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Abstract
Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956, and spent her early years in Pune. She has lived, studied and worked in the United States, and is a graduate of the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. In 1992 she was the Lansdowne Visiting Writer at the University of Victoria, B.C., Canada. She currently lives in Bremen with her husband, the German writer Michael Augustin, and their daughter. Sujata Bhatt works as a freelance writer and has translated Gujarati poetry into English for the Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets. She received a Cholmondeley Award in 1991. Her books of poems are Brunizem (1988) which received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award; Monkey Shadows (1991) which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation; The Stinking Rose (1995) and Point No Point: Selected Poems (1997) - all published with Carcanet. A bilingual (English-German) translation of her poems, Nothing is Black/ Really Nothing, appeared in 1998 in the series 'Salon' with Wehrhahn Verlag, Hannover.

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Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956, and spent her early years in Pune. She has lived, studied and worked in the United States, and is a graduate of the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. In 1992 she was the Lansdowne Visiting Writer at the University of Victoria, B.C., Canada. She currently lives in Bremen with her husband, the German writer Michael Augustin, and their daughter. Sujata Bhatt works as a freelance writer and has translated Gujarati poetry into English for the Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets. She received a Cholmondeley Award in 1991. Her books of poems are Brunizem (1988) which received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award; Monkey Shadows (1991) which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation; The Stinking Rose (1995) and Point No Point: Selected Poems (1997) – all published with Carcanet. A bilingual (English-German) translation of her poems, Nothing is Black, Really Nothing, appeared in 1998 in the series ‘Salon’ with Wehrhahn Verlag, Hannover.

How did you see India when you lived in America? And how do you see India today? Do you still feel homesick sometimes or do you feel a kind of nostalgia for India, and would you even like to live there again?

Well, these questions cover a long time period. I had gone to America twice. The first time, when I was five, to New Orleans. Then we returned to India when I was eight. And then I left India when I was twelve, when we went to Newhaven, Connecticut, where we stayed more permanently. I think as a child when I left India, and also as an adolescent, I missed it in a very strong way, especially when I was twelve and, say, from the age of twelve onwards, also in my twenties. I think what I missed was a certain way of life and also friends and relatives. Today I see India as my country, but a country from which I’ve been apart. I think I see it fairly objectively. I don’t have any romantic feelings about India. Even if I think about my childhood, I know what I loved and what I didn’t like about it. I’m interested in India and always have been, that’s where I come from. And I always like to know the so-called ‘truth’, to know what has been happening historically and politically, and what is going on culturally over there. I think there are times when I wish it would be nice to go there for a while. That’s again connected with people and certain places that I
would like to see again. And I would like to spend some more time in certain parts of India. But I wouldn’t want to live permanently over there. And I’m sure that my husband wouldn’t. He has his work and he really needs to live in Germany. And also, it would be disruptive for my daughter’s education. India is my country but I feel that now I’m in the position where when I go back it’s not what I had left behind. And it’s not really my home anymore. I can’t go back to the time of my childhood.

**How would you describe your cultural identity today?**

I would say that I’m like a blend of different cultures or a hybrid. In some ways I’m Indian, in other ways I’ve been very much influenced by growing up in America. And I would say that I’m influenced by living in Europe, in Germany. There are certain European ways of doing things that I also do, partly for practical reasons. Because one has to adjust to the country where one lives, to very mundane things, like shopping or, if you have children, school. And, also, when you have friends, you learn how they do things. There is a European style of meeting and socializing that I also feel a part of. Very broadly I would say I’m an Indian in the diaspora. But there are many of us, and everyone is different. I think I’m a mixture by the way I live. It’s all so blended together. I can’t separate it any more.

