**15. ‘Partition’ by Sujata Bhatt**

**Context**

Sujata Bhatt was born in 1952 in Ahmedabad, in Gujarat, India and lived there until 1968, when she emigrated to United States with her family. She now lives in Germany.

In 1942, British rule in India came to an end and the country was partitioned into India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This was planned by the British and Muslim leaders to assist the Muslim minority and give them a national identity. The partition was the signal for bloody conflict which left over one million dead.

In the poem, the people at the railway station are probably Muslim refugees trying to escape the violence.

**The Pain of Partition and Violent Epochs** *by G Baskaran*

The poem “Partition” is not all about the partition of India but is about all kinds of violent epochs that thwarted the aspirations of the common people, as found in the vast expanse of recorded history. The poem traces the incidents in which a land and its people are partitioned on the basis of religious beliefs, giving centrality to the partition of India. The poet seems to question the validity of the decision which caused the bloodshed of civilians on an unprecedented scale:

*‘How could they*

*have let a man*

*who knew nothing*

*about geography*

*divide a country?’*

A society in which ordinary Hindus and Muslims lived in perfect harmony and good neighbourliness was smashed up following the political formula of partition. This poem seeks to mitigate the negative effects of alienation, isolation, and dispersal through the literal and symbolic activities of translation. The fragmented senses of self, the frailty of survival, the persistence of hope, the wariness of the new are all represented with sharp precision.

*Comments by Melony Bethala, an Irish Indian poet.*

In this final poem, I look at Bhatt’s desire to represent her mother’s experience of Partition as part of Indian history. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin discuss the significance of women’s stories as part of history in their study *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (1998). They note that, ‘Different sorts of telling reveal different truths, and the “fragment” is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular (even individual), rather than general, and because it presents history from below’. This statement suggests the importance of bringing women’s narratives into a national history, which Bhatt does through a poem about her mother’s experience of the partition of British India.

The poem ‘Partition’ from *Augatora* explores Bhatt’s mother’s memories of growing up in Ahmedabad, a major city located just southeast of what is now the Pakistan Indian border. Given the title of the poem, it is clear that Bhatt wants her mother’s story to be seen as part of the greater narrative of Partition history, and the poem reveals her mother’s experience through a retelling of a story that is passed on from mother to daughter. Bhatt brings the violence and suffering of this period to the forefront of the poem through descriptions of the sounds in her city: ‘she could hear the cries of the people / stranded in the Ahmedabad railway station’, but her mother was young and afraid of becoming involved, so she stayed at home away from the violence. Unlike other women in her family, such as her aunt who went to the train station everyday, Bhatt’s mother was physically uninvolved in aiding others during this upheaval. Nevertheless, she is still haunted by the memories of that time, which Bhatt attempts to capture in the poem. Her mother’s reluctance in recalling this memory reveals the significance of women’s stories in the narratives of Indian history, and suggests that at times the only way to include them is by women passing on their stories through oral history.

The second part of the poem moves from her mother’s memories of Partition to Bhatt’s own experience of sitting with her mother and hearing the story. She says:

*Now, when my mother*

*tells me this at midnight*

*in her kitchen – she is*

*seventy-years-old and India*

*is ‘fifty’. ‘But, of course*

*India is older than that,’ she says,*

*‘India was always there.’*

In shifting the perspective of the poem from her mother’s memory to Bhatt’s experience of hearing it, we are able to perceive the social and historical frame of the poem, which places her mother’s memory and Bhatt’s role as the storyteller within a greater narrative. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin note the significance of hearing women’s stories of Partition, even if they are only in the form of a story, because women’s everyday experiences and memories of Partition are just as important as documented historical facts of that time. Bhatt’s inclusion of her mother’s words in the poem holds personal significance, for in relating their conversation, she places herself within her own family history and in a national history. Bhatt’s ‘Partition’ depicts this personal story as an important aspect of Indian history and signifies her desire to portray the experiences of the women in her family.

Bhatt’s poems about her mother show us the importance of perceiving women’s stories as part of a national history, but they also reveal the simple details of her mother’s life as an Indian woman. The relationship between mother and daughter indicated by these poems undoubtedly influenced Bhatt’s creative work, and in turn, Bhatt reflects upon these memories in her poetry.