

## Blended Identity: Culture and Language Variations in Sujata Bhatt's "The Hole in the Wind"

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Does the blending and fusion of cultures depend on dislocation, loss of communal memories, and individual alienation? As it seems to me, Sujata Bhatt's long prose poem "The Hole in the Wind" is suggesting otherwise: perhaps you can have your identity—in the form of an imaginary homeland (Salman Rushdie)—while creatively exploring a number of historical, regional or linguistic backgrounds.

Sujata Bhatt is bicultural by birth and migration, and is tricultural by marriage. She was born in Ahmedabad, India and when she was twelve her parents moved to the United States. Her husband is a German writer and radio editor/producer, and since 1988 she has been living in Bremen (northern Germany), where she works as a free-lance writer, translating Gujarati poetry and prose into English.

The title of her first book, *Brunizem* (1988), refers to the dark brown (*bruni*) prairie soil (Russian *zem*) that can be found in Asia, Europe and North America, the three very different worlds of her imagination. In her second and third volumes, *Monkey Shadows* (1991) and *The Stinking Rose* (1995), she continues to fuse different cultures, environments and perspectives, writing with equally sensitive comprehension about other species and surroundings. As in *Brunizem* she does this by interlacing her poems with passages in some of the official Indian languages such as Gujarati (mainly) and also Hindi and Sanskrit, though English is her main creative language. She also uses German, Low German, and Spanish (mainly single words) in some of her poems. This playful incursion into the poetic text of different languages serves the specific cultural context of each poem, which can be defined as one of the characteristics of her intercultural mode of writing. As she has stated in an

autobiographical essay, she now enjoys this hard-won, fortunate versatility, this power to comprehend, interpret and thus enter into the depths of almost any environment by writing about it imaginatively. "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."<sup>1</sup>

In her fourth volume of poetry, *Augatora* (2000), the title of which is also connected to the long poem "The Hole in the Wind," Bhatt again uses linguistic variations, multilingual mixings and a variation of themes and cultural backgrounds connected to her multicultural life. She plays on the etymological meaning of the Old High German word *augatora*, and of that of *window* (from ME. *windoze*, ON. *vindauga*) when she speaks of the "wind eye— / the hole, the opening, the opening out / into the wind, the hole," "eye-gate" or the "eye's gate," "the hole for the eye to measure / the wind, the sun,"<sup>2</sup> referring to the visionary imagination, to the notion of "seeing things." This already implies an approach which is not characterised by an inclusive attitude to reality, in the sense of closing one's eyes to phenomena just because they could be foreign or strange, but clearly shows an openness to the different cultural environments and their inherent possibilities. In an autobiographical essay, Bhatt says of exile, thereby commenting on her creative freedom and the notion of openness related to "living in *the world*":

In a way, exile brought me closer to India. I started reading everything I could find about Indian history, Indian mythology, Indian art, sculpture, sociology etc. I missed the Gujarati language as well and started reading Gujarati books (specially ordered from India of course) with a new persistence [...]. 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.<sup>3</sup>

Although she seems to have solved the problem of displacement, as she intimates in this essay, feelings of uprootedness, displacement and exile are also prominent in her poetry, along with an acute awareness of the epistemological and cultural implications of a blended identity and its creative potential.

In her poetry, Sujata Bhatt consciously (sometimes self-consciously) and selectively writes about 'Eastern' as well as 'Western' cultural

contexts, which are often merged, played off against each other, or confirmed in their affinity, mutuality, or complementarity. She creates many different characters and figures who can be interpreted as being equipped with various (plural) forms of identity that undergo constant transformation. Apart from female patterns of identity, prevalent in many of her poems, Bhatt writes poems that convey her awareness of 'being the Other' and at the same time present a kind of split identity, or ambivalence, as well as a sense of belonging to the 'West' and its specific historical, regional and linguistic backgrounds. Marked by an experience of "unstable cultural identity,"<sup>4</sup> characterized by transformation and plurality, Bhatt constantly shows the potential and scope of her poetic imagination: in dealing with her own cultural "border-territory," she can always go back to her 'mental landmarks,' the memories of her childhood in India—people, friends, family, voices, sounds, smells, myths and stories—and draw on them while she is making her creative move into the new environments.