**Do you have the feeling that people always want to make you fit into an identity? I am thinking of an anthology edited by Anna Rutherford?**

I would say that, especially when it comes to writing and publicity, that one is advertised as an Indian writer or maybe an Indian in the diaspora. In Anna Rutherford’s anthology I’ve been put in the UK chapter. I think it’s because I live in Germany, and that was the closest place. And because my publisher is in Britain, in Manchester, I’m a part of the British writing scene. I’m frequently there for readings. Being published in Britain, I’m known there more than anywhere else. I do feel that people who meet me would like to put me in some category if they don’t know me, or if they are trying to understand who I am. But this is even more true when it comes to anthologies and publishing. I think that I myself would prefer to be just accepted as someone who doesn’t belong in any category, or who belongs in several at the same time.

In the poem ‘A Different History’ you write, ‘later generations grow to love that strange language’, that is, English. In what sense would you say that language is always an expression of cultural identities?

First of all, I would say that not everyone who is part of the later generation has that feeling, and not everyone grows to love the English language. But there are some, and a few probably, besides myself, who do. I wasn’t made to feel that English was a bad language. I was actually sent to an English school in India, and I studied English. It became my language partly because it was my parents’ choice that I went to this school. In another poem in Monkey Shadows, in ‘Nanabhai Bhatt in
Prison’, I describe how my grandfather loved Tennyson. And that’s really true. It’s very ironic but he absolutely loved Shakespeare, and he loved Tennyson. And he continued to love those aspects of English literature although he was supporting Mahatma Gandhi. And in his quiet way, but also very strong way, he was opposed to English rule in India. But that never prevented him from loving or reading Tennyson. So I think that philosophy came down to me, also through my parents. They could separate the culture and the literature from the politics. For them it was not all black and white. I was raised not to hate English. I’m sure other people have been. And I know other Indians who are ten to fifteen years older than me, they grew up feeling it’s bad to write in English and they’re very patriotic about their own language. Well, my father is a scientist. For many years he hoped that I would also become a scientist. English being the language of science, he thought that I should go to an English school. Another reason was that I had started school in New Orleans. When I was eight and we went back to India, I had already finished the first two grades in English, and so my parents thought that I should continue in English. And I think a third reason why I went to an English school was, at that time in Poona, where we were living, the English schools were a lot better than the Marathi or the Hindi schools that were there.

Would you say that you use an American English or a rather ‘indianized’ English?

As I was brought up and educated in America, I would say that I speak and write an American English. Apart from that, my parents had seen to it that I always spoke correct English.

Is there a tradition of serious creative literature in Gujarati? Or do you rather take up ideas from the Hindi or Sanskrit and other Indian traditions?

There is major creative work in Gujarati. But there is a lot more in some other Indian languages. I have been influenced by the tradition in Gujarati literature, but also in the Sanskrit and Bengali which I’ve read in translation. There’s a very strong tradition in many South Indian languages. A.K. Ramanujan has done many excellent translations. So I found those very inspiring, especially the translations of ancient literature.

Would you say that your cultural background, rooted in Indian culture and literature, is still present in your writing?

I think so, because I feel that even on an unconscious level it’s all present, even if my subject has nothing to do with India but is concerned with, say, how I look at a street in Germany. I think there is something very faint, well in those poems it wouldn’t be faint, because it wouldn’t be obvious. But I think there’s always some unconscious element that is there. The poems which are about India are affected by what I know of the
various Indian traditions, plus the fact that I use English. I could never say that the Indian part of my cultural knowledge is absent, nor could I forget my childhood or all the Indian influences. If an Irish writer and an Indian writer were both asked to write a poem about a tree which is in Spain, for example, I’m sure the Irish writer would have something Irish in his poem about a Spanish tree, and the Indian writer would have something Indian, even when they’re trying to think only about Spain and only about the tree in Spain. Something is always there in the background. If I think about myself I feel that I have different layers of background.

Is your choice for a poem based on the subject-matter, on the rhyme, metre or structure, or just on an idea and feeling, on sounds, musicality and senses? Derek Walcott says that it is a wonderful thing that these alleged literary shapes, these structures and devices, are not in fact artificial. They are part of the rhythm of natural human narration. How would you describe your poetry?

