Search For My Tongue

SUMMARY

The speaker addresses someone who has just asked her what she means when she says she has lost her "tongue," meaning her language. The speaker asks this person what they would do if they had two different tongues (a figurative way of referring to language that the speaker uses throughout the poem) in their mouth, but then no longer had the first one, their native language, and couldn't ever feel totally at ease with other one, the foreign language. The speaker says that you couldn't use both of these languages at the same time, even if you thought and understood things in two languages at once. What's more, if you lived somewhere where you always had to speak in a foreign language, then your first language (again envisioned as a tongue) would start to decay until it eventually died in your mouth and then you had to spit it out and get rid of it entirely. The speaker says that she thought she had in fact spat out her own tongue (her first language), but something different happens in her dreams.

The speaker then shows what happens at night when she dreams, and speaks in Gujarati, her native language, for seven lines.

The speaker then translates what she has just said in Gujarati into English. She explains that, in her dream, her first language (again depicted as a tongue) grows back. At first it is just a small shoot, like the sprout of a plant. But then it grows longer and becomes stronger, to the point that it can even tie the foreign tongue up in knots. This first tongue is then compared to a budding flowers that blooms inside the speaker's mouth, and in doing so pushes away the foreign tongue. The speaker concludes that each time she thinks she has forgotten or lost the ability to speaker her first language, it blooms like a flower out of her mouth.

THEMES

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND COMMUNICATION

The poem's speaker is someone living in a foreign country who fears forgetting her native language. The poem shows how challenging it is for the speaker to have to speak only in a foreign language, and suggests that in losing her "mother tongue," she would lose part of herself. The poem thus implies that language and identity are closely connected, with the former being essential to the preservation of the latter. It also explores the related anxiety surrounding the struggle to communicate, to express oneself fully, without access to one's native language.

Referring to her native language as her "mother tongue" reflects the fact that this language is an indelible part of who the speaker is; the loss of her language would be a loss of her heritage and sense of self. This, in turn, is why the speaker worries about her native language being "lost" from lack of use in her new home: "If you lived in a place you had to / speak a foreign tongue," the speaker says, "your mother tongue would rot." Like a malnourished plant, the language she grew up with would wither and die until she "had to spit it out"—get rid of it altogether.

At the same time, the speaker struggles to feel comfortable with the dominant language of her new home. She says she "could not really know" this other language, which suggests that no amount of study would make it feel as smooth and natural as the language she grew up speaking. She thus could never fully be herself—never really communicate fluently—using only in this foreign language. Implicitly, then, the poem suggests that the speaker is in danger of losing the ability to express herself altogether.

And yet the poem itself is written in two languages—suggesting that one's native tongue isn't so easily erased after all. The speaker uses English at the beginning, followed by a stanza of Gujarati. That the Gujarati section describes a dream suggests that this is the language in which she thinks and dreams, even if it's not the one she always speaks in; this is the language she uses to essentially communicate with herself, which further establishes the important link between language and self-expression.

The section of Gujarati in the center of the poem also asks the reader to experience a sense of alienation themselves, similar to the alienation the speaker experiences in the culture she now inhabits. If the reader doesn't know Gujarati, they must navigate a stanza of foreign language and experience some part of what it is like to be an outsider and struggle to communicate.

In the subsequent English translation of this stanza, though, the speaker insists that her native tongue keeps growing back, little by little, ultimately "push[ing] the other tongue aside." Turning to her native language seems to have revitalized her, to the point that her mother tongue now "blossoms out of [her] mouth." The joyous end of the poem reaffirms the connection between language, identity, and self-expression, suggesting that by using her native language, the speaker has regained part of herself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

While "Search for My Tongue" establishes a general connection between language and identity, it also explicitly links this to the immigrant experience and the specific tension immigrants like the speaker may feel when trying to adjust to life in a new country without forgetting where they came from. The poem explores how immigrants must often negotiate between two supposedly irreconcilable identities: their own, and that of the dominant culture to which they now belong. The poem shows how that dominant culture can threaten to erode an immigrant's identity, while also reaffirming the enduring power of the speaker's sense of self. In the end, the poem also suggests that immigrants may develop a new, distinct identity that integrates *both* of their cultural experiences.

