Muliebrity

SUMMARY

The speaker says she often thinks about the young girl who used to collect cow manure in a big basket on a busy street by the speaker's childhood home, near the Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar, a neighborhood in the Indian city of Ahmedabad. The speaker often thinks about the graceful manner in which the young girl moved while going about her work. She also thinks about all the intense smells that surrounded the scene: cow manure, dust from the road, tropical flowers wet with rain, monkey breath, clean clothes, the dustiness of crows' wings (which, the speaker says, smells different from everything else), and yet more manure as the young girl gathered it up into her basket. These unique, individual smells, the speaker says, swirl around her all at once. The speaker often thinks about the young girl, but has refused to turn her into a metaphor for something else or treat her like just some pleasant image in her poetry. Above all, the speaker has refused to stop thinking about the girl, or try to make other people understand the raw power and beauty that emanated from the girl's face whenever she found a really excellent pile of manure.

THEMES

WOMANHOOD AND SELFHOOD

"Muliebrity" focuses on a young Indian girl gathering cow dung near a temple, and finds in her a figure of strength, determination, and beauty. The word "muliebrity" means "womanhood," and the speaker's admiration of this young girl is, at least on one level, a celebration of women's dignity and power.

But even as the poem showcases the young girl's resilience and spirit, the speaker refuses to use her as a "metaphor"—that is, as representative of anything other than herself. The speaker wants to treat the girl as an *individual* rather than objectify her as a *symbol* of femininity or womanhood more broadly. On the one hand, then, the poem seeks to honor the power and beauty of womanhood in all its disparate forms. On the other, it seeks to simply honor this *one* woman's personal dignity and humanity.

Many readers will view gathering dung (which is often used for fuel) as unpleasant, but that's basically the point. The girl approaches her humble task with quiet determination that the speaker clearly admires. The speaker focuses on the girl's "hands and her waist" and "the greatness / and the power" of her "glistening" face. She mentions how the girl lights up when she finds a good "mound of dung," a fact that suggests that the girl takes pride in her work. And while some people might not take collecting manure as a particularly feminine task, the speaker treats the girl's skill and power as markers of "muliebrity."

But this all comes with a disclaimer! Even as the speaker implicitly celebrates the girl's "muliebrity," she also implies that womanhood can't be reduced to some essential qualities. The speaker also states that, though she has thought about the girl "so much," she has always been "unwilling" to use her as a mere image or metaphor in a poem. In a way, to do so would involve objectifying the girl for the *speaker's* own purposes, which would, in turn, implicitly deny the girl her full humanity and individuality.

The speaker also refuses to "explain" the girl's "greatness," suggesting that this should be self-evident—and that such greatness doesn't rely on anyone else to validate it. The speaker is basically saying that the girl's powerful womanhood already exists; it doesn't need a poet coming along to point it out! The poem, then, ultimately implies that part of celebrating womanhood means treating women like the unique, diverse, and fully realized human beings that they are.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

THE NATURE OF MEMORY

"Muliebrity" subtly explores the nature of memory, revealing how even a single, fleeting experience can stick with people well into the future. The poem also speaks to the way that sensory details—things like those intense smells that surrounded the young girl collecting cow dung—can trigger a flood of recollection, and make the past seem vividly alive in the present.

The poem is based on a scene from Bhatt's own childhood, which has clearly stuck with the poet for years. She seems totally fixated on this moment, saying—not once, but three times—that she has "thought so much" about the young girl collecting dung off the street, which reveals the enduring hold that this memory has on her. Even small, quiet moments, the poem suggests, can profoundly affect people throughout their lives.

The memory hasn't grown any less vivid over the years, either. As the speaker dives deeper into her memory of the young girl, sensory details come thick and fast. The speaker notes not just the girl's graceful movements—"the way she / moved her hands and her waist"—but also:

the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies,
the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes
and the dust from crows' wings which smells different —

These evocative, often contradictory, smells bring the speaker's memory to life on the page. One scent seems to lead to another and another and another, mirroring the way that one memory may trigger a surge of disparate yet linked recollections. It's like the floodgates have been opened, and the past comes swirling into focus. All these smells create an intensely vivid and specific sense of time and place that "surround[s]" the speaker "separately / and simultaneously" in the present. Sensory memory, here, has the power to bring the past back to life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 15-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I have thought ...
... temple in Maninagar.