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In the following, I shall outline the ways in which Sujata Bhatt has aesthetically articulated her blended identity by looking closely at "The Hole in the Wind,"<sup>5</sup> a ghost poem about the East Friesian island Juist on the coast of Germany in the North Sea, which was commissioned by the South Bank Centre and BBC Radio Drama. An earlier version of it was read, recorded and subsequently broadcast as part of a ghost poem series.<sup>6</sup> The poem (Bhatt's longest to date), which is formally characterized by free verse and refrain, shows a change in narrative perspective and a juxtaposition of different stories connected to the different characters who are depicted. As islanders, they live in constant danger due to the overwhelming and vehement nature of the North Sea. Their lives are dominated by superstitions, tales, myths, and Christian traditions, as well as by ships, shipwrecks and death. All the different noises and sounds, smells, tastes and colours of these particular experiences are connected with the sea, giving the poem a highly metaphysical and sometimes surreal character (in lines such as "You have created angels

out of sea gulls," 68). She also draws on general human concerns by commenting on or posing some of the eternal and, in that sense, existential questions ("where can they go—the hurt souls?" 76) especially in relation to the elementary forces, i.e. sea, wind and fire. The poem begins as follows:

The hole in the wind where the scream lives—  
The scream that is the voice.

Is it only one voice?

And in the lightning did you see  
his implacable face?  
And did you see the blood on the knife—  
The knife that cut into the wave?  
Have you ever seen a wave that bleeds? (1-8)

In this poem, as can be seen in the opening part, Sujata Bhatt draws attention to the notion that "things" such as natural (i.e. the sea, lightning) and supernatural ("the wind where the scream lives") forces can have voices and even souls. This is done by foregrounding a ghostly atmosphere as the wind consists not of one voice only, but of many voices, even screams, that, as it turns out in the course of the poem, are connected to the idea of people being bereft, of people who tragically died and—as souls are immortal—want to tell their life stories. The aspect of a tragic fate is underlined by the notion of an "implacable face" which refers to the sea as an unsatisfiable force, as personified by the German expression "der blanke Hans" [the wild North Sea]. Taking into account the aspect of souls of the dead, Joseph Swann has recently drawn my attention to an early poem, "The Difference Between Being and Becoming" (*Brunizem* 1988, 33), in which according to Swann, "Sujata Bhatt speaks of the clear dichotomy posited by Post-Socratic philosophy between the body and the soul":<sup>7</sup>

So where does the body house the soul?  
Locked in the attic,  
Wings whirring against glass?

No.

These doors and windows are always open.

What Swann connects with “Post-Socratic philosophy” can also be interpreted in relation to the Indian philosophy and religion marked by the *Upanishads* (“Sittings Near a Teacher”), which go back to the formative and influential period of Indian religious life between 700 and 500 BC. Thus the line “These doors and windows are always open” can be seen against the background of the belief, stated in the *Upanishads*, that it is quite normal for the soul to return to Earth and to be reborn in human or animal form. Although Sujata Bhatt, in many of her poems, is engaged with a notion of life that may be called existentialist she also quite frequently puts forward questions—consciously or unconsciously—regarding the doctrine of karma (actions), according to which the soul achieves a happy or unhappy rebirth depending on its works in the previous life, which is clearly connected to the Hindu philosophy and the question of what happens to man (that is the soul) after death.

The poem “The Hole in the Wind” is characterised by different voices that speak and by the intermittent voice of a narrator describing things that come in-between the voices. He/she knows what happens and comments on the voices that tell their tragic tales. The use of tales that are imbedded in the local culture and the emphasis on the interrelatedness of life and death are as it were unconsciously connected to a Hindu belief in destiny, the transmigration of the soul and reincarnation and at the same time serve to bring into relief this specific region, history and its mythologies. In a more abstract way, the numbering of the years serves to pinpoint the severe tidal waves that took place over the centuries and that left their tragic marks.

It is the year 1170.

It is the year 1277.

It is 1570. It is 1717.

It is 1825.

It is 1863, 1866, 1873, 1878—

It is the year 1883.

