

## A CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE IN DHRUV BHATT'S “SAMUDRANTIKE” (OCEANSIDE BLUES)

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### ABSTRACT:

*This paper explores Dhruv Bhatt's "Samudrantike" (translated as "Oceanside Blues"), published in 1993, and translated by Vinod Meghani in 2001, through the perspective of cultural studies. Set in the coastal Saurashtra region, the novel blends real and imagined elements to illustrate the delicate interplay between traditional values and modern economic demands. The study delves into themes such as multiculturalism, gender roles, social hierarchy, and regional identity, demonstrating the novel's engagement with cultural studies theory. Utilizing qualitative content analysis and theoretical insights from Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, and Homi Bhabha, the research examines how cultural practices, power structures, and resistance are portrayed in the narrative. The focus includes the contrast between urban and rural lifestyles, the impact of colonial legacies on modern identities, and the challenges posed to traditional norms. By closely analyzing the novel's characters, settings, and cultural symbols, this paper reveals how Bhatt's work redefines cultural boundaries and offers a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics and power relations in the Saurashtra region.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, Gender Dynamics, Social Hierarchy, Regional Identity, Post-Colonialism, Power Dynamics

### Introduction

*Samudrantike* (Oceanside Blues) by Dhruv Bhatt, published in 1993, explores the intersection of tradition and modernity in the coastal region of Saurashtra, India. Through the memoir of a young civil engineer tasked with surveying and developing the region, Bhatt crafts a narrative that intricately blends real and imagined elements to reflect on cultural, social, and economic dynamics. This paper aims to analyze the novel using cultural studies theories to unpack its representation of multiculturalism, gender roles, and power dynamics.

### Research questions

1. How does Dhruv Bhatt's *Samudrantike* use material culture to express and reinforce Saurashtra's regional identity?
2. How are power dynamics and socio-economic disparities depicted in the novel, and how do they align with Michel Foucault's theories of power and space?
3. What insights does the novel provide into the contrast between urban and rural lifestyles, and how does this reflect the tension between tradition and modernity?

## Methodology

This paper employs qualitative content analysis to examine the themes and motifs within *Samudrantike*. By applying cultural studies theories, the study interprets the novel's portrayal of cultural identity, power dynamics, and social hierarchies. The analysis focuses on key chapters and passages that illustrate the negotiation of identity and resistance within the narrative.

## Cultural Representation and Identity

In Chapter 1, Bhatt introduces Sahib's urban perspective and contrasts it with the rural Saurashtra identity represented by characters like Ismail and Jaanaki. The use of local artifacts, such as the Daatan stick and Copper bowl, reflects the significance of material culture in maintaining cultural identity. Hall's framework suggests that these artifacts are not merely objects but are imbued with cultural meaning, shaping perceptions of belonging and continuity (Hall, 1997).

For example, the detailed description of the Haveli's mosaic patterns serves as a symbol of regional pride and cultural heritage: *"I took off my shoes before entering the terrace. Its entire floor was studded with glittering granules of glazed colorful tiles that formed mosaic patterns of peacocks, flowers, and Tulsi beds"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 23). This depiction underscores how material culture reinforces regional identity and cultural continuity.

## Power Dynamics

The socio-economic disparities between characters are starkly portrayed in the novel. Saboor's life conditions highlight the economic inequalities within the region. His reflection on his parents' death from famine emphasizes the harsh realities faced by the rural poor: *"In the last famine, both went to work as laborers at relief sites that provided jobs to starving. Ma didn't come back. Old man did, and died at home"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani p. 15).

Foucault's concept of space as a site of power negotiation is evident in the protagonist's interactions with institutional structures. For instance, the protagonist's challenges in asserting control within the office setting reflect broader power struggles: *"Despite my role, Aval's previous decisions overshadowed my authority in the office"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani p. 60). This illustrates how institutional hierarchies can marginalize individual authority, reflecting Foucault's idea that spaces are imbued with power relations (Foucault, 1977).

## Resistance and Colonialism

The novel's portrayal of the estate bungalow (Haveli) symbolizes colonial legacies and their impact on contemporary identities. The grandeur of the bungalow contrasts with the modest living conditions of local characters, highlighting socio-economic disparities rooted in historical contexts. The protagonist's mixed feelings about residing in the bungalow reflect the residual influence of colonial power structures: *"The grandeur of the bungalow seemed a stark contrast to the simple lives of the local people, evoking a sense of dissonance"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 80).