I would agree with what Walcott says. I think that my choice of a poem is sometimes the subject or the topic. I find that the rhyme, the metre – I try to avoid obvious rhymes – but, say, the structure or the form and the rhythm, and also the tone of voice and the diction in the poem all come together with the subject-matter. The poems come out sort of as a piece if the poem is going to work. But I can’t write a poem where I have to first think of the form or the words. Frequently, what happens is that I might have one line in my head. And if I write it down I have more lines. In a few hours or a few days I might have a poem.

What do you think about the sentence ‘all Art aspires to the condition of music’? Poetry and singing or music are very closely related to each other. I think that sounds like something that Yeats said, and I think that’s very true. I feel that the poem has to have its own life and its own rhythm. When I’m writing a poem, it has to come naturally. It’s possible that in the end I have to polish up things or fine tune it. When I feel that I have a certain rhythm in my mind that’s connected with the images then I feel that I’m able to write. When I have a phase in which I feel I can’t write, that means I have no music in my mind, or no images that are working in a way connected with music. Or I feel that the poem has to have a certain energy to begin with. So when I’m writing, this energy has to appear.

What about myth, religion, or even dreams? Do you believe that there is no escape from a religion like Hinduism, and from cultural behaviour as an Indian-born writer, a view Nayantara Sahgal put forward in an essay?

I think dreams are important. I haven’t really had any dreams that I have used in my poems lately. But sometimes dreams are very powerful. As far as religion is concerned, this goes back to the question about whether, as an Indian-born writer, one has to be involved with religion. I think that’s very dogmatic. I would totally disagree. I think what Nayantara Sahgal
Says is very presumptuous. Every writer, every person is free to decide whether they believe in one religion or not. I’m interested in Hinduism because that’s a part of my childhood. But I should say that I’m interested in other religions as well. I’m also interested in Buddhism. An Indian writer doesn’t have to be religious and doesn’t have to focus on religion. My focuses are usually connected with my childhood, and with people whom I’m close to, who are perhaps religious.

Exile, Salman Rushdie expounds, is very different from immigration. ‘Exile is a dream of glorious return’ (The Satanic Verses). What do you think about this expression? How would you describe your own situation?

I suppose for Salman Rushdie, who isn’t able to travel freely, it is a dream of glorious return because he can only fantasize about returning. I don’t have to live under such conditions. There are also other writers who cannot go back to their countries. I think, for them, exile does lead to dreams of returning. In a way I’m exiled because, when I do return, what I go back to is not always what I’m looking for, it’s not what I remember or what I miss, sometimes. Returning doesn’t make me feel now I’m at home, that’s no longer true. When I was seventeen and I would go to India during the holidays, I could still feel that I was home. But by the time I was twenty-five, I didn’t feel that way any more, mainly because I couldn’t be a child any more.

As a writer, do you feel lucky being able to move around in the world? Is there not a feeling of loss always lingering around you?

Yes, I do feel lucky being able to move around. I also feel lucky to be in Europe, and to have a chance to look at America from the outside. I do miss America in a way that I hadn’t before. Now I know what I like about it and what I don’t. I suppose when I’m over there I know what I like about Europe and what I don’t. I suppose there is some feeling of loss because I know that there is no physical place where I would say: this is the only place for me, or, this is my home. I don’t have that. I had to leave so many places. On the other hand, as a writer it’s an advantage being an outsider. Writers have to be outsiders.

So, exile is the poet’s natural condition?

Oh yes, I would agree. In order to write, a person has to remove himself into a room and have some privacy because writing is a very solitary activity. And being an outsider, just in the sense of culture, nationality and language, that can frequently help someone who is a writer or an artist.

How much does the ‘white’ European and German culture influence you in your writing process? Is it difficult for you to live in Germany?

