

We hope you enjoy this free preview from our Sujata Bhatt Poetry Anthology! [If you want to buy the complete course you can click here...](#)

### 3 November 1984

Sujata Bhatt

I won't buy  
The New York Times today.  
I can't. I'm sorry.  
But when I walk into the bookstore  
I can't help reading the front page  
and I stare at the photographs  
of dead men and women  
I know I've seen alive.

Today I don't want to think  
of Hindus cutting open  
Sikhs - and Sikhs cutting open  
Hindus - and Hindus cutting open

Today I don't want to think  
of Amrit and Arun and Cunwant Singh,  
nor of Falguni and Kalyan.

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to the copyright)*

### VOCABULARY

**Hindus** - Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world, and it originated in India. People who practise Hinduism are called Hindus.

**Sikhs** - Sikhism is another religion in India, originating from the Punjab region. Sikhs are people who practise Sikhism.

**Annapurna** - a mountain range in Nepal

**Sherpa** - nomadic people who live in the mountainous areas of Nepal

**Imlee fronds** - tamarind tree leaves

## STORY/SUMMARY

**Stanza 1:** I won't buy the New York Times newspaper today. I'm sorry but I just can't - perhaps because I don't have time to read it, or maybe because reading the news is too upsetting for me to cope with today. But when I walk into the bookstore I can't help but notice the front page of the paper - I stare at images of dead men and women that I know I've seen alive before.

**Stanza 2:** Today, I don't want to think about Hindus attacking Sikhs - and Sikhs cutting open Hindus - and Hindus doing the same back to them.

**Stanza 3:** Today, I don't want to think about all these different people: Amrit and Aron and Gunwant Singh, nor do I want to think of Falguni and Kalyan.

**Stanza 4:** I've decided: today I'll write in ink the colour of peacocks and the sea, I'll write poems about everything else and avoid the news. I'll think about those five Americans who made it to the Annapurna mountains in Nepal without help or guidance from local Sherpa people. I won't think about bleeding trains, I'll do my writing homework instead.

**Stanza 5:** Now, instead of finishing the poem I'm writing, I draw tamarind tree leaves all over the page, and I think of my friend Amrit when we were six, sitting beneath the tamarind tree, we both had just washed our hair and mine and his were equally long. Our mothers sent us outside in the sun to play, to dry our hair. Now instead of completing this poem, I'm thinking about Amrit.

## **SPEAKER/VOICE**

The speaker of the poem is certainly the poet herself, as she talks about her own personal daily experiences while living in America, reflecting on the way in which her life now is so disconnected from her life in her native India as a child. The process of writing poetry is also explored, as Bhatt seemingly veers off-topic several times; yet, looking back over the stanza structure we can see that all of her thoughts are connected - the traumatic experience of thinking about the dead men and women on the front cover of the newspaper triggers thoughts of death and violence in general, which leads her to think about the ongoing war between Hindus and Sikhs in India; this, in turn, triggers a personal memory about herself and her old friends and acquaintances, and she doodles an image of a tamarind tree as she considers a specific memory of her friend Amrit when they were children. This skillfully weaves the wider political contexts with Bhatt's own personal memories and experiences, exploring the interconnectedness of our lives.

## **LANGUAGE DEVICES**

**Listing 'Amrit and Aron and Gunwant Singh / nor of Falguni and Kalyan'** - presumably this is a list of people that Bhatt knew when she was a child growing up in Pune, India. The surname 'Singh' is commonly used by people of the Sikh faith, so it implies that Bhatt and her family, who are from a Hindu background, were happily friends with people in the Sikh community. This creates a **tragic tone** as it contrasts the wider context of war with Bhatt's own personal fond memories of her family's interaction with Sikhs.

**Compound adjectives** - 'peacock-greenish-sea-green ink' - the overloading of adjectives here cleverly conveys the poet trying to get herself into the mindset of writing by exploring different precise vocabulary choices to describe her ink.