The opening four lines establish that the poem is a memory ("I have thought so much [...]"). In fact, Bhatt is on record saying that it's taken from her own childhood.

These lines also set the scene itself. Like the opening shot of a film, the poem gives the reader just enough detail to sketch out a vivid picture of this memory, while holding back on the more particular recollections and thoughts.

The reader learns that the scene the speaker is recalling took place in Maninagar, a city in the Gujurat region of India. There, the speaker saw a young girl collecting cow dung (a.k.a. manure) in a big basket. The speaker doesn't say why the girl was collecting the dung, but she was probably planning to sell it on for a small amount of money; manure has various purposes, including fuel. That said, this still doesn't seem like the most fun of professions, and there's no escaping the fact that the young girl seems to have had a tough, impoverished life.

There is also a subtle juxtaposition at work here between the sacredness of the temple and the seeming lowliness of collecting animal waste. But that's the point: the poem sets up this contrast in part because it aims to find the holiness and beauty within this young girl herself.

This opening section is pretty light on poetic devices, instead feeling like the speaker is simply having a conversation with the reader. That said, the consonance of the dull /d/ sounds is noticeable is it runs through lines 2 and 3, subtly imbuing the girl's labor with a sense of heaviness:

who gathered cow-dung in a wide, round basket
along the main road passing by our house

Finally, it's worth noting how the opening four lines are all enjambed. This suggests the clarity and intensity of the speaker's memory, which is about to be recreated on the page in full technicolor and smell-o-vision!

LINES 5-7

I have thought ...
... wet canna lilies,

Line 5 begins the poem's second sentence, which starts in exactly the same way as the first:

I have thought so much about the way she

This anaphora emphasizes the strength of the speaker's memory—how the sight of the young girl has never left her, and how she's returned to this scene time and time again. Repetition, in other words, suggests *fixation*.

If the first four lines were like the poem's establishing shot, the speaker now zooms in on more particular details about the cow-dung gatherer. First, she focuses on the girl's physicality. As she does so, she uses striking enjambment between line 5 and line 6 to create a feeling of dynamic motion:

I have thought so much about the way she
moved [...]

This builds a picture of the girl as graceful, and in possession of a powerful inner strength that helps her survive day to day. Meanwhile, the diacope of line 6 ("moved her hands and her waist") makes it seem as though this memory has become refined over time, with the speaker able to appreciate all the different aspects of the young girl's being.

The speaker's memory is filled not just with striking images, but striking smells. In fact, sight and smell are intertwined throughout the poem. Line 6 flows right into line 7 without pause, mixing the senses together to include "the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies" (the latter two could be both visual *and* olfactory imagery).

The sound patterning in this line is extraordinarily evocative. The line teems with consonance and assonance that almost overwhelm the reader with a thick tapestry of sound:

the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies

The effect is one of beauty and awe; the scene is vivid and vibrant, hinting at the speaker's belief that in the figure of the young girl she witnessed something wondrous. The juxtaposition of "cow-dung," which many people of think of as somewhat unappealing, with the beauty of "lilies" also subtly suggests that real beauty—and womanliness—can be found anywhere, including side by side with what's normally thought of as ugly or unpleasant.

It's also worth noting how the poem starts using polysyndeton in this section (and beyond). "And" appears four times in these lines, which just adds to the strength of the memory—as if it is pouring out of the speaker's mind, each new detail leading to another.

LINES 8-12

the smell of ...
... and simultaneously –

The speaker's memory continues to swirl with the vivid, contrasting scents of this scene, which all seem to rush back into the speaker's mind and onto the page. Again, there's plenty of juxtaposition here of the wondrous and the mundane. For example, as the speaker sets "the smell of monkey breath" alongside that of "freshly washed clothes."

