

#### 4. "Search for my Tongue" by Sujata Bhatt

##### POET

Sujata Bhatt (1956-Present)

Bhatt was born in Gujarat, India, in 1956. In 1968, her family emigrated to America where she studied and lived most of her life. She is an accomplished poet who has received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry. She has translated Gujarati poetry by other writers into English. Much of her own poetry combines both the Gujarati and English languages. In 2013 she became the Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University.

##### BACKGROUND

The extract is part of a longer poem which was inspired by her time studying English in America. She was concerned that her immersion in the English language might mean that she would lose her Indian identity.

Bhatt writes: "I have always thought of myself as an Indian who is outside India...That's the deepest layer of my identity."

##### SUMMARY

The poem voices the poet's anxiety that she is losing her mother tongue – Gujarati. She wonders if by living exclusively in one language, she will find her other voice will rot and die. However, she then dreams in Gujarati. These words are translated in the final section of the extract, where she expresses that her mother tongue cannot be destroyed.

##### ANALYSIS

The title of the poem, "Search for My Tongue", alludes to the colloquial phrase – mother tongue. The expression describes the language a person learns as a baby. It is a metaphor comparing a person's first language with a parent. It also describes the concept of language and communication through the physical embodiment of it – the tongue. Bhatt's title communicates her personal mission to find her true voice, and through that her true identity. Her confusion stems from the fact that she learnt Gujarati as a baby in India, but as a grownup now works and lives in an English-speaking world.

The poem is written in one long stanza. This gives a focus to her words, showing how important this issue is to her. The poem has no fixed rhythm or rhyme scheme; it is in free verse. The poem opens with the sentence, "You ask me what I mean by saying I have lost my tongue." This immediately identifies the speaker of the poem with the poet herself. This is a very personal poem. Moreover, the speaker seems to be engaged in a conversation which has been happening prior to the beginning of the extract. It appears the poet has already said that she feels she has "lost my tongue" and is now going to explain what she means. First, this suggests that her interlocutor, or the person to whom she is speaking, does not understand her. Secondly, this implies that she lives in a world which does not fully appreciate her situation and which requires her to explain herself.

The speaker goes on to turn the question back on to her interlocutor – "I ask you". Indeed the entire poem repeats the pronouns "you" and "your" a number of times. This makes the tone

of the opening of the poem quite confrontational. The speaker of the poem is clearly feeling anxious, distressed and annoyed by the situation. She wants the person with whom she is speaking to understand how she feels. The reader is placed in the position of being the person who is being confronted with the poet's dilemma; we are made to face her problem and appreciate how she must feel.

In order to get this empathy, the poet asks "what would you do if you had two tongues in your mouth". Immediately, she is getting the interlocutor and the reader to imagine what it feels like to be her. This poem tries to create empathy for an experience that few people have; the experience of being bi-lingual or fluent in two languages. The image of "two tongues in your mouth" is striking and unpleasant. It makes the reader appreciate the sense of being too full up with words, almost choking on the languages.

The poet goes on to ask the reader to imagine how they would feel if they "lost the first one, the mother tongue". The use of the phrase "mother tongue" here emphasizes how personal and comforting the language of one's birth is. The idea of losing it seems horrifying. She goes on to explain that not only has she lost her original language, but she can "not really know the other, the foreign tongue". The word "foreign" here emphasizes the fact the poet feels that she does not belong in the English language. This is obviously surprising to the reader who is studying for a GCSE in the Language. It cleverly makes us think about what it would be like to feel these words did not fit with our own identity.

The poet continues in line eight with "You could not use them both together even if you thought that way". Here the poet explains her problem clearly. Having two languages is difficult because you cannot use them simultaneously. She cannot speak in both English and Gujarati at once; that would be gibberish. This reveals that every time she opens her mouth, she is forced to make a choice between her languages; she is made to prioritize one over the other, and she doesn't want to.

In line ten, the poet begins the sentence with "And". This is a conjunction which should be used to connect two parts of a sentence, not to introduce it. Here the word gives a sense of urgency to the poet's voice. She is running through her thoughts anxiously, so every sentence is connected to the next one because it is forming one larger expression of distress.