It is 1962. It is 1995. (19-25)

But the local references are not confined to historical dates. In 1995, when Sujata Bhatt visited the island of Juist, her imagination was stirred by authentic stories of people such as a certain Widow Braamhorst, the Captain's wife, who, during a storm, was tossed into the sea und then pulled out onto the beach, where she finds her four sons and her husband dead. After that experience she went far inland and "never again / looked at the sea" (59-60); similarly, a "dark and deaf" (64) Polynesian sailor is mentioned, who is "much looked at, pointed at, while the cargo of cotton disappears with the tides" (66-67). Here the poet is referring to the Middle Passage and the trade with the Caribbean and India, which also suggests that the islanders had contact with people of a different race, skin colour and origin. Other examples include the nightmare of a daughter who saved the father's life ("*Ach Mutter, es weht so stark in dieser Nacht / ertrinken wir*"<sup>8</sup>; 71-72), or a brief episode in the life of Heinrich Heimreich, who on Christmas Day "awakened by his daughter's cries / held on to the roof of his swaying house" (95-96), and who saw Death himself but remained unharmed. There is also the story of a woman who on Christmas Eve "stayed with her husband / hanging on the masthead, cradled in the crow's nest while the storm killed [their] crew" (126-28). Their "ship, the *Excelsior*, destined for Hamburg / was trapped by the sand off Juist" (129-30) for seven days, and this woman "watched two sailors below / feast on their dead mates." Furthermore, the poem speaks of the soul of a woman called Anna Ruhtz, who was on her way to the United States on a ship called the *Cimbria*; her soul complains that she wasn't able to live her life as she wanted to live it. There is a rescued sailor, and a Captain Luckham from Salcombe, England, who lost his whole family, and was asked at court why he didn't know about the new lighthouse on Norderney [a neighboring island]. He "never retired to his country home / but plunged his restless heart / into the restless sea—" (190-94). The poem is also about a man whose horse didn't want to jump in a storm, and when it finally did, broke its neck—the rider was saved. And the poem includes the superstition of the "black cat" which dominated people's lives in former days and belongs to the specific, regional mythology. A black cat was thrown into the sea to make the merchant

ships run aground offshore, so that the islanders were able to collect the valuable cargo on which they were economically dependent. This is represented by the personification of the tides: "All winter the tides dragged in the coal for us" (117). But "[t]he black cat didn't bring a ship this time—/ Well, their black cat had no power over the moon" (14-15). Here, actually two different superstitions are interlocked in order to show the different values and beliefs that existed at the same time and marked people's lives. In this line it turns out that the moon, being responsible for the tides, is even stronger than the belief in the black cat. The different voices in the poem, including the narrator, represent a striking statement of a blended identity: a statement that is centrally concerned with the relation between memory (record), myth and reality.

Besides using the stories of 'real' people, Bhatt stresses the local scene and history by quotations in East Frisian Low German: "*doh fangede sick an groth Jamer unde Noth / dar sach men vör Ogen den bitteren Dodt / deß bedröueden Solten Waters*" (217-19) [there was so much pity and fear, and people, before their eyes, saw death, grievously waiting for them in the threatening salty water; *translation mine*]. These lines are taken from a song and are characterised by death and melancholy, typical of the region and the people living under the permanent danger caused by—the fatal tidal waves—of the North Sea. The origin of the song is explained by the line that someone is writing "*Sturmflutlieder in Plattdeutsch*" [shanties (on the tidal waves) in Low German, *translation mine*] which is repeated several times in the poem itself.

Repetition and echoism ("And there were those who opened their mouths / but could not speak—/ they opened their mouths but could not / swallow, could not eat. / And so they died. And so they died," 167-71), together with onomatopoeic effects ("the sea was hissing sounds," 285) contribute to the intended ghostly effect of the poem. "The Hole in the Wind" is set in October when the sea can be rough with strong winds and floods: "It was October and we wondered / *what are these trees with silver leaves?*" (248-49) or in a variation, "It was October and we wondered / where can they go—the hurt souls?" (275-76). The narrator always puts forward questions and comments on the connection

between life and death and the souls of human beings: "Do you think their souls were wounded / with their bodies? / Where can they go—the hurt souls?" (173-74). From line 235 to the end (line 293) the poet's own voice comes in, sometimes in the form of the personal pronoun *we*, reflecting on her own and her family's experiences on Juist.<sup>9</sup> This voice is, again, juxtaposed by the narrator's questions about the souls. And again, this voice is juxtaposed by comments like, "Every year someone / is swept away by the tides, lost / to the currents near Juist" (245-47) to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the dangers of the North Sea are perennial. This aspect is already referred to at the beginning of the poem, when the years of the tidal waves are listed, the last entry being as recent as "1995." In the last passages of the poem (277-93) Bhatt's voice comes in again, this time making it into a "she" in order to remove herself from the figure that is speaking. In the last two stanzas, the poet refers to "The Idea of Order at Key West" by Wallace Stevens (1935) which can be characterised as a poem of a creative act of the mind. The mind, here referred to as "she," "was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (37-40).<sup>10</sup> In Stevens's poem the sea becomes the self of the song created by the mind, whereas the mind "knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing made." This is contrasted with the male (Ramon Fernandez) concept of order and demarcations. In Sujata Bhatt's poem, the last lines are as follows:

