

Linguistic Otherness in the Identity of Diaspora in Sujatha Bhatt's Poetry

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Abstract

The word 'Diaspora' is currently making waves in the realm of Postcolonial literature and theory and in recent years. The contribution to the literary field by Diaspora writers is overwhelming and commanding. The word 'diaspora' refers to a postcolonial condition of people who migrate from their homeland either unwillingly by colonial regime or willingly due to poor living condition of the former colonies. Sujatha Bhatt is a Diasporic writer who was born in Ahmedabad, raised in Poona and New Orleans, university educated in Baltimore and Iowa, spent time writing in British Columbia, married and settled in Bremen, Germany and publishes her poetry in England. Her poetry ponders over the identity crisis of a Diaspora and the anxiety and alienation of a migrant.

The 'Otherness' in general refer to the identity conferred on the colonized. Bill Ashcroft defines the 'other' as: The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as **primitivism** and **cannibalism**, as a means of establishing the **binary** separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. (155-156) Sujatha Bhatt's poetry provides postcolonial resistance towards this 'Otherness' and especially she writes against the linguistic otherness in the identity of a Diaspora. In "Search for Tongue" she displays her anxiety over her identity. The poem commences with a question to the center that imposes 'Otherness' over her identity through their language:

You ask me what I mean

by saying I have lost my tongue.

I ask you, what would you do

if you had two tongues in your mouth,

and lost the first one, the mother tongue... ("Search for my Tongue" Brunizem 63-66)

These lines also demonstrate the doubleness of a diasporic identity and thus are different from the center's view of identity. The language is a part of one's identity, just as tongue is part of a body. In the case of Diaspora, they live with two or more language and this condition exerts alienation in them.

In the poem, Sujatha Bhatt initially thinks that both the tongues are at war for their place in her. She confesses that the foreign language seems to win in their fight for survival as she says, "and lost the first one, the mother tongue," In her frustration she is afraid that she forgot her mother tongue and she exclaims that 'I thought I had spit it out'. But in the later part of the poem she reveals that she dreams in her mother tongue Gujarathi. She discloses her desire to be an Indian who lives outside India. This dual nature of the identity is a postcolonial resistance against the 'Otherness' inscribed her identity as

Sujatha Bhatt though laments about loss of identity by forceful linguistic conversion, shows her postcolonial resistance by her 'appropriation' of the colonizer's language. Bill Ashcroft explains this 'appropriation' in his **Postcolonial Studies: The key concepts** as:

A term used to describe the ways in which post-colonial societies take Over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities.(15)

Though having this postcolonial writer's license to use the colonizer's language for expressing her linguistic 'Otherness', she uses Gujarathi to tell her plight and she presents this poem as a translation of it.

In the poem 'The Stare' from Monkey Shadow, she argues that language is a part of one's identity.

The word
is the thing itself.
Language is simply
a necessary music
suddenly connected
to the child's own heartbeat.

In her poetry, she vehemently protests against the oppressor's linguistic thrusting 'Otherness' on her. For instance, in 'A Different History' she visually demonstrates that, 'soul has been cropped' by the British with a Scythe as the oppressor's language is forced on them. She is surprised and posts the question how the enforced language will be praised by the unborn children i.e. future generation.

And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face-
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.

She points out fatal outcome of such oppression which kills the culture and identity of the colonized. She posts some tough questions to answer when she asks, "Which language has not been the oppressor's tongue?" Here she is also critical about her own language which once was an oppressor's language as it is of Aryan origin. There is also a connotation that the language is too much male dominated one, and thereby expresses the double plight of a postcolonial woman who is forced with 'Otherness' as a woman as well as a colonized.

Sujatha Bhatt also acknowledges that colonized culture also affects the colonizer. The she Augatora speaks about how Jane who represents colonizer wants to reform by imposing linguistic otherness on Tarzan finds herself changed in turn.

At first
I thought I should teach you

English – return to you
what you have lost.

But you have changed the sounds
I listen for,
.....
Already you have changed my eyelids,
my ears, the nape of my neck –
The way I lift my head to listen. (Augatora 57)

This poem is a postcolonial reading of the story of Tarzan. It brings out the construction of ‘the orient’ in the minds of European by subverting the story of Tarzan. Here, Jane the representative of the colonizer wants to ‘civilize’ Tarzan by teaching him English. This reminds us Daniel Defoe’s **Robinson Crusoe**, Where Robinson Crusoe tries to teach English to cannibal Friday. In **The Tempest**, Caliban is taught colonizer’s language in order to make them civilize him. This is a perfect example of ‘Othering’ where centre tries to define itself as civilized and cultured by defining the ‘Other’ as primitive and backward.

Sujatha Bhatt mentions that in trying to influence the colonized, the colonizer is influenced by the colonized. Jane who tries to teach English to Tarzan in order to return what he lost. She symbolically tells that Tarzan, the barbarian of the Jungle has lost his culture and she tries to supplant his culture by her English language. But she realized that he changed her in turn, for example, her listening ways, her eyelids, ears, the nape of her neck. Here by resorting to the hybrid nature of identity, Bhatt defies the otherness imposed on her. The Center thrusts otherness by giving a stereotypical identity but this rigid identity is resisted by the notion of hybrid nature of the identity.

In her study about South Asian Women writers, Sneja Gunew mentions that “Food and Language as Corporeal Home for the Unhoused Diasporic Body” since language is central for identity formation for a Diaspora. So Gunew asserts that, “language shapes us and that language is fundamentally grounded in the body itself” (94). Sujatha Bhatt brings out the existential trauma inflicted on the Diasporic identity through linguistic otherness and she has provided postcolonial resistance towards this linguistic otherness of the colonized in her poems.

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