

Dreaming in Gujarati

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The children in my dreams
speak in Gujarati
turn their trusting faces to the sun
say to me

care for us nurture us

in my dreams I shudder and I run.

I am six
in a playground of white children

Darkie, sing us an Indian song!

Eight
in a roomful of elders
all mock my broken Gujarati

English girl!

Twelve, I tunnel into books
forge an armor of English words.

Eighteen, shaved head
combat boots. Shamed
by grannies in white saris,
neon judgments
singe my western head.

Mother tongue

Matrubhasha

Tongue of the mother
I murder in myself

Through the years, I watch Gujarati
swell the swaggering egos of men,
mirror them over and over
at twice their natural size.

Dissolve the bones and teeth of women,
break them on anvils of duty and service,
burn them to skeletal ash.

Words that don't exist in Gujarati:

*Self-expression
Individual
Lesbian*

English rises in my throat,
rapier flashed at yuppie boys
who claim their people "civilized" mine,

thunderbolt hurled
at cab drivers who yell
Dirty black bastard!

force-field against
teenage hoods hissing
Fucking Paki bitch!

Their tongue - or mine?
Have I become the enemy?

Listen:
my father speaks Urdu
language of dancing peacocks
rosewater fountains -
even its curses are beautiful.
He speaks Hindi,
suave and melodic,
earthy Punjabi,
salty-rich as saag paneer
coastal Kiswahili laced with Arabic.
He speaks Gujarati,
solid ancestral pride.

Five languages,
five different worlds.
Yet English
shrinks
him
down
before white men
who think their flat, cold spiky words
make the only reality.

Words that don't exist in English:

Najjar
Garba
Arati

If we cannot name it, does it exist?
What becomes of a tongue of
milk-heavy cows, earthen
pots, jingling anklets,
temple bells,
when its children grow up
in Silicon Valley? To be
programmers?

Then there's American:

*Kin'uh get some service?
Dontcha have ice?*

Not:
May I have please?
Ben, mane madhath karso?
Tafadhali nipe rafiki
Donnez-moi, s'il vous plait
Puedo tener...

*Hello, I said can I get some service?!
Like, where's the line for Ay-mericans
in this goddamn airport?*

Words that atomized two hundred thousand Iraqis:

*Didja see how we kicked some major ass in the Gulf?
Lit up Bagdad like the fourth a' July!
Whapped those sand-niggers in'nu a parking lot!*

The children in my dreams speak
in Gujarati. Bright as butter, succulent
cherries, sounds I can paint on the air
with my breath, dance
through like a Sufi mystic.
Words I can weep and howl
and devour, words I can kiss
and taste and dream -
this tongue
I take
back.