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 An Interview with the Poet Sujata Bhatt

A Non-Indian Resident

Sujata Bhatt’s most recent collection of poetry, A Colour for Solitude, takes the reader to the village Worpsewa 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 daughter, but left behind a substantial, remarkable body of work. 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. Worpsewa was therefore chosen for my encounter with the Indian poet Sujata Bhatt on 3 June 2002.

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 killed 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?

Is this how one bears witness to bear witness?

And another woman tells us how many 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 you will 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 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 sweep 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
sweep away too much.

The next day, he lands in prison again:
my grandfather in the middle
of the night, in the middle of writing,
there is an L-shaped house
planted by Nanabhai Bhatt.

Sujata Bhatt
continued from page 15

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 sub-
jects. 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 sur-
rounding 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 tradi-
tional 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 con-
ected 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.

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, 1993), The Stinking Rose (1996), 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
Cholmendray Award in 1991 and the Italian Tratti Poetry Prize in 2000.
bhatt.augustin@twn.de

Sujata Bhatt
Poetry Book Society Recommendation, 1991), and
Monkey Shadows (Poetry

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
tings can be questioned and examined.

Martin Moiij is Secretary of Poets of All Nations (PAN). Founded
in 1993, its aims are propagating literature and freedom of expres-
sion as well as offering advice and services to poets, authors, trans-
lators, publishers of literary works, associations, institutions, and
other organizations in the literary and development area.

Suja追寻 trophies and unen-abled her drink.

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