



## The Journey Towards Meaning: Deconstructing the Symbolic and the Semiotic in Sujata Bhatt's Poetry.

**Dr. Guni Vats**

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, Haryana.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0424.0908>

### ABSTRACT

Sujata Bhatt is an iconoclast of her generation and her writing reveals an unornamental sight of the society. She writes with a candor and wit that is unparalleled. Her writings are brimming with metaphorical contexts and symbolic references and a very specialized critical lens is required to further decipher her meaning. There is an incessant need to deconstruct the nuances of signification in her poems to reveal her intention and unveil the symbolism deployed. This paper borrows the idea of symbolic and semiotic from the post-structuralist discourse and studies how Sujata Bhatt inspires free play in her verse.

Keywords: Sign, Signification, Semiotic, Symbolic, Deconstruction

Meaning is not made just denotatively, with words denoting thoughts or things. Meaning is made in large part by the poetic and affective aspects of texts... (McAfee 1)

Sujata Bhatt is a prolific and celebrated poet, who writes with the precision of a painter's brushstrokes and paints with her words. She conveys what she means using a harmony of semiotics and symbolism in her language. My paper attempts to deconstruct her knitted language to try to experience the jouissance of meaning and truth that the poet hides beneath her carefully chosen words. Julia Kristeva's theoretical rendering of the semiotic and symbolic and its application to the avant-garde author guides us to read the work of a poet who plays with the naivety of her poetic voice. Bhatt's poems convey a journey; a journey that the author has taken and the journey that the narrator is on, sometimes they are the same and at other times the poet distances herself conveniently from the persona. The diasporic writer has traveled far and wide, and so has her language. Her poems bear witness to the great adventurous distance that the poet and her words have traveled together. Bhatt impressively uses symbols in her poems that she conceals with vocabulary and verbosity, but under the layers of unpunctuated hastily drafted sentences lie the inherent understandings of the phallic and the *yonie* and how they represent society and how society is represented by them. The paper aims to deconstruct these symbols diligently by reading the signifier bound with its signified. Bhatt's poetic experience comes to life when the thetic breaks and ruptures of her sentences are read carefully.

I use my teeth

to tear the outer hard *chaal*

then, bite off strips

of the white fibrous heart-

suck hard with my teeth, press down

and the juice spills out. (*Sherdi* 20)

The six lines quoted above paint a beautiful erotic picture; the poet's persona uses her teeth to tear the hard outer flesh and dig inside till the juice spills out. The poem titled *Sherdi*, meaning sugarcane, goes on a journey of the poet's childhood where she reminisces about her sucking sugarcane in Sanosra. Julia Kristeva suggests that we have started using language as a 'dead artifact' (Kristeva 14) something that could be 'cataloged, archived and entombed - a formal object of study' (14) under the influence of the state of order. We are taught to accept language as a definite entity with straight rules and definitive meaning but its usage defies the basic rule we learn it as. The language we expect to read and decipher does not necessarily align with the colloquial we speak.

Bhatt breaks the order and plays around with her language enjoying her stature as a writer and chronicling her journey. Her poem about the experience of sucking sugarcane does not begin with an ornate artistic blend of sophisticated words but an almost colloquial opening of a theatrical act of sucking the *russ* of the *Sherdi*, 'The way I learned / to eat sugarcane in Sanosra.' (Bhatt 20). The pleasurable act is punctuated after an accurate 'colon' announcing the explanation that follows. The poem that seems so simply a revisit to the childhood memory steers towards an ending that changes the entire tone of

the poem. The journey from the opening lines to the closing line shifts the symbolic meaning of sugarcane altogether. The signifier shatters away linguistic rules and the signified changes its reference from the innocent pleasure of the poet's childhood hunger to the quenching of an adult persona's sexual thirst. The three stanzas of the poem indulge in a poetic journey that depicts the poet's coming of age and her symbolic travel through the time; from the morning of the farms to the night with the lover.