The sea was hissing sounds  
 she could not follow. The sea was more  
 than she could ever know.  
 The spirits of the island retreated  
 with the waves. And though she walked fearless  
 beside the North Sea—there was no order  
 in her mind. And the song  
 she would have sung  
 hardened in her eyes. (285-93)

In these lines, it becomes clear that it is not the poet, speaking in the female voice, who is the single artificer of world, but that the sea is the relentless, obscure and ever-dangerous producer of a tragedy that will never come to an end for the people who live near it. The spirits and in this sense the souls of the dead might be calm when the sea is calm too, but when the tidal waves return, the atmosphere reminds people of their fate as well as of the dangers the North Sea forever entails. Being overwhelmed by the tragedies of the people, the narrator of the poem is unable to follow the sounds, and is unable to sing, as the song, which might be one of the "Sturmflutlieder"—of death and melancholy—"hardened in her eyes." In the last line Bhatt comes back to the visionary imagination, the notion of *seeing things* to underline the idea of the title of the poem "The Hole in the Wind." On the one hand it represents a window to the sea and the sun, to life that is connected to the forces of nature; on the other it represents a window to the world, to different concepts of life and death.

The poet fulfilled the commission from the Southbank Centre and BBC Radio Drama for a "ghost" poem by following the method of 'organic poetry'<sup>11</sup> as defined by the Russian-Welsh-American poet Denise Levertov.<sup>12</sup> At the same time the surreal and supernatural that enters Bhatt's poem shows it to be indebted to the Gothic novel. This connection is reinforced by Bhatt's concern with subjects such as the soul of man, the guilty conscience, or, more generally, pain and suffering. The poem brings to mind one primary example of this genre in German literature related to the North Sea and the superstitions belonging to it: the novella *The Ghost Rider* by Theodor Storm.<sup>13</sup> In "The Hole in the Wind" the poet thus blends techniques of writing (organic poetry, dramatic narrative), combines genres (the ghost poem, the gothic) and reinterprets and rewrites myth in what can be called a syncretic<sup>14</sup> way of writing. The landscape of the poem, similar to the setting in a Gothic novel, includes contrasting elements like massiveness and calm, danger and safety, uprootedness and wholeness, strangeness and familiarity. Unlike many Gothic novels, however, the poem does not pass moral judgement: the captain who lost his family through his own ignorance is not judged; nor

are the sailors who were found with the flesh of their mates in their pockets. The poet simply asks the question: "Did the soul of the sailor who was eaten / meet the soul of the sailor who ate him?" (264-65). Although this isn't judgement, there is a sadness in the wistful existential questioning reflecting the sadness of the stories, which are as human as they are strange—like that of "the deaf sailor [who] "laughs and laughs / a silent laughter for the isle of Juist. / He's Polynesian: dark and deaf. / But alive" (62-65). In these lines the poet plays with the word *deaf* which sounds similar to *death* and therefore makes *deaf* and *alive* appear to be antonyms, as well as with the weird situation that a "dark and deaf" sailor when he is laughing makes a sound like "a lull in the storm" (61). There is something continuous and dynamic connected with the sea, ever-dangerous, ever-present, reflected in the dramatic narrative which is also characterised by the device of foreshadowing: "At first there was only fog: / white, soft one could still believe / in life. My daughter / could still dream of marriage" (142-45), showing the dreams and aspirations of the people that are later destroyed by a storm. The poem ends on a metaphysical note with the affirmation that death and loss, as well as an awareness of pain, are essential to human life accompanied by disorder, possibility, uprootedness, no ending: the search of the unquiet soul. This again refers to Hinduism as explained above.

In the poem, the great value of cultural encounter is suggested by pointing out the interdependence of life experience, existential questioning, Hinduism and aesthetic ambition. By shifting the subject to a German background, especially regarding the region and (partly) the use of language, Sujata Bhatt shows that she has—in contrast to earlier poems in which she focuses on India while living in the USA and on America while living in Germany—the "power to control and give shape to any given environment in order not to be intimidated or overwhelmed by its foreignness."<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, she draws on the metaphor of the "broken mirrors"<sup>16</sup> which represents the workings of the fragmented memory and the new cultural environments which are transformed into new and challenging perspectives on a seemingly archaic theme. Thus, in "The Hole in the Wind" the poet's meeting with the North German

world, in which she discovers an unconscious concept of life and death, is related to Hinduism as part of her 'mental landmarks.'

