i.e. the wedlock of her daughter. It is the consciousness and psyche of every Indian mother to think seriously about the offering they have to offer their daughter whether it is allowed by their economical sanity or not. The poem has two sections. The first section deals with the worry of a protagonist Devibhen Pathak who is the maternal granny of the poet and her worry about the presents (may be shtridan) and gold ornaments which she has to offer to her daughter at her wedding. It reflects the socio-economic reality of a middle class family. It is not the worry of Devibhen Pathak
only. It is the worry of entire woman kind. The woman who plays a pivotal role in shaping the future by nurturing the young ones even at the cost of her life, is considered a burden. Isn’t it ironical and shameful that the parents have to pay a hefty dowry at the time of their daughter’s marriage? Bhatt states:

When she came of age
Something for her daughters
Daughter’s daughter. (47)

The later part of the poem talks about ‘Swastika’ which is a sacred symbol in India symbolizing triangular Parvati and triangular Shiva. Sujata Bhatt was also fond of Swastika symbols and she drew them everywhere. Deviben had never heard of Hitler's use of swastika for Nazism. However, how will she explain it to her young daughter?

But how shall I begin?
what shall I say
oh my German-born daughter,
innocent girl with a Lubecker

Baltic-eyed innocent father… (Monkey Shadows 50)

Bhatt is not at all a rebel but her anguish is prominently noticed in her doubts and dilemmas about holiness of swastika. This dilemma is due to her deeply rooted childhood memories of Hindu folklore and the awareness of the German History. She writes about the Indian culture and the German culture with the same gusto and confidence and displays the power to comprehend, interpret and enter into the depths of any environment by writing about it imaginatively and this adds a special flavour to her poetry. Pondering over this trait of her poetry, Bhatt remarks, “It is also a power to control and give shape to any given environment in order not to be intimidated or overwhelmed by its foreignness” (‘Unpublished Manuscript’ Muse India Archives online)

The latest collection A Colour for Solitude (2002) is a sequence of readings of paintings and imagined conversations between the German painter Paula Modersohn Becker and her sculptor friend Clara Westhoff. It shows her deep sensitivity and understanding of paintings. The volume deals with Paul Modersohn Becker (1876-
1907), a young, energetic woman who went her own way against all odds and carved a niche for herself as a painter. She left behind a remarkable body of work that has made her one of the greatest modern painters of her times. Bhatt was fascinated by her self-portraits and in her poems she imagines the painter's inner and outer worlds. 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 attempt to give voice to two women silenced in history by a male artist reflects her consistent interest in feminist issues. (Sharrad: Literary Review, online)

Sujata Bhatt as a 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, oneness and reconciliation. At times, she reflects a strong sense of history and postcolonial politics of culture. Addressing the reader and the Hindu goddess of Siva’s Himalayas, she writes in the poem “Parvati”:

Heathen

Pagan, Hindu

What does it mean, what is a pagan?

Someone who worships fire?

Someone who asks Parvati to account for

the Industrial Revolution.                  \textit{(Brunizem 40)}

The poem “History is a Broken Narrative” is an intelligent discourse on language and history. It is a long poem presented in different slots of time. 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.          \textit{(Augatora 40)}

Bhatt returns to her favorite subject of language again and again. In “Jane to Tarzan”, Jane tells Tarzan that he has changed her sleep and also the darkness within her dreams. She further exclaims:
Hunter, ravisher, you are more

Than 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.

“My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari” depicts memories of the poet's mother in the poet's mind. She was quite fast at wrapping her sari round her body, measuring each plait and aligning it carefully, before them into her waistband. The poet's mother gets up early in the morning when it is still dark. She has to fill all the clay pitchers 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 kitchen work. 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 etc. It reflects the feminist consciousness of the poet who thinks the Indian women have no freedom worth the name; they have no personality, identity and recognition. The poem vividly describes 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 the other-

Finally, aligning them into a flowing fan.  

(Augatora 91)
“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. Bhatt feels 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.

There is a unique combination of traditional ethos and feminism in some of her poems. “Ajwali Ba” is one such poem that expresses her feminist inclinations in a very unique way. The protagonist was Sujata's paternal grandmother. 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. Nanabhai returned home at 1 a.m. after spending the whole day with Harijans 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. Nanabhai decided to sleep in the garden. Then there was a pause and after a few minutes, Ajwali Ba like a devoted Indian wife rushed outside running across the courtyard leading to the mango orchard to join him. Nanabhai was asleep but the latter stayed awake. This reflects absolute dedication and self-abnegation of Indian women for their husbands:

I see her alert, thoughtful.