So tonight  
when you tell me to use my teeth,  
to such hard, harder,  
then, I smell sugar cane grass  
in your hair... (*Sherdi* 21)

Julia Kristeva in her *Revolution to Poetic Language* suggests that 'linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject - his relation to the body, to others, and to objects' (15). Kristeva's language is not a dead entity, it lives and breathes with the subject. It does not only narrate the experiences of the subject but also conveys his desires and intentions hidden under the garb of his language. The language thus portrays the status of the subject. Kelly Oliver goes further to explain Kristeva's views thus; 'The force of language is (a) living driving force transferred into language. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language.' (Oliver xx) The subject mentioned above is called the Speaking Being by Kristeva and she confers that the meaning of language could be understood only if the energy of this speaking being is realized with the language. Kristeva points out that a 'polite society' (Kristeva 16) expects one to 'contain' (16) oneself. The study of the signification of language with the energy of the speaking being breaks the mold of society and frees the symbolism to play. Sujata Bhatt in her poetry uses symbolism to express her desires, and they gain new meaning with her energy which is punctuated through the syntactical rule.

Her poems like *Udaylee*, *The Doors Are Always Open*, *Sherdi*, *The Kama Sutra Retold*, *At the Marketplace* and *Love in a Bathtub* use explicit symbols to not only portray the desires throbbing between the thighs of a four-month pregnant woman but also the helplessness of a woman stuck in the outer chambers of her home during her menstruation. The poems mentioned are all strong recitals of pain, desire, lust, passion, and memories of love. They change their meaning not with the symbols but with the tone of the poet who manages to express her feminine desires through predominantly phallic symbols. The white asparagus, horse, dog, wolf, sugarcane, cock, pine needles, and eel might have conveniently steered towards a phallic meaning but the infusion of the poet's desire and energy changed the connotation. The phallic symbols don't make the poems Phallogocentric, but they remain the voice of the woman who writes them. They quench her thirst and do not seek to overshadow her. The brilliant use of these symbols with the perfect addition of syntax and punctuation steer the dominantly phallic symbols towards a semiotic that sings of the desire of a woman.

Only paper and wood are safe  
from a menstruating woman's touch... (*Udaylee* 18)  
This aching is my blood flowing against,  
rushing against something –  
knotted clumps of my blood... rising.  
Then falling, falling up on the sand  
strewn over newly laid turtle eggs. (19)

...outside the rooster runs away from  
his dangling sliced head  
while the pregnant goat lies with mourning hens. (*The Doors Are Always Open* 20)

...it's not enough to say  
she kissed his balls,  
licked his cock long  
how her tongue could not stop. (*The Kama Sutra Retold* 24-25)

...Eating raw fish  
makes you feel like a mermaid through your legs –

Juicy salt.

I always crave sea salt, sour salt, strong eel salt. (*At the Marketplace* 48-49)

...and the hunger

raw obsession beginning

with the shape of the asparagus:

...she buys three kilos

of the fat ones, thicker than anyone's fingers... (*White Asparagus* 98)

Julia Kristeva explains that the process of signifying involves two modes; the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic can be understood as the words that convey feeling, desire, or unconscious drive whereas the symbolic are the words that are used to convey something consciously and clearly. In Kristeva's term, the 'Jouissance', the intellectual pleasure, both erotic and psychic pleasure, is derived from the expression that is more emotive than logical. (McAfee 16) The semiotic is what is felt like the child's cooing is the first expression that he feels when he becomes aware of himself as a subject. The symbolic then is the discharge of the semiotic, the expression abiding by all the rules of the syntax. The semiotic is an innocent portrayal that might shatter syntactic rules that rigorously bind language because it only aims at expressing the desire of the subjective being. The symbolic, on the other hand, places words wisely in the culturally appropriate structure of the language. It also tries to incorporate linguistic freedom that attempts to accommodate the desire of semiotic. 'Both are involved in the process of signification as the symbolic uses words with clearly demarcated meaning and the semiotic refers to the syntax that undercuts the order.' (Kristeva 17) Both together form language and convey meaning. The meaning can thus not be understood lacking the understanding of either semiotic or symbolic. Where semiotic are free to express desires, the symbolic depends on the 'language as a sign system with its grammar and syntax' (Kristeva 27).

