

A Non-Indian Resident

An Interview with the Poet Sujata Bhatt

Sujata Bhatt's most recent collection of poetry, *A Colour for Solitude*, takes the reader to the village Worpswede in Northern Germany in the early twentieth century, where a group of artists founded a colony. In this book-length sequence of poems, the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) is the poet's quarry: a young energetic woman who, against all odds, went her own way as an artist. Modersohn-Becker died shortly after giving birth to her one daughter, but left behind a substantial, remarkable body of work. Soon after Hitler came to power, Modersohn-Becker's paintings were branded *entartet*, condemned by the Nazis for being 'degenerate'. Today, she is widely considered as the most significant German woman painter of the twentieth century. Fascinated by the number of self-portraits, Sujata Bhatt imagines the painter's inner and outer worlds. Furthermore, the poems explore Modersohn-Becker's friendship with Rilke (who wrote his famous requiem *Für eine Freundin* for her) and with Rilke's wife, her closest friend, the sculptor Clara Westhoff. Worpswede was therefore chosen for my encounter with the Indian poet Sujata Bhatt on 3 June 2002.

Interview >
India

By Martin Mooij

MM: Reading your work, except for your last collection, I can see that India or rather not 'India' but your Indian background plays an enormous role in it.

SB: For some reason, I'm not sure why, my imagination seems to be continually sparked by those early years in India. I think, for many writers, their childhood is something very magical and special and they keep drawing from that for their work. For me, the fact that I had to leave India certainly made me think about it more. And this departure from India, this 'loss', as I felt it, prevented me from taking India for granted. Ironically, exile brought me closer to India.

MM: You had to leave India twice: first as a young child and then later when you were twelve.

SB: Yes. Both trips were connected with my father's work. He is a scientist, a virologist [see the poem 'The Virologist' in *Augatora*]. We went to New Orleans because he had received a scholarship. Then we went to Connecticut because Yale University invited him out of the blue, so to speak, to establish a programme of virus research within their department of comparative medicine. My father was the first scientist to start tissue culture in India and to investigate certain tropical diseases and viruses. He was a pioneer of sorts and many people admired his work. Actually he never really wanted to settle in America. He had received other invitations earlier from various institutions in the US but this invitation came at a time when the death of one of his brothers, followed by the death of that brother's wife, left him with three more children to support than he had planned to. Being the eldest, he was responsible not only for them but also for his younger brothers and sisters. Financially he was at a loss. So this sudden invitation from Yale felt like fate and seemed like the best way to keep the family together. All these years he has always sent money to many of our relatives.

MM: As you know, many young people from the West want to go to India for religious or for other mystical reasons. However, as far as I can see, religion and such things do not play an important role in your life.

SB: No, not in that way. I have my beliefs and my philosophy, both of which are private. I do not consider myself to be a part of any single religion. And I am especially wary of all '-isms' and dogmas.

MM: We often think of India in a folkloric way. You don't romanticize India. Instead, you portray a country with people who are 'like us'. It is strange because there are, after all, such vast differences between India and the West.

SB: No. I don't mystify India. For me it is 'home' or one of my homes. Of course, it is 'different' and, for me, a very special place. But I refuse to summarize or categorize it – or as you say, romanticize it.

MM: Many remarkable things happened in your family. Your grandfather was very close to Mahatma Gandhi.

SB: Yes. My paternal grandfather, Nanabhai Bhatt, was an intimate friend of Gandhi's. He wasn't as politically involved as Gandhi was, not in a direct political way, but rather in an indirect way through education. He, my grandfather, founded schools in many villages in the rural areas of Saurashtra [a part of Gujarat] for farmers who were mainly illiterate. These schools were Gujarati schools designed to help young people, living in farming communities. And that was a very radical step. He was very much opposed to the caste system, which was also seen as radical by many people he knew. In his own way he supported Gandhi and was involved in the 'Quit India' pro-independence movement. Gandhi used to visit him frequently and discuss private things with him that were not to be discussed with anyone else and it was also his friendship with Gandhi that got him in prison. He was

imprisoned on several occasions [see 'Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison' in *Monkey Shadows*]. I should add that my parents also were very much influenced by Gandhi's philosophy.

MM: And what about you? Does he play a role in your mind?