The poet again appeals to the reader to imagine what it feels like to be her, "And if you lived in a place you had to speak a foreign tongue". The word "if" makes us think about different possibilities for our life; it makes us imagine being in her situation. We are forced to consider how it might feel to live somewhere that you spoke a language you did not learn at birth.

Now the poet begins to develop an unpleasant extended metaphor. She imagines her tongue as a piece of meat in her mouth. She says that if you lived in a language you were not born into "your mother tongue would rot". The metaphor of rotting meat is distasteful. It is made worse by realising that the meat which is rotting is in her mouth and is her own tongue. The horror of this is underlined by her repetition of the word "rot" in line thirteen. She then says that the mother tongue or native language would "die in your mouth". The thought of something dead and decaying in your mouth is revolting. The poet is using our disgust to communicate how strongly she feels.

In line fourteen, the poet explains that with a dead piece of meat in her mouth, she is left with no option but to “spit it out”. This phrase is repeated in the next line to communicate that this is a terrible thing. By living in a different language, the poet’s own mother tongue has died and she has had to reject it. She has very effectively made us feel how awful this would be.

However, the direction of the poem now changes from horror to something mystical and lyrical. The poet says “but overnight while I dream”. Here the poet reveals that even though she thinks the English language may have killed her Gujarati, it comes back in her dreams. The word “dream” has a double meaning here; it is both the moment of imagining when asleep and the idea of a wish or desire. Therefore the poem’s deepest wish – to keep her mother tongue – comes true in her dreams.

Lines seventeen to thirty suddenly change where the reader thought the poem was heading. The lines alternate words in Gujarati and phonetically spelt words which express how to pronounce them out loud. The poet is doing two things here; first, she is showing us that her mother tongue is irrepressible, and secondly, she is inviting the reader, quite literally, to speak with her tongue in their mouth.

This is a celebratory moment – the poet’s mother tongue has come back to her while she sleeps. She also wants to show the reader how much she loves Gujarati by getting us to join in with it. If the reader reads the phonetically spelt words in brackets underneath the Gujarati, then they can make the sounds of the language. We are thereby enabled to speak in a different language and to imagine what it feels like to be bi-lingual. It also makes us realise how lovely the sound of the poet’s native language is; it makes us realise that we would not want to lose it either.

Having enjoyed the sound of the words, without knowing what they mean, the reader is given a translation of them into English. This begins on line thirty one. In stark contrast to the metaphor of the tongue as a piece of rotten meat, the lines describe the tongue as a lovely flower.

The poet writes, “it grows back”. This is a joyful moment of resurrection. It is as though a miracle has happened and the dead tongue has returned to life. She describes the growth of the language as a “stump of a shoot”. Therefore it begins tiny, but soon it “grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins”. The triple repetition of “grows” expresses the pace of the plant maturing. Each time the word “grows” is mentioned, the plant becomes healthier until it is full of blood and alive.

Instead of being a lump of rotting meat, the tongue is described in the extended metaphor as a “bud”. A bud is the closed flower of a plant. It is usually a similar shape to a tongue, so this is a vivid image. The poet continues to describe how the “bud opens in my mouth, it pushes the other tongue aside”. The mother tongue now re-establishes itself and finds a place inside her mouth.

The end of the poem sums up the poet’s realisation that even though she thinks her mother tongue will die because she is immersed in the English language, it always returns to her – “Everytime I think I’ve forgotten”. The final image is beautiful. The poet describes the bud opening in her mouth – “it blossoms”. Blossom is the most lovely part of a tree; it opens in spring time, and usually represents new life, hopefulness and youth. Thus the poet leaves us

with a positive image of a language and cultural identity inside herself which can never been destroyed.

#### POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Poem at Thirty Nine” – provides interesting juxtapositions between the ways the poets assert their identities, sometimes in a context which is unfriendly to them.

“Half caste” – provides excellent links to the poem because it is also about being proud of your identity.

“Remember” – provides useful comparisons because both poems are about a person trying to remember who they are.