The speaker's "two tongues" can be understood as representing different aspects of the speaker's identity. These languages—and especially her first language, her "mother tongue"—are inextricably connected to who she is, reflecting where she came from as well as the new culture of which she is a part.

Yet the speaker also highlights the conflict between these two languages. The dominant culture threatens to actively destroy the speaker's original identity; she feels she can't use the new, foreign tongue without implicitly pushing her native language aside. Society, it seems, doesn't want to allow for the nuance of bilingualism or having an identity that cannot be contained within a single cultural experience.

When the speaker says "[y]ou could not use" both languages "together / even if you thought that way," this suggests that even though the speaker thinks and understands the world in *both* English and Gujarati, within the dominant, English-speaking culture she now inhabits, it is not acceptable to speak with both languages. Instead, there is overwhelming social pressure to speak and communicate only in English—to essentially choose one identity over another.

Yet the speaker goes on to say, "but overnight while I dream," and then *does* speak in her native language, Gujarati, throughout the center of the poem. After this stanza, the speaker asserts that her mother tongue "grows back." Through an extended metaphor, she envisions this language growing like a flowering plant that finally "blossoms out of [her] mouth." Implicitly, the poem suggests that just as the speaker can still remember and speak in her native language, this aspect of her identity still lives in her, despite all the pressures and constrictions of the larger society. Like a flowering plant, her native language and identity is vital and alive, and can grow back again and again.

Finally, it is important that the poem doesn't only express the resilience of the speaker's native language. The poem also actively brings together English *and* Gujarati, incorporating both into a new form of expression that can encompass the complex nature of the speaker's identity. The poem thus subtly suggests that despite social pressures to completely assimilate, it is important for immigrants to forge identities and understandings of themselves that include *all* aspects of their experience.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You ask me ...
... in your mouth,

At the start of the poem, the speaker addresses someone (a "you") who has asked her "what [she] mean[s]" when she says she has "lost [her] tongue." The word "tongue" is often used to stand in for language, since people use their tongues and mouths to shape words. Here, the speaker uses the word "tongue" in this way—as a metonym for language itself. What the speaker means here, then, is that she has said she has lost her own language, and someone has asked her what she means by this.

Yet as the poem goes on, the speaker makes this metonym more literal: "I ask you," she says, "what would you do / if you had two tongues in your mouth." In these lines, the speaker asks both the "you" she addresses, as well as the reader, to imagine what it would be like to *literally* have two tongues, and how difficult it would be to speak.

At the level of sound, these lines replicate some of this difficulty: the alliteration of /w/ sounds in "**w**hat **w**ould" and /t/ sounds in "**t**wo **t**ongues" create a kind of tongue twister. At the same time, the assonance in "y**ou**," "t**wo**," and "d**o**" emphasizes the speaker's address to the "you," asking this "you" and the reader to imagine what she describes.

This opening of the poem can be read as establishing its primary conflict, as the speaker describes what it is like to have to live with "two tongues" or two languages. The lines themselves enact this duality in a number of ways. First, the repetition of "tongue" (which appears in its second iteration as "tongues") as well as "you" and "I" calls attention to the fact that the speaker must deal with having "two tongues." It also suggests that there is a kind of gap or misunderstanding between the "you" on the one hand and the "I" on the other, as though the speaker's experience isn't fully seen or understood by the person she addresses.

Additionally, the lines alternate between instances of enjambment ("mean / by"; "do / if") and end-stopped lines. This

alternation builds a kind of tension and back-and-forth into the poem at the outset, implying that the speaker's internal experience, too, is one of tension and inner conflict.

LINES 5-7

and lost the ...
... the foreign tongue.