I would say that German culture in terms of music and literature has influenced me. There are German writers whose work I like very much.
And the old tradition of music has influenced me, obviously Bach. And I’ve been very interested in Wagner’s operas. I’ve only seen one, but I’ve listened to the music, which is interesting; also the very old myths going back, say, to Grimm’s fairy tales which I read as a child in India and also in America, which many children all the over the world read. I do feel more of an outsider in Germany also because of the language. Sometimes I feel that there’s a strong tension that I have with the German language, for example, on a day-to-day basis. When I’m writing a lot or reading – I’m usually doing one or the other – and I take a break and go to the bakery to buy some bread, it’s a very surreal experience: imagine after three hours of writing in English and being almost in a trance, then quickly running out to do some shopping for food and speaking to the shopkeepers in German, and then coming back home again – that sometimes feels very strange.

Do you feel restricted as a female poet with regards to so-called ‘universal’ subjects that male poets write about, given that you write about women’s concerns in life, like pregnancy, childbirth, children, menstruation?

No, I’ve never felt restricted about subjects. I always felt that I could write what I wanted to. I think part of the reason I have poems about women’s experiences is that I tend to write out of my life to some extent. In many poems I’ve changed things or put in a lot of fiction, or I have female characters who are not me, but I imagine a woman in a different time and a different place. But in some way she would be connected to me. I would say that that’s why I’ve written about those subjects.

In an interview in Outposts, Derek Walcott says that ‘the less original you are as a young man and the more you model yourself on the great masters, that is where your originality lies.’ Would you agree? In what sense would you describe how you started to write poetry?

I think I would agree because no one can write in a vacuum. The best writers are knowledgeable about all that has been written before them and alongside them. A writer who is ignorant about what has already been written is usually not a good writer, or that type of writer can’t really go on very far. Sooner or later the ignorance would be evident. It would be like someone trying to pretend that they were not connected to any society, culture or history. I started writing actually when I was eight. And as I got older I took it more seriously. When I was fourteen and fifteen – at that time I was in America – I was very familiar with many 20th-century American writers. I was reading a lot on my own. I had started to read Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and many others who came after them. By the time I was sixteen I was aware that so much had already been revolutionized in poetry: I had read Plath and Wallace Stevens, for example. If I go back to that time I was totally in love with many of these writers. I wanted to write like all of them. What happened was that I was
attracted to writers who were totally different, say, Emily Dickinson, Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost. Of course I tried to learn what I could from them. And I know that sometimes I took ideas from Wallace Stevens. Other times I was very affected by Virginia Woolf or Thomas Hardy. I think it was good there was such a variety that I was interested in at that young age. It made me realize how much had already been done. I felt it was so difficult to do anything beyond that. As a young writer one thinks that what one wishes to say has already been said by someone else. But I think it's very true that a young writer learns how to write by studying the old masters.

Would you agree with Derek Walcott that poetry has removed itself by its own choice into something that is private, that comes out in little magazines that only other poets read. Has poetry moved away into a little chamber of its own, the so-called ivory tower?

I think that is especially true in America. But it is also the case in many other countries. Very few people read poetry, and many people have terrible prejudices against poetry. I know for example that in India very few publishers are publishing poetry. Two years ago I got a letter from an international publishing house in India saying that they’re discontinuing poetry from their list. They wrote to my publisher that they would only be interested in novels from me and not in my Selected Poems. I don’t know why, but I think it’s also because very few people enjoy reading poetry. But novels, the cheaper and the less literary the novels, the more popular they are, like these romances which are best-sellers. That’s what the average person wants to read. I think there’s a lot good poetry appearing in different countries. I think it’s too bad that the average person does not appreciate reading poetry. This sounds very elitist but I really feel that not everyone is able to understand poetry.

The Stinking Rose was published in 1995. What does the title stand for, symbolically? And how is the new book structured in comparison to your earlier collections, Brunizem (1988) and Monkey Shadows (1991)?

