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| **A) Summary and structure of the poem** | **B) Key quotations and references from the poem** | | **C) Key techniques and/or vocab to discuss quotes** | **d) Key context / interpretation: some vocabulary and further discussion** | Search For My Tongue |
| **Summary:** Sujata Bhatt crafts an unusually structured and very powerful poem that reflects her isolating experiences as a foreigner, with English as a second language, living in a new country. She is forced to search for her identity and her voice (represented by the metaphorical ‘tongue’) both of which are threatened in a new environment. Bhatt forces the assumed English reader into her own situation and the difficulties she faces trying to communicate in a foreign language whilst retaining her personal identity. The poem contains three types of language: colloquial addressing of the reader in English; Gujarati script with phonetic transcription; and use of extended metaphor. | | | | **Biographical:** Sujata Bhatt was born in 1956 in Ahmedabad, India. During her childhood she mainly spoke an Indian dialect called Gujarati but moved to a culture dominated by the English language when her family emigrated to the USA in 1968. The difficulties experienced by moving between different languages can clearly be seen in this poem. Some would interpret it as a criticism of English as a dominant empirical language that meant other cultures and languages had to compete to be heard and valued, reflecting amongst others, the legacy of white British rule in India. |
| **Part 1:** Bhatt uses a demanding conversational tone as if in response to a previously asked question (1-6) | | *‘You ask me what I mean…lost my tongue’*  *‘I ask you, what would you do if you had two tongues in your mouth…’* | This colloquial /argumentative tone, introduces the theme of frustration and anxiety at having one’s identity threatened through lack of ability to communicate and establishes the tongue as a metaphor for personal identity. |
| **Part 2:** Bhatt goes on to explain her fears of forgetting how to speak her native language and being forced to reject it in favour of English. (10-15) | | *‘Your mother tongue would rot, rot and die in your mouth until you had to “spit it out”.* | The repetition of ‘rot’ and the lexis ‘die’ suggest a traumatic experience and physical degeneration culminating in rejecting something disgusting through the colloquial imperative “spit it out”. | **Interpretation:** Language and structure are literally linked to meaning in this poem with the inclusion of the Gujarati script that renders a non- Gujarati reader silent, ironically communicating how one can become voiceless in a foreign country without the knowledge of the native language. Even if the reader pronounces the phonetic transcription detailed under the script, they are merely making sounds and not communicating, conveying Bhatt’s message that without language one can feel insignificant, invisible and experience loss of personal identity. The fear of losing your roots, or not being heard and having to fight to have your voice listened to is expressed here. However, a vibrant sustained metaphor of the tongue as a naturally regenerating plant presents the reader with Bhatt’s celebration of the strength and resilience of personal identity and the power of the individual to rise up and be heard, however much one is made to feel personally or culturally inferior. The final idea in the poem starting, ‘Everytime I think I’ve forgotten, I think I’ve lost the mother tongue…’ reflects the fact that this insecurity about personal identity linked to our language and ability to be heard is an ongoing one for people who do not have English as a first language. |
| **Part 3**. Bhatt shifts to a visual representation on the page of her native and new languages competing. (19-30) | | *‘but overnight while I dream’*  *Gujarati script*  *(may thoonky nakhi chay)* | The reader hears her foreign tongue through the phonetic transcription. The meaning is the Gujarati translation of the final section in English. It is positioned in the middle section because it is at the centre of the conflict she’s experiencing. |
| **Part 4:** Bhatt describes her native language, the essence of her sense of self- identity regenerating and growing stronger through an extended metaphor of a plant rooting, shooting, growing and flowering. The ending is powerful and celebratory with the surreal image of her tongue as ‘it blossoms out of my mouth’. | | *‘It grows back, a stump of a shoot grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins’.*  *‘It ties the other tongue in knots’.* | Metaphor of her tongue as a plant and the repetition of grows suggests an organic/natural process of regeneration that is not glamorised but inevitable. |
| Playing on the colloquialism ‘tongue tied’, this use of personification describes the mother tongue dominating the foreign tongue, therefore protecting her self-identity. |
| **Partner poems?** | | *‘the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,’* | The use of anaphora emphasises the ‘bud’ and natural regeneration and conveys her sense of awe and wonder at the power of her own spirit to protect her cultural identity. |