

SEARCH FOR MY TONGUE – SUJATA BHATT

***Sujata Bhatt** – Search for my Tongue*

*This poem is about **Sujata Bhatt** being afraid that she was losing her identity as a Gujarati-speaking Indian. It comes from a time when she was in America studying English, and feared she was being ‘Americanised’, and forgetting her first language (her ‘mother tongue’)*

The content of the poem consists of the poet writes about losing her tongue, by which she means forgetting how to speak her mother tongue because she had always to speak English (‘the foreign tongue’).

Then, however, as she dreams, her mother tongue re-asserts itself as her first language.

She writes first in Gujarati (e.g.), then she gives us the pronunciation of the Gujarati (e.g. ‘munay hutoo’), then she translates it for us (meaning: ‘It grows back’).

The feelings of the poet are at first distress that she is losing her mother tongue.

At first she talks about the two languages as though they were at war, and is fearful the foreign tongue seemed to be winning. She seems to think that the

foreign tongue is winning because she is not using it (she talks about how it will ‘rot and die’) or because she is consciously not using it (‘I thought I had spit it out’).

However, she finishes confidently, reasserting her knowledge of her Indian identity.

You can sense her happiness when she writes:

‘overnight while I dream ... every time I think I’ve forgotten ... it blossoms out of my mouth’.

The allusion to her ‘dreams’ has TWO meanings – one, that she speaks Gujarati literally in her dreams, but also, it is her ‘dream’ (her longing) to speak it always.

The Structure of the poem is that it is written as a single stanza, representing one long coherent assertion to the reader that it is her Gujarati language which is most important to her.

The poem starts in English – because the story starts with her worrying that English is taking over in her life.

But then the entire middle section is Gujarati, a visual assertion that, for her Gujarati is growing back/ re-asserting itself at the centre of her life, and that she is proud of it.

When she writes it phonetically, and then translates it, it is not because English is more important, but simply because she is doing the reader a favour. The result is that the reader reads the story of how Gujarati triumphed over English THREE times!

In her use of language, the poet writes in free verse, so that her poem feels just like a lecture, giving her thoughts as they come out of her head.

She writes in the first person – ‘I’ – to show that this is a personal battle, but also so other readers in the same situation will be able to read it as though it is their personal poem too.

She uses the word ‘tongue’ in three ways, firstly as the physical tongue in her mouth, secondly as her ‘mother tongue’ (her language), but also as a symbol of her personal identity and Indian culture.

The poem consists of an extended metaphor of her language as a plant. At first she is worried that it is going to ‘rot and die’ (that she is forgetting it), but then in lines 30–35: it ‘grows’, ‘shoots’, ‘buds’, ‘blossoms’, representing the poet growing in confidence, remembering Gujarati words, forming them on her lips, and finally speaking them full out fluently in Gujarati.

One a powerful image is of her tongue rotting in her mouth and her ‘spitting it out’, reflecting the horror and disgust she felt at losing her tongue and Indian identity.

The repetition: ‘the bud opens ... the bud opens’ symbolises the unstoppableness of the process, but also her excitement that it is happening and that she is re-finding her Gujarati identity.

The poem reminds me of how, as I have grown older, I too have lost some of the good habits and practices of childhood – and perhaps I ought to return to them!