And as though to mark the intensity of these memories, the poem dials up its consonance and assonance in the imagery of lines 8-9:

> the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed
> clothes
> and the dust from crows' wings which smells
> different –

The sounds all mix together, just like these smells do; those fresh "clothes" mix with "dust" from "crows," for example. All the swishing sibilance here, meanwhile, atmosphere of dustiness in words like "freshly washed" and, of course, the word "dust" itself.

In line 10 ("and again [...]") the poem returns to the "smell of cow-dung." The speaker vividly recalls that smell, and it's notable how this is discussed in the present tense. The smell comes back "as the girl scoops" up the dung, showing how present this memory is in the speaker's mind, even though she's recalling it many years later. This speaks to the powerful nature of memory, which in turn speaks to the power of the young girl herself. Despite her seemingly menial and lowly work, the girl is *still* right there in front of the speaker.

The speaker then explains in line 11 and the first part of line 12 that these olfactory sensations "surround[]" her "separately / and simultaneously." Each smell is separate and vivid, yet they combine to make for an extremely evocative experience that is almost overwhelming.

This *rush* of memory—the way it comes on so sudden and strong—also finds expression in the enjambment throughout this section. In fact, this is technically still the same sentence begun in line 5 and that ends with the end of the poem! The sibilance of "smells," "surrounding," "separately," and "simultaneously" create a whirling, swirling effect that evokes the way these scents surround the speaker.

LINES 12-14

I have thought ...
... nice image –

The speaker explains that she has been reluctant to "use" the young girl in her poetry. That is, to make a "metaphor" or a "nice image" out of the girl seems unjust, reducing her to something she is not.

Metaphors transform one thing into another in order to explain an idea or make a comparison. But the girl doesn't *need* transforming: she is already powerful, as evidenced by the fact that the speaker has never stopped thinking about her. While a poet presides over their images and metaphors like some kind of divine creator, it is the *girl*—not the speaker—who has the real strength here.

It's important here to relate this back to the title, which again means "womanliness" or "womanhood." The speaker is torn between holding the young girl up as a symbol of the positive traits of womanhood—strength, resilience, beauty, survival—and objectifying her, robbing her of her individual, unique humanity. To turn her into a linguistic device seems to defeat the point of celebrating her; it would turn her into "a nice image" rather than a human being.

That said, the speaker still decided to write the poem! The speaker thus wishes to commemorate the young girl while acknowledging the fact that she can't entirely capture who she was in a poem. The speaker sees feminine grace, dignity, and pride in the girl, but wants to be clear that the girl doesn't exist for the speaker to make a point.

LINES 14-18

but most of ...
... of dung –

After the caesura in line 14, the poem builds on the speaker's stated unwillingness to "use" the figure of the young girl as a "metaphor" or "nice image." These last lines answer why the speaker decided to write the poem, given that she instinctively feels there is something wrong about trying to transform the girl into anything other than herself.

From the speaker's perspective, the poem isn't about *using* the figure of the young girl for some poetic process. The speaker can't "forget her," which is why the poem came to be. To the speaker, the girl is worthy of remembrance, and her greatness is worthy of celebration—not because she's a *metaphor* for

womanhood in general, but because she's a woman whose strength and beauty should be self-evident.

To that end, the speaker feels unable and unwilling to "explain" the young girl's "greatness" and "power." She doesn't want to tell readers why they should see such qualities in the girl, or to oversimplify things. Refusing to explain what the girl has such "greatness" also implies that there shouldn't need to be an explanation; her "greatness," her "muliebrity," shouldn't be up for debate. She doesn't have to prove her worth to anyone.

Even so, the speaker tries to capture some of that greatness in the poem. In the speaker's memory, the young girl's physical presence shines with something almost holy, this "power glistening through her cheekbones" whenever she finds a good mound of dung to collect. The young girl glows with life and determination, embracing the task before her, finding pride in doing her work well.

- Notice how the alliteration and consonance between "greatness" and "glistening" in lines 15 and 16 gives the poem itself a kind of sheen, supported by both the powerful /g/ and slippery, liquid /s/ sounds.