As the speaker continues, she expands on the image of having two literal tongues in her mouth and describes each one in more detail. The first, she says, is the "mother tongue," the speaker's native language. The use of the word "mother" emphasizes how closely connected this language is to the speaker's identity and sense of self by implying that it bore her. The other tongue, and the other language, the speaker says, is a "foreign tongue" that she "could not really know" since it is unfamiliar and not the language she grew up with.

At this point in the poem, the speaker begins to let the reader know more about her circumstances. The reader can intuit that the speaker is living in a new culture, a foreign country, where a foreign language is spoken. She feels, as a result of living here, that she has "lost" her "mother tongue," her native language—yet she also feels she can't fully "know" or find familiarity in the new language. She is in a sort of limbo that threatens to take away her ability to communicate.

The repetition of the word "tongue" with changing modifiers (as "mother tongue" shifts to "foreign tongue") emphasizes the difference between the two. Additionally, the word "and" repeats anaphorically in these lines, creating polysyndeton as the speaker describes her experience of these "two tongues." This polysyndeton suggests that the speaker has to elaborate to the "you" and the reader, in order to explain the complexity of her experience, and what it truly means to live with these two languages within this context.

While the repetition of "and" conveys the complexity of the speaker's experience, it also conveys the amount of constriction she feels. Although she describes having two languages, the speaker makes clear here that in a way she feels alienated from both—the native language she fears she has lost, and the new, foreign language that she feels she doesn't fully know or identify with. Implicitly, the speaker suggests that as a result of having these "two tongues," neither of which she can fully use, she fears she can't communicate or express herself at all.

LINES 8-11

You could not ...
... a foreign tongue,

In lines 8-11 ("You could not use [...] foreign tongue") the speaker builds on this sense of constriction and her fear that she may lose the ability to communicate altogether. "You could not use them both together," the speaker says, "even if you thought that way." Here, the speaker makes clear that she *does* use both languages, in terms of how she thinks and understands the world. In her head, she suggests, she combines the "foreign tongue" and "the mother tongue." Yet implicitly, in this new culture it is not an option to "use them both together" verbally, and the speaker also asks the reader to imagine the *literal* difficulty of speaking with two physical tongues at the same time.

The speaker then emphasizes another difference between these two languages in her experience, since she now "live[s] in a place" where she has to "speak a foreign tongue." In other words, in this new place where the speaker now lives, she must always speak in the dominant language of this culture. The speaker, the poem implies, faces social pressure to assimilate, to adopt this new language as her *only* language, even though to her it is still "foreign."

Importantly, throughout all of these lines the speaker has continued to address a "you." This "you" can be read as an actual person with whom the speaker has had a conversation, but the direct address also engages the reader, asking them to imagine all of what the speaker describes. The reader might realize, for example, that their own familiar language, their own "mother tongue" might be, to the speaker, a "foreign tongue." By continuing to address this "you," then, the speaker asks the reader to imagine themselves within this situation.

At the same time, the address also continues to emphasize the *difference* between the speaker and the "you," since the speaker has to work so hard to explain and, in a sense, translate her experience to the person she addresses. The insistent repetition of "you," as well as the phrase "foreign tongue," emphasizes this sense of foreignness and alienation.

Interestingly, these lines return to the alternation between enjambment and end-stopped lines that opened the poem. This creates a kind of music and patterning in the poem's rhythms. Yet this alternation also continues to enact the tension the speaker describes. As the poem shifts back and forth from enjambment to moments of end-stops, it conveys, at the level of its rhythm, the speaker's experience of navigating between two languages, and implicitly, two identities—her own, and that of the dominant culture in which she now lives.

LINES 12-16

your mother tongue ...
... while I dream,

In the last five lines of this opening stanza, the speaker describes what she fears will happen to her "mother tongue," her native language, if she continues to be unable to use it in this new culture. Building on lines 14-15, in which she said "And if you lived in a place you had to / speak a foreign tongue," she goes on, "your mother tongue would rot, / rot and die in your mouth / until you had to spit it out."