SB: Yes, I do feel his importance in my own life, in my great admiration for him, of course, and in my attitudes, which I'm always striving to perfect.

MM: Can you tell me more about your childhood?

SB: Yes. In order to further describe my childhood, perhaps I should describe my family background here: I come from a traditional Gujarati Brahmin family of writers, teachers, social workers, musicians, and scientists. We were, and still are, a close-knit extended family. My parents lived in close proximity to their siblings. I thus grew up with my cousins, uncles, and aunts. Growing up with my cousins gave me this wonderful feeling that I had a dozen brothers and sisters, when in fact I have only one brother. I am still very close to a number of my relatives. And nowadays, email is a boon to a family like ours!

We were middle class but poor. My mother grew up in real poverty. Her parents were forced to leave their village, where work was scarce, for the big city of Ahmedabad. My maternal grandfather was an engineer. He worked for a textile mill and died of heart failure at the early age of forty-one. I find it amazing that my grandmother, my mother's mother, managed to put all her children through university. I am moved by the hardships they faced. My paternal grandfather was a writer and a teacher. He was an essayist, a short story writer as well as a translator from Sanskrit into Gujarati. Two of my uncles, both of them my mother's brothers, are highly respected poets who write in Gujarati. As a child I was aware of the fact that my uncles were not only writing poetry but that they could also recite it from memory and even sing it depending on the form of their poems. One of them in particular, 'Bharat Pathak', has always been and continues to be a source of great inspiration to me. Along with my mother he is a brilliant storyteller. In this way I grew up with an oral tradition.

I wrote my first poems when I was eight. Given my background, I felt that it was a natural thing to do. I'm certain that I would have started writing even if I had never left India. Although my sense of being 'exiled' and an outsider has no doubt affected my writing as well as my 'need' to write. Around the same time I became the 'storyteller' for my brother, my cousins, and friends. All my stories I told in Gujarati but my poems I wrote in English.

MM: To return to 2002, you are coming from three different cultures: Indian, American, and European.

SB: Yes, and so increasingly I feel that I am living in the world as opposed to living in any one country. I feel attached to many different places and I am at home in various parts of the world. At the same time, I don't really 'belong' to any one place. I have always continued to write poems dealing with 'non-Indian' themes and locations. In the end, I am 'myself' and at home with 'myself'. I think that academics have more trouble with my identity than I do. My latest book, *A Colour for Solitude*, might be perceived by some as very European or Germanic but I think it is a collection that goes completely beyond 'nationalities'. Also, having been written by the ultimate foreigner that I am, the book offers an outsider's perspective.

MM: Women are also outsiders in many societies. I think that many of the themes you explore in your work are not so in India. The way you write about female sexuality and everything connected with it for example. I suppose that in India they have other attitudes?

SB: Yes, they do. Part of the reason for having poems about women's experiences, such as menstruation and

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A woman kills
her newborn granddaughter
because she has four already.

A woman kills because
there's not enough money
not enough milk.

A woman kills her newborn daughter
and still eats dinner
and still wears a green sari.

Is this being judgemental?
Or is this how one bears witness
with words?

And another woman in another country
makes sure that her seven-year-old daughter
has her clitoris sliced off
with a razor blade.
This is what they will show us
tonight – prime time –
We're advised not to let our children watch this.
This has never been filmed before.
Sometimes it's necessary
to see the truth. The moderator tells us
words are not enough.

Now the camera focuses on
the razor blade – so there is no doubt
about the instrument. The razor blade
is not a rumour.

Now the camera shifts over
to the seven-year-old face:
she smiles – innocent – she doesn't know.
The girl smiles – she feels important.
And then the blood and then the screams.

Why do I think I have to watch this?
Is this being a voyeur?
Or is this how one begins
to bear witness?

And another woman tells us how years ago
she accidentally killed her own daughter
while trying to cut out her clitoris.
The risks are great, she tells us,
but she's proud of her profession.

How much reality can you bear?

And if you are a true poet
why can't you cure
anything with your words?

The camera focused
long and steady on the razor blade.
At least it wasn't rusty.

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

The camerawoman could not
afford to tremble or flinch.
She had to keep a steady hand.

And the hand holding the razor blade
did not hesitate.

And if you are a true poet
will you also find a voice
for the woman who can smile
after killing her daughter?