Knowing she can’t sleep

She doesn’t even bother
to close her eyes. (Monkey Shadows 26)

About the next volume 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 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. It reflects the innocence of childhood:
There is that moment
when the young human 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. (13)

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 a good will and curiosity on their faces. The poet is spellbound by the innocence on the face of the child and the monkey but is unable to comprehend and articulate the feelings.

The poem “Maninagar Days” presents 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 new born. Before every meal, however, truce took place. To the poet, they seem to be teaching the lesson of co-existence, tolerance and universal brotherhood. She seems to be exhorting the readers to follow their example for a blissful future:

Rhesus monkeys that travel in small groups,  

Extended families; constantly feuding brothers, sisters,  

Somehow they manage to make peace before every meal. (16)

Hanuman is an Indian mythological character, the son of wind God Maruti and Anjana, a goddess turned into a monkey by a curse. Hanuman is considered to be 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 ideals of egolessness, humility and obedience to his master Sri Rama:
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... (20)

Similarly, Bhatt’s feminist vision becomes apparent in the poem “A Different Way to Dance” in which she points out the past life of Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati:

Sometimes the elephant head of Ganesh
Dreams of the life among elephants it knew
before Shiva interfered. (35)

The woman always carries the scars of a consciousness, forced within patriarchal bonds, analogous to which in order to establish the parallel between a divine life of high standards and a human life of low standards, and focus on identity to create new waves and new forms. The lines, cited below, convey a sense of self-awareness about the contradiction of the ideal and the real situation of the female world:

The elephant trunk swings
From side to side
hiding away the memory of Shiva’s raised hand,
hiding away the knife-slashed soul,
that throbbing wound it carries
since leaving its first life. (36)

Moreover, the poet, illustrating the mythic set-up, configures the pain the female elephant is forced to undergo. In a way, the issues of feminism are related to the problems of the emotional experience, the struggle for independence continuing with the same strain of thought. The poet in another poem “What Happened to the Elephant” muses on the fate of a dead elephant whose head now is the divine Lord Ganesh. But as a feminist, the poet in the guise of a child refuses to accept Shiva’s
carelessness and expresses her anguish over the fate and existence of all female creatures. Even in the group or family, they feel alienated and have to remain content within themselves. Her feelings are akin to Germaine Greer who remarks that “many a housewife staring at the back of her husband’s newspaper or listening to his breathing in bed is lonelier than any spinster in a rented room”. (qtd. in M.K.Pandey 81)

In a large number of her poems, Sujata expresses her deep sorrow over the loss of compassion of mankind towards the creatures of the earth. The extensive urbanization and reckless industrialization has ruined the beautiful surroundings. She seems to be suggesting that humans should learn the art of co-existence and live on this earth in perfect harmony with nature. “Kankaria Lake” expresses her sadness over the confinement of the beasts in the zoo just for human enjoyment:

In the end, he was
always marched off
disappointed to the zoo
where the faced sullen animals
sometimes crouched far away
in the darkest part of the cage,
frightened in
their festering skins. (32)

She feels pained to notice a lot of devastation to natural surroundings in the name of the so called progress and development’. The wide-spread natural setting, which was a reality once, turns out to be a fantasy in the present times. These feelings find its expression through the objective correlative of ‘the boy’.

The boy imagines the lake
overpopulated with crocodiles
who never have enough to eat
for he doesn’t believe
could live in such water. (31)
The poet has the romantic spirit of John Keats who takes the readers to the world of the Nightingale in his “Ode to the Nightingale”. In that world, there is innocence, virtue, compassion and enlightenment. That is the world which is worth living. Bhatt soars high to a pristine and primeval world for some time, but returns to the reality too. We know that we cannot be a part of that hallowed world. But definitely, it is a grand delight to be in that world at least for some time.

Her poetry, thus, differs from that of other Diasporic poets where one finds a sense of dislocation and displacement from their homeland while in Bhatt's poetry, one encounters intellectual inquiry often metaphysical in nature. She describes tails of monkeys as glorious questions in her poem “Understanding the Ramayana.”

So many old religious fatten on arrangements,

on fresh murders

or do they call that offerings?

Someone's wife, someone' son.