## Religion and Culture

Religious practices are integral to the cultural fabric depicted in the novel. The shrine of Goddess Shikotar and the role of the 'Mother' as a caretaker illustrate how religion intersects with daily life. The narrator's observations about the shrine emphasize its significance: *"The temple of the mother Goddess Shikotar stands on the cliff. How can you lose your way?"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 7). This depiction underscores the role of religion in shaping cultural practices and communal identity.

## Urban vs. Rural

The contrast between urban and rural lifestyles is central to the narrative. The protagonist's reflections on the simplicity of rural life compared to urban chaos highlight cultural and lifestyle differences. His observations about the sea and coastal village life illustrate this dichotomy: *"Never before had I indulged in the elemental proximity of an ocean. The only sea I had ever seen was a muddy creek from across the road of a metropolis or from the rooftop of high-rise buildings"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 14). This contrast underscores the cultural and experiential differences between urban and rural settings.

## Gender Dynamics and Social Hierarchy

The novel challenges traditional gender roles through characters like the 'Mother,' who assumes a priestly role traditionally reserved for men. The protagonist's surprise at encountering a woman in this role reflects societal expectations: *"Could a woman be Hanuman? I felt something amiss but assumed 'Mother' to be the administrator of the shrine"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 127). This disruption of gender norms highlights the novel's engagement with issues of gender and social hierarchy.

## Language and Cultural Expressions

The use of regional dialects and linguistic practices enriches the novel's depiction of cultural identity. Terms like *"Aavjo"* and *"Vaal Baai"* enhance the authenticity of the narrative and reflect the cultural specificity of Saurashtra. Jaanaki's mother being referred to as Vaal Baai exemplifies the significance of language in preserving cultural heritage (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 6).

## Multiculturalism and Cross-Cultural Encounters

The depiction of a foreign woman as a caretaker of the Ekaliya Hanuman shrine highlights themes of multiculturalism and cross-cultural encounters. The travelers' reaction to finding a foreign woman in a remote location underscores the blending of diverse cultural backgrounds: *"Finding a foreigner, and that too a woman, in this forlorn place made me initially wonder about its quaintness"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 127). This illustrates the novel's engagement with multiculturalism and the negotiation of cultural identities.

## Respect and Values

Cultural values such as hospitality, respect for food, and ethical treatment of animals are emphasized in the novel. Vaal Baai's hospitality reflects cultural ethos: *"I shall tend everything, sending him to the bungalow and all that. And his staying the night here will not make me poorer. You get going"* (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 7). Chapter 19's depiction of food practices highlights cultural norms regarding sustainability and mutual support: *"No leftovers! If you can't eat it all, don't dump remnants in front of cows and dogs."*

*Feed your leftovers to animals only if you're willing to eat theirs*" (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 131).

### **Lifestyle and Regional Identity**

The depiction of local food, attire, and material culture provides insights into regional identity. Descriptions of traditional foods like Jawar loaves and the use of brass saucers reflect the cultural specificity of Saurashtra: "*Jawar loaves and brass saucers form an integral part of our culinary practices, symbolizing regional traditions*" (Bhatt, 1993, translated by Meghani, p. 12). This portrayal emphasizes the simplicity and self-sufficiency of the region.

### **Conclusion**

*Samudrantike* offers a nuanced portrayal of cultural dynamics and power relations in Saurashtra. Through the lens of cultural studies theories, the novel reveals how Bhatt's narrative engages with themes of identity, resistance, and socio-economic disparity. The novel's portrayal of cultural representation and identity is closely linked with material culture and local customs, emphasizing how everyday practices and artifacts reinforce regional identity and belonging. Power dynamics are depicted through socio-economic inequalities and institutional hierarchies, revealing how these structures marginalize individual agency and perpetuate existing imbalances, as illustrated by Foucault's concepts of space and power. The theme of resistance and colonial legacies is evident in the depiction of the estate bungalow (Haveli) as a symbol of enduring colonial influence, reflecting the broader critique of historical power structures. Religious practices and cultural rituals, such as those surrounding Goddess Shikotar and the role of the 'Mother,' underscore the significance of religion in maintaining cultural heritage and social cohesion. The novel also contrasts urban and rural lifestyles, highlighting the differences in cultural values and experiences between these settings. Overall, *Samudrantike* provides a nuanced analysis of the cultural and socio-economic realities of Saurashtra, offering insights into the ongoing negotiations of tradition, modernity, and identity within the region.

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