Again, this glow of strength—the girl's irreducible womanhood—shows most each time she finds a "particularly promising / mound of dung." The alliteration of "particularly promising" lends the poem excitement and anticipation, leading to the final image of that dung. The enjambment heightens the sense of surprise and juxtaposition in the poem's final moments, one image slipping quickly into the next as the lines unfurl down the page.

To many people, it's hard to imagine cow dung being "promising." The lilies mentioned in line 7, and the adornments in the nearby temple, are more easily understood than the cow dung as treasures. But to the girl, who embraces the task at hand, the dung is something precious.

The poem thus rejects narrow, stereotypical ideas of strength and beauty by celebrating this one young girl's power and unique femininity. But it does so in a way that says, ultimately, this power *doesn't need* the poem or the poet to exist.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to bring the speaker's memory to life on the page. Much of this alliteration is subtle, in keeping with the poem's thoughtful, free-flowing tone. But some alliteration rings out quite clearly, adding intensity to the speaker's imagery and calling attention to how different all the sights and smells surrounding the girl are.

Take lines 7-9, where the shared /c/ and /d/ sounds of "cow-dung," "road-dust," "canna lillies," "clothes," and "crows' wings" highlight the sharp juxtaposition between these scents, which nevertheless all swirl together in the speaker's memory. These are also both relatively loud consonant sounds, which makes the imagery feel all the more striking and inescapable.

In lines 11 and 12, alliteration again evokes the rush of memory:

> it up, all these smells surrounding me separately
> and simultaneously –

The sibilance here nearly overwhelms the reader, reflecting the seemingly unstoppable swirl of sensory memories flickering through the speaker's mind.

Alliteration can also be used to suggest aesthetic beauty; it can be a poetic form of *decoration*. This is the case when the speaker describes how the girl lights up when she finds a "particularly promising / mound of dung." Those sharp /p sounds call readers' attention to the girl's excitement; it feels almost as though she's stumbled upon buried treasure.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "girl"
- **Line 2:** "gathered"
- **Line 6:** "her hands"
- **Line 7:** "cow," "dung," "dust," "canna"
- **Line 8:** "clothes"
- **Line 9:** "crows," "wings which"
- **Line 10:** "scoops"
- **Line 11:** "smells surrounding," "separately"
- **Line 12:** "simultaneously"
- **Line 15:** "greatness"
- **Line 16:** "glistening"
- **Line 17:** "particularly promising"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance just like alliteration and consonance: to bring the speaker's childhood memory to life on the page, and to highlight the intense juxtaposition between all the various sights and smells that the speaker recalls.

Assonance is strongest in lines 7-9—not coincidentally, the lines with the poem's strongest alliteration and consonance. This moment is dense with imagery, and the use of all these poetic devices adds intensity, vibrancy, and beauty to that imagery:

> [...] cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies,
> the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes
> and the dust from crows' wings which smells different –

The swirling assonance creates swirling excitement as the speaker recounts all the different smells, one seemingly leading to another. Also note how the shared sounds here draw attention to the *contrast* between these smells—between "dust" and "dung," "monkey breath" and "freshly washed clothes," clean "clothes" and dusty "crows' wings."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cow," "round"
- **Line 7:** "dung," "dust"
- **Line 8:** "smell," "breath," "freshly," "clothes"
- **Line 9:** "crows," "wings which," "different"
- **Line 11:** "me separately"
- **Line 12:** "simultaneously"

CAESURA

The poem avoids caesura for the most part, its lines flowing quickly and smoothly down the page in a way that evokes the rush of the speaker's memory.

That said, there are two important mid-line pauses here. The first is in line 12:

> and simultaneously – I have thought so much

The pause here marks a transition in the poem. Up until now, the speaker has been recalling all these sights and smells that are intertwined with her memory of this young girl. That recollection comes to a sudden halt in the middle of this line, as though the speaker has been abruptly yanked out of her reverie. Perhaps, caught up in the memory, she was on the brink of doing exactly what she doesn't want to do: using the girl "for a metaphor." The caesura suggests the speaker is pausing to collect herself, to ground herself in the present.