A text is an amalgamation of the semiotic and the symbolic. The signifying process requires the reader to deconstruct the words and study the desire of the author behind using that specific vocabulary. The reader can do this by realizing the intention of a subjective being and analyzing the syntactic rules followed and the non-verbal codes shattered. The entire process thus involves the reader's understanding of desires and syntax. The meaning that is aimed at requires a critical study of the verbal and the non-verbal, the words written and the spaces left between the black ink, the punctuation marks adhered to, and the simple syntactic rules are deliberately broken. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the Swiss linguist and founder of structural linguistics pointed out the rupture in the process of signification, the gap between the signifier and the signified. The presence of more than one signified for a signifier complicates the process of signification and throws the symbolic into a state of ambiguity. '... Kristeva writes that the scission between semiotic and symbolic is marked by a break within the symbolic itself between signifier and signified.' (McAfee 22) This process of signification complicates further recognizing that it involves two modes and that they further break down because of a rupture that follows the signification and precedes the meaning-making process.

The attempt to derive meaning in Bhatt's poetry also takes the long journey from a subject's desire to the taming process that the language rules force and then the interaction between the signifier and the signified that could either support each other to construct a structure that appears flawless or works against each other to deconstruct the structure into microstructures that each contain their own meaning. Sujata Bhatt is a very wise writer; she implements her desire in her language and tames her words to run free. The signs may rupture and the fission may branch out to different signifiers and signifieds but the accumulative experience of the poem only delivers to the few who are keen to allow the pain of the naïve structure to settle and then let the pleasure of the meaning absorb them completely. *The Hindu* wrote an article on Sujata Bhatt titled "The Anxiety of Being Sujata" which was published on March 18, 2001. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra said in the article, 'There is an unevenness to Sujata Bhatt's Indian poems because she feels compelled to put on her post-colonial hat. Her European poems are invigorating'.

Bhatt's Indian poems are indeed uneven but it is only in her unevenness that I enjoyed the semiotics. Her European poems seem polished and tightly bound in the structures of linguistics but her Indian poems are as free as her Indian subconscious. The unevenness of her poetry, the broken punctuation, and the direct conversations in her works seem like her Indian semiotics is her only persona where her desire breaks free from the fetters of European linguistics and she goes through a journey of her own being free in the Indian farms, the marketplaces, the ocean that might not be as neat as the European counterpart but is sure etched in her memory as the free desire. The post-colonial hat that Mehrotra sees appears to me as the memory of a past that cannot be tied down, the semiotic that cannot be expressed by a symbolic, the rupture that breaks down the structure to enjoy the freeplay of signifieds.

Bhatt's poetry is rich with the symbolic and in our attempt to move towards the meaning we need to understand the rupture that occurs between the signifier and the signified of the symbolic. The signifier is the sound image of a sign and the signified is the meaning of the signifier, the connotative image of the sound image. Sometimes the signified moves in sync with the signifier and at other times the signified takes many different forms and each form lends a separate meaning to the sign. To understand the rupture better and to practically study the process of signification one must look at the text holistically; the semiotic with the symbolic and the signifier with the signified. Bhatt's collection of poems, *The Stinking Rose* would bring the case in point. Phallic and Yonic symbols are explicitly used in these poems. The symbolic understanding of the Phallic and Yonic may take us a step closer to the meaning-making of the poems. The title *The Stinking Rose* conveys a lot; the rose is known for its femininity and delicate fragrance but just by adding the word Stinking changes the signified altogether. *The Stinking Rose* is no longer the feminine delicate flower that is offered as a token of love but becomes a smelling reminder of a rupture that immediately separates semiotic from the symbolic. The words convey the desire and the symbolic no more

gives a non-verbal meaning to the semiotic but the signifier, the sound image remains so strong that it overcomes the rupture and the need to find a signified. It lays the semiotic in all its nakedness.

Everything I want to say is

in that name

for these cloves of garlic – they shine

like pearls still warm from a woman’s neck... (*The Stinking Rose* 125)

Did you know some cloves were planted

near the coral-coloured roses

to provoke the petals

into giving stronger perfume...

His fingers tired after peeling and crushing

the stinking rose, the sticky cloves –

Still, in the middle of the night his fingernail

nudges and nicks her very own smell

Her prism open – (125)

The poem *The Stinking Rose* is the best example to study Bhatt’s use of symbolism. The poem reeks of the smell of garlic. The phallic and the yonic symbols intertwine a beautiful thread of ugliness. The name, the identity, and the smell are all unveiled. The signifiers are left playing in the deconstructed field where they refuse to bind with their designated signified. The rupture is forced in this poem. The symbolism is shattered to reveal the semiotic. The feminine and masculine are at loggerheads and Shakespeare is dragged in the poem, ‘What’s in a name? that which we call a rose,/ By any other name would smell as sweet.../ But that which we call garlic/ smells sweeter, more/ vulnerable, even delicate/ if we call it The Stinking Rose.’ (125). The shattering of the masculine not only argues with the vanity of naming the rose but also breaks the linguistic structure. The prescribed semantics are not followed.