Here, the literal imagining of "two tongues" becomes vivid and palpable in both its imagery and meaning. The speaker imagines

her "mother tongue"—her native language—like a neglected plant, literally rotting and dying until she has to "spit it out" and abandon it altogether. Implicitly, the speaker suggests that her native language is a living thing. Since she also imagines her native language as a physical part of her body, the poem suggests that the speaker's native language is part of *her* life and vitality. If she loses her native language, if this language "die[s]" and the speaker has to get rid of it forever, the poem implies that she will also lose a crucial part of who she is.

Several elements of sound in these lines emphasize the threat the speaker feels in imagining this. First, the speaker uses asyndeton when describing what could happen to her "mother tongue." She omits conjunctions that might normally link the clauses. Instead, one seems to give way inevitably to the next, speeding up the poem as the reader imagines the deterioration of the speaker's language as a physical thing. Additionally, the repetition of "rot" emphasizes this sense of loss, decay and erosion, and the consonant /t/ sounds in "tongue" and "rot" connect the two words together, making the image even more vivid and frightening.

And it is at this point that the speaker shifts, for the first time, away from the "you," instead speaking only from her own experience, from a first person "I." "I thought I spit it out," the speaker says, meaning that she thought her native language *had* died, and that she already lost it. The phrase "spit it out" repeats here from the preceding line, but is somewhat changed, since now the speaker seems to take greater ownership over what she describes and speaks from her perspective. And in fact, this second iteration shifts to the speaker's *actual* experience, as she suggests that in fact she hasn't lost her native language at all: "but overnight while I dream," she says, suggesting that within the world of her dreams, her native language is still alive. The stanza ends with a comma, not a period, suggesting that the speaker's thoughts move fluently from what she has said here to what follows.

LINES 17-23

munay hutoo kay ...
... modhama pakay chay

In the middle stanza of the poem, the speaker illustrates what does happen when she dreams—she speaks in Gujarati, her native language. In the text of the poem, the speaker includes both the Gujarati script and a transliteration of that script, so that the reader can sound out the words even if they don't know what they mean. And although the reader might not yet understand what the speaker is saying, it is possible to discern rhythms and moments of repetition within the text at this point, for instance when the speaker says "modhama kheelay chay" and then "modhama paya chay." Like the surrounding English, then, this part of the poem is clearly driven by rhythm and repetition—even if the reader can't yet grasp what the speaker is saying.

This stanza is crucially important to the poem's meaning. First, the speaker doesn't only *say* that she can still speak in her native language; she *does* speak in her native language, making it vividly present and alive within the world of the poem. This language, the reader can discern, isn't lost at all, but very much alive in the speaker's dreams, which also implicitly come from the deepest level of her consciousness.

Additionally, for the space of these lines, the speaker no longer translates her experience to the reader. Of course, she might guess that many readers don't know Gujarati, her native language, yet she doesn't explain, at least now, what she is saying. If the reader doesn't know Gujarati, these lines create a moment of inaccessibility, as the reader perceives a language that they can't comprehend or fully understand. In other words, this stanza asks the reader to experience, however briefly, the feeling of being an outsider, as the speaker moves away from a focus on the "you" to her own experience.

Importantly for the poem, this stanza appears in the poem's center, at its heart. This placement suggests that while the rest of the poem is in English, conveying the speaker's experience in that language, this other language is also crucially important to her experience, and in a way, at the center of it. She needs *both* languages to truly express her experience and who she is, the poem implies.

LINES 24-28

it grows back, ...
... other tongue aside.

As the poem moves into its final stanza, the speaker translates what she has just said in Gujarati. She describes, now in English, how her "mother tongue" and native language hasn't died at all. Instead, she uses an extended metaphor of a flowering plant to depict her native language as a living thing that grows back again and again.

This depiction is rich with imagery, as the speaker imagines her native language growing from a small sprout or "stump" into a strong living plant with the "bud" of a flower or blossom that starts to open. That the speaker compares this language to a plant, part of the natural world, suggests that in a way this language is the most "natural" part of her identity, or the way she feels most natural or at home.