The caesura in line 14 is less jarring but serves a similar function, allowing the speaker to pause briefly and transition between points:

> for a nice image – but most of all unwilling

The pause before "but" adds extra weight to the poem's final lines, which celebrate the girl's fundamental "power" and "greatness."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "simultaneously – I"
- **Line 14:** "image – but"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance like it uses alliteration and assonance: to make its imagery come to life on the page, making the speaker's memory all the more vivid for the reader.

And also as with those other sonic devices, the bulk of the consonance comes in the middle section of the poem. This marks the height of the speaker's memory, and the poem, fittingly, unleashes a sensory extravaganza of sound to reflect the intensity of all these sights and smells:

> and the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies,
> the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes
> and the dust from crows' wings which smells different –

Dialing up the consonance here is the poem's way of matching all the imagery packed into these lines. The sibilance here also evokes an atmosphere of dusty heat. The /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds in words like "smell," "freshly washed," and "crows' wings" sound almost like the movement of sand in the wind.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "girl"
- **Line 2:** "gathered," "dung," "wide," "round"
- **Line 6:** "her hands," "her"
- **Line 7:** "smell," "cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies"
- **Line 8:** "smell," "monkey breath," "freshly washed clothes"
- **Line 9:** "dust," "crows' wings which smells different"
- **Line 10:** "smell," "cow," "scoops"
- **Line 11:** "up," "all," "smells surrounding me separately"
- **Line 12:** "simultaneously"
- **Line 15:** "greatness"
- **Line 16:** "glistening," "cheekbones"
- **Line 17:** "each," "particularly promising"
- **Line 18:** "mound," "dung"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is an extremely important part of the poem, allowing its lines to flow smoothly and quickly down the page in a manner that evokes the intense, overwhelming rush of the speaker's memory.

There are just two main sentences in the entire poem, in fact: lines 1-4 ("I have thought so much about the girl [...] temple in Maninagar.") and lines 5-18 ("I have thought so much about the way [...] mound of dung —"). The flow of the poem evokes the flow of memory, with one smell or leading to another until "all these smells surround[]" the speaker "separately and simultaneously.

Enjambment can also create a sense of movement in the poem, as is the case in lines 10-11:

and again the smell of cow-dung as the girl scoops
it up [...]

The "scoops" of line 10 needs the "it up" of line 11 to feel grammatically complete. The sense of the phrase, then, quite literally bends down the page in order to be picked back up again—just like the girl's movement itself!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "girl / who"
- **Lines 2-3:** "basket / along"
- **Lines 3-4:** "house / and"
- **Lines 5-6:** "she / moved"
- **Lines 6-7:** "waist / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "clothes / and"
- **Lines 10-11:** "scoops / it"
- **Lines 11-12:** "separately / and"
- **Lines 12-13:** "much / but"
- **Lines 14-15:** "unwilling / to"
- **Lines 15-16:** "greatness / and"
- **Lines 16-17:** "cheekbones / each"
- **Lines 17-18:** "promising / mound"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is another extremely important part of the poem, as the speaker places the traditionally sacred and beautiful alongside the mundane—and, in doing so, finds a sense of beauty and power in even the most humble of tasks.

At the poem's start, for example, the speaker places this young girl collecting "cow-dung in a wide, round basket" alongside the image of "the Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar." The temple is a site of organized religion, while gathering cow-dung seems like unpleasant and difficult work. But through juxtaposing these images, the poem is really suggesting that there is something beautiful and sacred about the young girl and the way she goes about her work with dignity and pride.

The wildly contrasting smells that fill the air all at once are another example of juxtaposition. The "smell of cow-dung," for example, sits just a few words apart from that of "wet canna lilies." The "smell of monkey breath" stands in contrast to that of "freshly washed clothes," while this image of cleanliness stands against that of dusty "crows' wings."