The symbol of garlic, the stinking rose signifies the vulnerable feminine. The peeling of the cloves of garlic establishes imagery of the vulva, the *yoni*. The smell of garlic fills the blood of the guest who dines with Rose and garlic plays around the scission of the signifying process. Interestingly the poet’s careful symbolic expressions pan out an entire power hierarchy where the rose is the name, the identity, but it is the garlic that smells, that enters the bloodstream, the garlic cloves are peeled off in what appears as forcibly. It is the stinking rose that is sacrificed to render the beauty and smell to the coral-colored rose. It is the garlic that is served in the salad with a hint of salt while the rose is decorated at the table. The stinking rose is consumed while the rose is decorated. The symbolic of the stinking rose fills the poem with the smell of the garlic under the nails of the reader. The semiotic survives the rupture and the symbolic help the semiotic paint meaning in this poem.

You would never know

she was Garlic

because she would smell of roses (*If You Named Your Daughter Garlic Instead of Lily or Rose* 130)

Kristeva talks of *inter-textuality*, ‘passage from one sign system to another’ (McAfee 26). As opposed to what inter-textuality is mostly understood as, the intersection of texts, Kristeva’s idea of inter-textuality refers to when one symbolic signifier is transported from one text to another. Complying with Kristeva’s explanation we must read another poem that justifies this inter-textuality; *It Has Not Rained for Months*. The poem begins with a passage from Hippocrates. Bhatt quotes him directly, it is as if she is answering him now, it is as if this is her way of expressing her semiotic. ‘To know whether a woman will bear a child./ clean a clove of garlic cut off the top./ place it in the vagina and see if next/ day her mouth smells of it./ If she smells,/ she will conceive; if not, she will not.’ (131) The poem opens with the symbolic clove of garlic as the patriarchy’s tool of executing their power and limiting the woman’s reproductive and sexual liberty. The sign of the clove of garlic reduces a woman to a vagina, a mere object for childbearing. Bhatt’s poem then begins with the line ‘It has not rained for months.’ (131) These six words shatter the power hierarchy that Hippocrates had so authoritatively created. This poem is the best example of the inversion of the meaning of a sign. The signified is flipped and the signifier assumes a different meaning altogether.

While Hippocrates uses the clove of garlic to belittle the woman and reduce her to the vagina, Bhatt uses his symbol and inverts the image. She shows how the desires of the woman are left parched in a land that does not rain. It does not make the poet’s persona helpless but shows the failure of the phallus to satisfy the vagina he so conveniently wanted to test with a clove of garlic. The garlic that Hippocrates wanted to place in a woman’s vagina is forced into a man’s mouth by Bhatt. The clove of garlic travels from the man’s mouth to the flesh of the woman. It is pressed in her parched flesh that burns with the garlic. The clove that was to test the woman of her reproductive ability unveils the man’s inability to quench the woman’s thirst and to satisfy her thirst. The rain she waits for never comes and she is left burning in her own flesh. The phallic symbol is turned into the yonic semiotic and the garlic plays with signifieds to voice the poet and the persona, the tormentor and the tormented. The journey to the meaning is thus realized with the realization

of rupture, the thetic break, and the understanding that the sign might never convey a specific meaning. The meaning is only an allusion to the structured linguistic that is as ambiguous as the truth itself.

It has not rained for months.

I am wet from my own sweat...

Every month I bleed

too much –

too much – and then he comes

with his clove of garlic

and then I must keep

this clove of garlic deep inside me

where it burns. (*It Has Not Rained for Months* 132)

---

### References

---

1. Bhatt, Sujata. *Point No Point: Selected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997. Print.
2. McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
3. Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. "The anxiety of being Sujata". *The Hindu*. The Hindu Newspaper. 18.03.2001. Web. 15 Jan. 2018.
4. Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Print.
5. McAfee, Noelle. "Abject Strangers: Toward an Ethics of Respect" in Kelly Oliver (ed.) *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
6. Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. Print.