As the speaker describes this growth of her native language, she uses asyndeton, each clause in the description leading directly into the next without connecting conjunctions. Interestingly, this asyndeton recalls the asyndeton in the first stanza, when the speaker described this mother tongue rotting and dying. Yet here, the asyndeton has the opposite effect, as it suggests not the inevitable deterioration of this language and the speaker's identity, but rather the resilient, persistent, survival of both. The repetition in these lines, specifically of the word "grows" and the phrase "the bud opens" emphasizes this resilience, suggesting the ongoing growth and strength of the

speaker's identity.

The imagery, too, strongly contrasts with the earlier imagery in the poem, as what was described as something rotting away is now reimagined as a living thing that is in fact strong enough to "ti[e] the other tongue in knots" and "pus[h] the other tongue aside." The dominant language of the new culture, the poem implies, is no longer dominant *within* the speaker, as her own identity and its vitality reemerge.

LINES 29-31

Everytime I think ...
... of my mouth.

In the last lines of the poem, the speaker concludes that she hasn't truly lost her native language—and implicitly, part of herself and her identity—at all. "Everytime I think I've forgotten," the speaker says, "I think I've lost the mother tongue, / it blossoms out of my mouth."

Here, the speaker sustains the extended metaphor of her native language as a flowering plant. She shifts back again to a shorter sentence, more contained syntax; yet here, the containment conveys not a sense of constriction, but the speaker's confidence and authority.

Interestingly, the speaker implies that she has gone through this experience again and again, many times fearing that she has lost her native language, only to find it again as it "blossoms out of [her] mouth" as though of its own accord. The repetition of "I think" emphasizes that the speaker has experienced this fear many times, while also highlighting the difference between what she thinks—and fears—and what is actually the case. At the same time, the shift from the image of a "bud" to a complete "blossom" reinforces the truth of the speaker's conclusion. This final image shows the native language, and this part of the speaker's identity, as fully alive and also beautiful and unconstrained.

Interestingly, this ending of the poem emphasizes a new way the speaker now relates to her native language. Before, she described it simply as an additional "tongue," something awkward, difficult to navigate in this new culture. Now, she understands it in terms of something that is alive, something that is a part of her—but that also, in a certain sense, lives *within* her, that can "blossom" out of her almost unexpectedly. It is as though, in reconnecting to her native language, the speaker has reconnected to not only what is most *familiar* in her identity and herself, but also to something mysterious within her consciousness, a level of connection to culture, history, and the natural world that can't be severed or undone.

SYMBOLS

THE DREAM

The dream in the poem reflects the speaker's ultimately unshakable connection to her native language. It can be thought of as a manifestation of her truest self.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker says, "but overnight while I dream," and then goes on to speak in Gujarati. The speaker implies, then, that the native language she fears she has lost isn't lost at all. On the contrary, it comes to life again while she is dreaming, and in her dreams she fluently speaks that "mother tongue."

Dreams are understood to come from the deepest levels of someone's consciousness. As such, they often symbolize the unconscious or subconscious levels of a person's thoughts. The fact that the speaker dreams in Gujarati, then, implies that this language lives at a deep level of her consciousness and her existence. Something so deeply connected to her identity, the poem suggests, can't truly be lost.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "but overnight while I dream,"

THE BUD AND BLOSSOM

In the last section of the poem, the speaker describes how her native language reemerges like a flowering plant. First, the speaker says that the language grows stronger, and then compares it to a "bud" of a flower that begins to open. Finally, the speaker concludes that every time she fears she has lost her native language, it "blossoms out of [her] mouth."

Flowers, and especially the new buds of flowers, symbolize new life, and the reemergence of life after a period of dormancy. The image of the flowering plant, then, is highly symbolic in the poem. These images of buds and blossoms suggest that the speaker's native language has never truly died at all. Instead, it might go dormant during periods of time, like a plant in winter. But implicitly, it will always come back and flower again.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,"
- **Line 31:** "it blossoms out of my mouth."