This is a world of intense contrasts, all of which exist "simultaneously," and juxtaposition suggests that it's impossible to reduce the scene to any *single* sensation. This, in turn, reflects the speaker's refusal to reduce the young girl to a symbol of anything other than herself.

The poem turns to juxtaposition again in its final lines, when the speaker says that the girl goes about her task with "greatness" and "power glistening through her cheekbones." While collecting animal dung seems like a tedious and unpleasant job, the girl approaches it with grace and strength. And whereas many people would consider encountering a big pile of dung to be a nuisance, to the girl finding a "particularly promising mound" is like finding treasure. All this juxtaposition helps make the point that there is dignity and beauty in the girl and her work.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "the girl / who gathered cow-dung in a wide, round basket / along the main road passing by our house / and the Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar."
- **Lines 7-9:** "and the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies, / the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes / and the dust from crows' wings which smells different –"
- **Lines 15-18:** "the greatness / and the power glistening through her cheekbones / each time she found a particularly promising / mound of dung –"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton creates a sense of building intensity and excitement as the speaker recollects the vivid sights and intense smells that have stuck with her since childhood. This device appears in lines 7-10—the height of the speaker's memory, where she quickly recounts smell after smell after smell:

and the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet
canna lilies,
the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed
clothes
and the dust from crows' wings which smells
different –
and again the smell of cow-dung [...]

All these "ands" create a piling up effect. One sensory memory leads to another and another, and the speaker can't seem to list them out fast enough! It's almost as though the poem has been overwhelmed by sensory overload, and the speaker could go on and on listing smells. This, in turn, speaks to the curious power of memory to take the mind back to a day in the past as if were happening right then and there.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-10:** "and the smell of cow-dung and road-dust and wet canna lilies, / the smell of monkey breath and freshly washed clothes / and the dust from crows' wings which smells different – / and again the smell of cow-dung"

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition throughout, which reflects the speaker's fixation on this one, specific memory. (Some of this repetition is specifically anaphora and polysyndeton, discussed separately in this guide.)

Note, for example, the diacope of the words "smell" and "smells." This speaks to the way that all these smells—from cow-dung to canna lilies—remain vivid in the speaker's mind. The speaker also repeats the even more specific phrase "the smell of cow-dung" twice (and, of course, the words "cow-dung" and "dung" many times), reiterating how intense and present this scent remains in her mind.

The parallelism in lines 13 and 14 works differently:

> but have been **unwilling to use her for a** metaphor,
> **for a** nice image – but most of all **unwilling**
> **to forget her** [...]

The speaker uses phrases with the same grammar, and even the same words, in order to emphasize her determination that she won't *reduce* the young girl to a mere poetic image or metaphor. The parallelism of "unwilling to use her" and "unwilling to forget her" is particularly striking, and essentially encapsulates the poem's entire thematic idea: that the girl doesn't exist for the speaker's (or readers') consumption, yet remains firmly lodged in the speaker's mind.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "her hands and her waist"
- **Line 7:** "the smell of cow-dung"
- **Line 8:** "the smell"
- **Line 9:** "smells"
- **Line 10:** "the smell of cow-dung"
- **Line 11:** "smells"
- **Line 13:** "unwilling," "for a"
- **Line 14:** "for a," "unwilling"

IMAGERY

The poem is packed with imagery, which helps recreate the speaker's memory right before the reader's eyes (and nose)! This imagery is mostly olfactory (related to smell), though the mention of something like "wet canna lilies" conjures up visual images too. The intensity of the poem's imagery reflects the intensity of the speaker's memory—which, in turn, speaks to just how strong of an impact the sight of this young girl had on the speaker.

The poem's most intense imagery comes towards its middle—specifically, the end of line 5 ("[...] the way she") through the start of line 11 ("it up"). As previously noted in this guide, is also a section filled with alliteration, consonance, assonance, and repetition. All these devices work together to create an almost overwhelming sensory experience, as the speaker lists out all the disparate smells that surrounded the young girl, and which seem to even surround the speaker in the present.