**Symbolism** - 'I'm drawing imlee fronds' - curiously, the doodling at first seems like a distraction from the poet's task of composition, which she terms 'homework' as it seems on this day like a chore to her. However, we realise that she is using the drawing to dredge up a childhood memory about her friend and that this process helps

her to focus. The word 'imlee' is translated as 'tamarind', a tree that grows in abundance in India and whose fruit is often used in cooking.

**Visual imagery** - 'beneath the imlee tree / his long hair just washed / just as long as my hair just washed' - the image of the two children out in the natural environment of India, drying their hair in the sun, seems perfect and idyllic. The repetition of 'just washed' and 'long' and 'hair' emphasises the equality and parity between the young Hindu girl and the young Sikh boy - Sikhs customarily never cut their hair, which is why Amrit's hair would have been long. This is further reinforced by the **collective first-person pronouns** in the phrases 'our mothers' and 'our hair'.

## STRUCTURE/FORM

**Title** - The title of the poem is simply a date: 3 November 1984. This gives the poem a casual style as if it was a diary entry or journal - implying that Bhatt is attempting to capture the realistic thoughts and experiences of everyday life.

**Irregular stanza length** - the irregularity of the stanzas mirrors the digressive stream of consciousness style of the writing, which explores a series of interlinked yet separate thoughts and memories.

**Repetition** - the **time adverbial** 'today' is repeated several times throughout the poem and serves as **anaphora** for the second and third stanzas.

**Volta / Negatives** - The first half of the poem is full of negatives, creating an impression that the speaker is weary and lacking energy: 'I don't want' / 'I won't buy' / 'I can't'. However, there is a volta - a turning point - at the beginning of the fourth stanza, where the speaker feels positive and motivated to write her poetry about things that she finds inspirational. Yet, the final few stanzas do also **repeat** the concept that the poet is doing other things 'instead of completing this poem', which perhaps conveys a kind of anxiety that she is distracting herself or allowing her mind to wander without focusing. **Ironically**, it is this process itself that produces the poem - suggesting that we should allow ourselves time and space in our day to play and explore.

## ATTITUDES

**Sometimes the empathy we feel for newspaper stories is too upsetting to process and we may need to take a break from the news when this happens** - the repetition of 'today' implies that Bhatt often reads the news and does feel compassion for the stories she encounters in it, but that on some days she feels too tired or weak to properly be able to process the information, presumably because she has a lot of empathy and sensitivity so reading news stories is draining for her.

**Learning about traumatic world events without being able to help can lead to a feeling of hopelessness** - The war between Sikhs and Hindus which never seems to end is a **synecdochic** example of ongoing historical and sociopolitical events that occur on a global scale - these types of tragic and complex situations are ones that we often feel a sense of deep sadness about, yet at the same time we can also feel hopeless because there's very little that we as individuals can do to fix them.

**Writing poetry is sometimes like 'homework'** - there is a tension between the idea of writing being work or a chore for the poet, and it being playful and an important way to explore her thoughts on memory and politics.

**Creativity is not a linear process** - the digressive and erratic process of composition is skilfully conveyed by the poem's irregular structure, and the interplay between the poet's conscious daily activities and experiences, as well as her subconscious memories and urges.

## CONTEXT



**The New York Times** is an American newspaper based in New York City. It covers national and international news and is read commonly worldwide.

**Warring between Hindus and Sikhs** - The two religions of Hinduism and Sikhism have occupied the same geographical space since Sikhism was founded in the 15th century - there is a long history of conflict between them, but also there are many ideological similarities, such as their belief in principles such as *karma* (where a person's good or bad actions affect the events that happen to them in their lives) and *mukti* (enlightenment). At certain points in history, Hindus and Sikhs have also supported each other; during the Mughal Empire's campaign to convert Hindus to Islam, Sikhs defended persecuted Hindus.

## THEMES

- News and Media
- History
- War
- Daily life
- The writing process

- Creativity
- Dislocation
- Immigration
- Memory
- Art

### POSSIBLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Comment closely on the poem and its connection to art and history.
2. In what ways does the poem explore the connection between personal and political worlds?
3. How does Bhatt convey ideas about memory and childhood in the poem?