Sujata Bhatt evidently feels the need to rewrite literature, in that traditional epics, myths or stories can be perceived as subtexts of her poems. However, though Sujata Bhatt's work is characterized by a particular combination of cultural influences in terms of a blended identity, an intercultural or syncretic way of writing that shows mutual respect and a reciprocal exchange of values and beliefs and is basically dialogical, this mode of writing is to some degree typical of the eclecticism of twentieth-century poetry, in which figures from all manner of pantheons may enter and act without conflict. It is rare for Bhatt to subscribe to a single orthodoxy; she has the knowledge of many faiths, and many mythologies, and she instinctively takes something from some or all as her sustenance.<sup>17</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sujata Bhatt, "From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen," unpublished manuscript (1988) 4.

<sup>2</sup>Sujata Bhatt, *Augatora* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000) 16.

<sup>3</sup>Bhatt, "From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen," 4.

<sup>4</sup>Bernd Schulte, *Die Dynamik des Interkulturellen in den postkolonialen Literaturen englischer Sprache* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1993) 74.

<sup>5</sup>Sujata Bhatt, "The Hole in the Wind," *PN-Review* 24.1 (no. 117, September-October 1997): 17-20. Further line references are in the text. The poem is also published in the volume *Augatora*.

<sup>6</sup>This information is taken from interviews with Sujata Bhatt as well as from the footnotes to "The Hole in the Wind," *PN-Review*.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Swann, "Transcultural Identity in the Poetry of Sujata Bhatt: *Comparative Approach*" (unpublished manuscript), presented at the conference "Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a Post-Colonial World," Aachen / Liège, 31 Mai-4 June 2000. I am grateful to Joseph Swann to let me have his paper before publication.

<sup>8</sup>"Oh mother, the wind blows so strong, tonight we will drown" [translation mine]. This brings to mind Goethe's poem "Der Erlkönig" "Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? / Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind," which is of course also about death.

<sup>9</sup>Sujata Bhatt at a reading on Monday, 5 June 2000.

<sup>10</sup>Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," Alexander W. Allison, et. al., ed., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1983) 556-57.

<sup>11</sup>"Coleridge, following the lead of the German critic, A. W. Schlegel, distinguished between mechanic form, which is a preexistent shape such as we impose on wet clay by a mold, and organic form, which, as Coleridge says, 'is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form.' To Coleridge, in other words, as to other organicists in literary criticism, a good poem is like a growing plant which evolves, by an internal energy, into the organic unity which constitutes its achieved form." M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston 1981) 67.

<sup>12</sup>See Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World: Essays 1960-1973* (New York: New Directions, 1973).

<sup>13</sup>Theodor Storm was born in Husum (the North coast of Germany) in 1817 and died in Hademarschen in 1888.

<sup>14</sup>According to Christopher Balme "syncretism is based on mutual respect and reciprocal exchange of values and beliefs" in regard to religious contact. "By analogy, one could extrapolate that, in general, cultures which find themselves in a process of rapid change, crisis and acculturation are continually involved, consciously or unconsciously, in similar processes of reinterpretation; there is constant re-evaluation of cultural practices, . . . In the realm of literature and art, writers and artists involved in creating and working in syncretic processes are having to refashion meanings from diverse cultural sources to create a new quilt in which the seams have varying degrees of visibility." Christopher Balme, "Inventive Syncretism: The Concept of the Syncretic in Intercultural Discourse," *Fusion of Cultures?*, ed. P. O. Stummer and C. Balme, *Cross/Cultures* 26, *ASNEL Papers* 2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 11.

<sup>15</sup>Sujata Bhatt, *From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen* (unpublished MS, 1988) 4.

<sup>16</sup>For further reading and a discussion of the notion of the "broken mirrors" see Cecile Sandten, *Broken Mirrors: Interkulturalität am Beispiel der indischen Lyrikerin Sujata Bhatt* (Frankfurt/M.: Lang, 1998). The title *Broken Mirrors*, is explained in relation to Salman Rushdie's essay collection, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) who also used the expression.

<sup>17</sup>Levertov 77.