Again, this sensory extravaganza of imagery speaks to the sheer strength of the speaker's memory. It creates a picture of life in full-flow, and speaks to the complexity of even a single moment in a single location. The imagery is even a bit surreal; something like "the dust from crows' wings" is not necessarily a distinct smell, but certainly is evocative.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-11
- Lines 15-18

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora by repeating the phrase "I have thought so much about the" at the beginning of clauses in lines 1, 5, and 12:

> **I have thought so much about the** girl
> [...]
> **I have thought so much about the** way she
> [...]
> and simultaneously – **I have thought so much**

Repeating how much the speaker has thought about the girl shows, well, how much she thinks about her! In other words, this anaphora signals a kind of fixation on the girl, which speaks to how formative this memory was for the speaker.

Interestingly, however, while the first two examples above both lead directly into sensory memories of the girl, the last does not. That third "I have thought so much" is followed by "**but** have been unwilling to use her for a metaphor." This shift in the pattern suggests that the speaker is pausing this parade of memory to clarify for the reader that the girl isn't just some symbol in a poem, but a real human being. Even though the speaker has thought about her "so much," the girl didn't exist for the speaker's consumption.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have thought so much about the girl"
- **Line 5:** "I have thought so much about the way she"
- **Line 12:** " I have thought so much"

VOCABULARY

Muliebrity () - A word meaning "womanliness," "womanhood," or "womanly qualities."

Radhavallabh Temple in Maninagar (Line 4) - A Hindu temple in the Maninagar area of Ahmedabad, a city in the state of Gujarat, India. Hinduism has many gods and goddesses, and Radha is worshiped as a goddess of love, compassion, and kindness (traits which are often associated with womanhood). Radha was a milkmaid, meaning, like the young girl in the poem, performed manual labor relating to cows (the holiest animal in Hinduism).

Canna Lilies (Line 7) - The canna lily is a plant with a colourful iris-like flower and tropical foliage.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Muliebrity" doesn't use a conventional poetic form, instead unfolding down the page in a single, 18-line block of text.

This speaks to the power of the speaker's memory, which moves uninterrupted by constraints like stanza breaks, rhyme, or meter. Given the force of this memory, it makes sense that the poem isn't rigidly organized; neat stanzas would make the memory seem less urgent and intense, and more considered and controlled.

The formlessness of the poem also subtly reflects the speaker's determination not to oversimplify the figure of the young girl. She specifically *doesn't* want to turn the girl into a metaphor or "nice image," and, as such, neat, overly poetic stanzas would also potentially feel too reductive. The poem's lack of form, meanwhile, lends it a sense of authenticity and immediacy.

METER

"Muliebrity" is written in free verse, meaning that it has no regular meter. Writing in free verse allows the speaker to keep her tone intimate and authentic, and to evoke the immediacy and urgency with which her memory "surround[s]" her.

The lack of meter also reflects the speaker's refusal to "use" the girl "for a metaphor, / for a nice image." The speaker wants to respect the girl as an individual rather than just use her as raw material for the speaker's own poetry. The speaker thus doesn't stuff her description of the girl into a strict, neat meter.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Muliebrity," which is written in free verse. The poem deliberately *avoids* being too neat or traditionally poetic. Instead, the poem unfolds in an exciting, seemingly uncontrolled rush that matches the intensity of the speaker's memory.

SPEAKER

Sujata Bhatt is on record saying that this poem is based on her own childhood memories, and thus she can be considered the speaker of this poem. She was clearly affected by the sight of this young girl collecting dung on a street near Bhatt's childhood home in India. The fact that the speaker is a poet herself also helps readers make sense of lines 13-14, where the speaker says:

> but have been unwilling to use her for a metaphor,
> for a nice image [...]

The speaker is conscious of her role and responsibility as a poet, and torn between the desire to use poetry to describe her vivid memory and the fear of objectifying the young girl by reducing her to a poetic device or a pleasant "image."

Thus though the sight of the girl had a lasting effect on the speaker, she makes it clear that the girl wasn't going about her work *on the speaker's behalf*, nor to make some grand statement about femininity; the girl's "greatness" didn't depend on the speaker writing it down. And while the speaker sees an embodiment of "muliebrity" in the young girl, she also insists that the girl was a unique individual rather than some broad symbol of womanliness.