What is the point of bearing witness?

Afterwards, the girl can barely walk.

For days the girl will hobble – unable
unable unable

unable to return
to her old self,
her old childish way of life.

Sujata Bhatt

Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison

*At the foot of Takhteshwar hill
there is an L-shaped house
hidden from the road
by five mango trees
planted by Nanabhai Bhatt.*

*Huge crows swoop over
the L-shaped terrace,
red-beaked green parrots fight over
the mango trees. Some years the monsoons
sweep away too much.*

It is 1930, 1936 ...

It is 1942:

*Nanabhai sits writing for a moment
while my grandmother
gives orders to everyone.*

*The next day, he lands in prison again:
thrown in without a trial
for helping Gandhiji,
for Civil Disobience.*

*One semester in college
I spent hours picturing him:
a thin man with large hands,
my grandfather in the middle
of the night, in the middle of writing,
between ideas he pauses to read
from Tennyson, his favourite.*

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childbirth, is that I tend to write starting from my own life – it is my life that I am trying to understand. In many poems I've changed things or put in a lot of fiction: often my female character is not me, but an imagined woman in a different time and a different place. Of course, in some way these imaginary women are connected to me. In my opinion 'women's experiences' are universal subjects. People can forget that half the population is female and that pregnancy and childbirth are experiences that also affect men. Yet, there is so much silence connected with the female story and the female voice – I have grown up with that silence in my family – so on another level I feel that I am trying to break a private historical silence. So yes, being a woman has had a major effect on my writings. For me the mind and the body are very closely connected. I am certain that my poems, even the ones about 'neutral' themes, would be completely different if I were a man.

The erotic poems, then, were not difficult to write. They were written spontaneously, impulsively – with a great need to write them, a need to break certain silences surrounding female sexuality – but without any audience in mind.

MM: *Is it possible to have these poems published in India?*

SB: Well, I have published several collections with Penguin, India. So the answer is 'yes'.

MM: *Do you think the situation will improve for women?*

SB: I would like to say 'yes', I would like to be optimistic but often I find it hard to believe that things will improve.

MM: *As to that, you also have the task to change those opinions.*

SB: I suppose so. Although, as you know, one can only 'change' those who want to be changed. One of the traditional roles of the poet is to be the spokesperson, the most articulate speaker for the nation, or for the tribe. Given my family background, I have always felt intimately connected with Indian politics, history, and social issues. Thus, I've always felt 'responsible' and acutely aware of

the situation in India. On the other hand, as a poet, I feel that I should also just write about anything that moves me: animals or plants, or whatever, and not constantly be making political statements. Furthermore, in any place, and especially in India, history is so complicated, the situation today so complex, that one cannot make general statements.

MM: *Besides studying English and philosophy you have studied, and have been deeply influenced by, science. Most scientists are looking for results. You, on the contrary, are looking for questions.*

SB: For me, poetry is a place where there are tensions and contradictions in the language, and also in the things being discussed. So, I feel that poetry is a place where things can be questioned and examined. <

Martin Mooij is Secretary of Poets of All Nations (PAN). Founded in 1997, its aims are propagating literature and freedom of expression as well as offering advice and services to poets, authors, translators, publishers of literary works, associations, institutions, and other organizations in the literary and development area.

Sujata Bhatt >

Sujata Bhatt (b. 1956) was born in Ahmedabad, India and currently lives in Germany. Having moved to the US with her parents in 1968, she studied philosophy, English, and biology at various American Universities. A graduate of the Writers Workshop, University of Iowa, she has worked in the United States and Canada, where she was the Lansdowne Visiting Writer at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Sujata Bhatt has translated Gujarati poetry into English for the *Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets*. Carcanet published her first five collections, *Brunizem* (Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize, Commonwealth Poetry Prize, 1988), *Monkey Shadows* (Poetry Book Society Recommendation, 1991), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Augatora* (Poetry Book Society Recommendation, 2000), and *A Colour for Solitude* (2002), in addition to substantial selected poems, *Point No Point* (1997). Her poems have been widely anthologized, broadcast on radio and television, and have been translated into more than a dozen languages. She received a Cholmondeley Award in 1991 and the Italian Tratti Poetry Prize in 2000. bhatt.augustin@nwn.de