In a poem “White Asparagus”, she enters into the consciousness of a pregnant woman who erotically relives her state of sexual fulfillment. She argues that in a society where both the male and female have equal contribution as well as participation, why is the female desire not recognized, female voice not listened to whereas the male desire is looked upon with proper respect, acceptance and recognition?

Who speaks of the green coconut uterus

the muscles sliding , a deeper undertow

and the green coconut milk that seals

her well, yet flows so she is wet

from his softest touch?  

(Monkey Shadows 98)

Her feminine sensibility is at her best in “A Story for Pears” which is a very touching poem about her great aunt Hiraben. She was divorced and started working as a nurse. She was often seduced by married doctors. Like countless Indian women, she was subjected to a lot of harassment even by her own near and dear ones. She was tortured and beaten mercilessly by her own mother-in law. This shows the
bitter reality that Indian women are not safe even in their own homes. They are exploited and treated badly even by their near and dear ones! The poet cries out with utter desperation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Her mother-in-law used to beat her} \\
\text{with a bamboo pole.} \\
\text{She made her work all day} \\
\text{with little food,} \\
\text{Then whipped her every night} \\
\text{until her pretty skin turned ugly.}(67)
\end{align*}
\]

The story of Hirabhen is the story of a typical Indian woman who is exploited by the callous patriarchy. She went to the court, got divorced and became a nurse to earn her livelihood. But here too, she was chased, seduced and exploited by married doctors. The effect of patriarchal culture is all-pervasive. It promotes soul-killing subjugation and lifelong thralldom.

The “Echoes in Pune” describes how scientists use rhesus monkeys for vaccination. It is again a protest against the exploitation of the poor and the weak. “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 an immigrant’s view of subtle form of violence in America. The gullible people are befooled, exploited all around as they get stunned to see the progress and prosperity of the developed countries. She feels anguished and ruminates:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In another section} \\
of the newspaper I read \\
\text{about the ever growing problems of refugees who will take them in?} \\
\text{Especially, the ones from Vietnam,} \\
a favourite subject for photographers. (85)
\end{align*}
\]

“Distances” expresses Bhatt’s true diasporic and multicultural sentiment which always insists on embracing universalism, multiculturalism, and
inclusiveness. 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 frothy

just breaking waves, relentless

salty water.(100)

But back out of the ocean again, all is separate, distant. Manmade borders come into existence on land in the atlas:

Inland again, it’s different

All is separate, distant.

The atlas fills my mind

With its many borders, and this ocean

Lies trapped on the page.(Ibid)

The poet seems to be giving the message of universal brotherhood. All the partitions are manmade and weaken us. “The 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 harbour, to a ship

destined to go

to a far away place

You've never been to... (110)
The mother says that she was lucky to have felt each step. A mother has to go through tortuous labour pains in giving birth to a baby. However, she undergoes it happily and takes pride in it.

The poem “What Does One Write When the World Starts to Disappear”, has a universal appeal and a very relevant theme. It expresses her concerns about all-pervading aggression, hatred, violence arising out of man’s rat race for materialistic pursuits. We have to stop this demon of ever-growing materialism from swallowing the whole humanity. 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, guns, missiles, satellites and so on. She requests Lord Shiva to do something to save her. Deeply pained at the futile pursuits, the poet laments and raises a series of questions:

What would one do
when the words start 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 the violins?

I mean, what species? (120-121)

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 woman complaining to Lord Shiva along with scientific terms very deftly.

The foregoing analysis of the poems demonstrates the fact that the basic subject matter of the poet is her own experience as Kamala Das says in My Story, “a poet’s raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality” (My Story 157). Her maturity is reflected in the feminist vision and even becomes more significant in her mythic consciousness either in the form of Kali or Agni which can break the wall of
patriarchy prevalent in our society. In the words of M. K. Pandey, “As a feminist poet, she has been able to outface the male dominated world by transcending the intricacy of patriarchal structure to recover both power and position of women at the global level”(82). Her poetry displays the new trends and techniques found in contemporary Indian women poets. According to Ram Sharma “There is a remarkable movement connecting the domestic and personal with public spheres of work. Like other contemporary women poets, her poetry brings forth the suppressed desires, lust, sexuality and gestational experiences. The new poetry by these new women poets display new thematic concerns related to contemporary issues. It has changed the cause of human civilization as the country entered the new millennium”. (Emergence of Feminist Perspective, online)