SETTING

Though the poem itself takes place in the present, it swiftly transports the reader back to a memorable scene from the speaker's childhood. This scene takes place in the Gujarat region of India, and more specifically near a Hindu temple in the neighborhood of Maninagar in the city of Ahmedabad. The speaker recalls a hot, dusty day, filled with the smell of manure, rain-soaked flowers, animals, and fresh laundry.

As the speaker describes "all these smells," it's as though they're "surrounding" her in the present day. At the same time, the speaker is many years removed from this scene (and also many countries away, given that Bhatt herself no longer lives in India). The fact that the speaker evokes such a vivid sense of place from such a distance speaks to the power of her memory, and to the immense impact this young girl had on her.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sujata Bhatt is a contemporary Indian poet who lived in the Indian state of Gujarat (where this poem is set) for most of her childhood. She moved with her family to the United States in 1968 and received her MFA from the University of Iowa. She now lives in Germany and has published six collections of poems.

Bhatt has said that "Muliebrity," which appeared in her 1988

collection *Brunizem*, is based on her childhood memories of India, where she regularly saw the young girl discussed in the poem. The poem sits alongside others rooted in Bhatt's childhood, including "The Doors Are Always Open," "Buffaloes," and "Living With Trains." The title of *Brunizem* comes from the name of a kind of soil found in India, and alludes to the metaphorical roots or source of Bhatt's work.

Bhatt describes her poetry as "Indian-English," as opposed to the more conventional and western-centric Anglo-Indian. English-language poetry of Indian origin has a long-standing and rich cultural tradition, of which Rabindranath Tagore is probably the most famous example (though he originally wrote in Bengali). Bhatt considers the Gujarati language as the "deepest layer" of her identity, but writes in English as it is the language she speaks most in everyday life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem is set in mid-20th century India in the western state of Gujarat, only 20 years or so after Indian won its hard-fought independence from British colonial rule. More specifically, it takes place in the Maninagar neighborhood of Ahmedabad, where Bhatt grew up and the largest city in the region.

Two key aspects of Indian life are on display in the poem. First, the "Radhavallabh temple" is ostensibly set up for the worship of Radha, the Hindhu goddess of love and compassion. Radha is also linked with cow herding. The cow, meanwhile, is the most sacred of all animals in the Hindu religion (and Ahmedabad is predominantly Hindu). Perhaps, then, the young girl's cow-dung gathering activities in the poem have a subtly implied holiness about them.

It's also worth remembering that Bhatt also wrote this poem after emigrating to the United States. She's thus looking back at a striking memory from childhood within the context of a new country and very different culture—one in which many would likely look down on the task of gathering manure for money. In asserting the girl's beauty and power, Bhatt is also defending the dignity of the world she came from.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Bhatt — The poet discusses her childhood and how she came to be a writer. (https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=4;doctype=interview)
- The Radhavallabh Temple — Check out the temple Bhatt mentions on Google Maps! (https://www.google.com/maps/place/Radhavallabh+Mandir/@22.9952064,72.6066155,15z/data=!4m12!1m6!3m5!1s0x0:0x3b0608e99d36ea13!2sRadh
- Bhatt Out Loud — Listen to recordings of Bhatt reading poems from Brunezim, the collection in which "Muliebrity" appears. (https://voetica.com/voetica.php?collection=17&poet=900)
- Hinduism and the Cow — An article discussing the Hindu religion's most sacred animal. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/sanctity-of-the-cow)
- Ahmedabad — Learn more about the city in which Bhatt grew up and saw the young girl in the poem (Maninagar is a neighborhood within Ahmedabad). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmedabad)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SUJATA BHATT POEMS

- Search For My Tongue

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Muliebrity.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Aug 2020. Web. 17 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Muliebrity.*" LitCharts LLC, August 12, 2020. Retrieved March 17, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/sujata-bhatt/muliebrity.