I feel that each book is different from the others. Maybe I should begin with the first. The earliest poems in Brunizem were written when I was in my early twenties. I finished the volume when I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine, and then it took time to get published. First of all it’s special because it’s a first book. I have written many poems before Brunizem and could have published a book when I was, say, nineteen or twenty. Now I would probably never publish those poems unless I reworked them, or called them ‘juvenile poems’. There is a lot of variety in Brunizem: half of the poems are about India, the other half are about the western world. Coming to Monkey Shadows: that was written from 1988 after Brunizem was published. New poems that were written while I was waiting for Brunizem to get published were included in there, too. So that’s why it’s
also a long book. *Monkey Shadows* consists largely of narrative. Most of the poems were written after my daughter was born. There are many and sometimes long poems about different relatives, and poems looking at my childhood in a different way, like the monkey poems. *The Stinking Rose*, again, is very different. I wanted to do something different each time. I didn’t want to copy or imitate myself. I was lucky that the different ideas or different styles just started to happen by themselves. In *The Stinking Rose* I have many poems which are shorter. When I did *Brunizem* I also wanted to be able to write really short poems but I always found that difficult. In *The Stinking Rose* I was trying to get a style that was also very spare. I enjoy, at this point, writing long as well as short poems. There were also differences in my life, say, after *Brunizem* was published, I had my daughter, and then after *Monkey Shadows* was published, I went to Canada and we lived there for half a year. That in turn affected the type of poems in *The Stinking Rose*.

The rose is the European symbol of love, and when you put the word ‘stinking’ in front of the rose, the image becomes very ironic. Some poststructuralists would say, by doing this you ‘deconstruct’ the European symbol of love. Would you agree?

Well I didn’t think about it like that because I was focusing more on garlic. But then garlic stands for a variety of cultures. And the rose is also an important symbol in other cultures as well. I didn’t plan on writing that many garlic poems. But the more I found out about garlic the more interested I became with that.

What was it like working with Rolf Wienbeck, the painter, who did the drawings for *The Stinking Rose*? You seem to like to cross over to different forms of art, like painting or film (in one of your poems). Do they give you some inspiration?

With Rolf it was very interesting. First it started out that I asked him if he would do a cover for the book. He was very interested by the garlic theme as well. So he did many pictures and paintings and etchings and wood carvings; the cover is a wood carving. When he printed that, he did so in all sorts of colours. It took a while before I could decide which colour to take because he had also used this dark turmeric, or mustard yellow, and red, and he had used green and black and white and red. He had done many pencil drawings and pen and ink drawings. At that time I would frequently pass by his house after shopping. Our whole dialogue with all these other drawings was very natural as we are friends, and some of the poems developed out of our talks about garlic. I would think about the different techniques or different materials he used, whether he did a fine pencil drawing or whether he did an oil painting. That gave a different image or different meaning to the garlic for me. Frequently he would show me new things, his own experiments with the subject. That was
very enjoyable and it was a very spontaneous interaction.

Can you say something about your new projects? Once you told me that you feel a more narrative way of writing developing in you. What about writing a novel? Or would you prefer to go on writing poetry?

I would try to write a novel, or I still want to, at least, experiment with it. But at the moment poems are coming out. I am and always have been attracted to the narrative style. After *The Stinking Rose* was published I thought of a book in which I would write poems in response to a series of self-portraits by Paula Modersohn-Becker. Two poems on this theme have already appeared in my first and third books. I thought that this would be a way to give myself an assignment, so I wouldn’t feel I was in limbo or without any project. I’ve been interested in Paula Modersohn-Becker’s work since I first saw it, and I’ve since looked at many more of her paintings. There was a special exhibition, here in Bremen. And I hope that the book would also be a visual book, in which I could reproduce some of the paintings. A totally new collection that I’m in the middle of working on right now will be out in spring 2000. Its title is *Augatora*, a Low-German word meaning ‘the eye’s gate’. There won’t be any Paula Modersohn-Becker poems in it as I am keeping that project separate!

*Thank you very much.*