POETIC DEVICES

METONYMY

A metonym is a figure of speech in which a part of something

stands in for the whole. Since people use their mouths and tongues to shape words, languages are also sometime metonymically called "tongues." In "Search for My Tongue," the speaker of the poem makes use of this metonym, referring to both her native language and the new, foreign language she must now use as "tongues." (Technically this could also be interpreted as the related device known as synecdoche, if readers take the tongue as being something closely *associated* with language rather than a *part* of it.)

Interestingly, the speaker makes this metonym literal; she describes her "two tongues" as though the languages are two *literal* tongues. She also asks the reader to imagine what it would be like "if you had two tongues in your mouth," emphasizing the difficulty of navigating between these two languages.

This metonym makes clear that the languages are inextricably connected to the speaker. Since she describes them—and especially her "mother tongue," her native language—as part of her body, the poem implies that in losing her native language, the speaker would lose a crucial part of herself. The metonym also makes the imagined loss of the speaker's native language intensely vivid and palpable, as the speaker imagines this "tongue" literally dying in her mouth. Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker describes her native language reemerging as a literal, physical part of her being, emphasizing the power and resilience of her identity and sense of self.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I have lost my tongue."
- **Lines 3-4:** "what would you do / if you had two tongues in your mouth,"
- **Line 5:** "the mother tongue,"
- **Line 7:** "the foreign tongue."
- **Line 12:** "mother tongue"
- **Line 26:** "it ties the other tongue in knots,"
- **Line 28:** "it pushes the other tongue aside."
- **Line 30:** "mother tongue,"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

While the speaker describes her two languages metonymically as "tongues," she also uses an extended metaphor to describe her "mother tongue," her native language. At the end of the first stanza, the speaker describes her fear that her native language has "rot[ted] and die[d]" until she had to "spit it out." This suggests that the speaker's native language is a living thing, like a plant that has been neglected until it withers and rots away.

Later in the poem, the speaker makes this metaphor even more vivid and specific. She describes her native language no longer dying away, but instead growing back. Through the extended metaphor of a flowering plant, the speaker describes the reemergence of her mother tongue as a kind of new growth of a flower that emerges after the winter. It grows stronger, and eventually the bud of a flower opens, until the language "blossoms out of [her] mouth."

This metaphor makes the reemergence of the speaker's native language immediate and palpable. It suggests that for the speaker, her native language is not just a means of communication, but a fundamental part of her life, vitality, and creativity. When she returns to her native language, the metaphor suggests that she also returns to what is most natural and vital within herself.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "your mother tongue would rot, / rot and die in your mouth / until you had to spit it out."
- **Lines 24-28:** "it grows back, a stump of a shoot / grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins, / it ties the other tongue in knots, / the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth, / it pushes the other tongue aside."
- **Line 31:** "it blossoms out of my mouth."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears several times in "Search for My Tongue," creating both music and meaning. For example, in the first stanza, when the speaker describes the difficulty of living with "two tongues," or two languages, alliteration works to emphasize this difficulty. The /w/ sounds in "**w**hat **w**ould" and the /t/ sounds in "**t**wo **t**ongues" make the speaker's question "**w**hat **w**ould you do / if you had **t**wo **t**ongues in your mouth" sound almost like a tongue twister; the alliterative sound clusters ask the reader to not only *imagine* but also *experience* some part of the struggle the speaker describes. Additionally, the alliterative /m/ sounds in "**m**other" and "**m**outh" make clear that what the speaker fears losing with her native language is also a crucial part of her heritage.

Later in the poem, alliteration appears again to a different effect. When the speaker describes her native language growing back like a plant, /st/ sounds connect the words "**st**ump" and "**st**rong," emphasizing the inevitable growth of the plant—and by extension, the speaker's native language.

Then, alliterative /t/ sounds appear in the speaker's description of how her native tongue can now "**t**i[e] the other **t**ongue in knots." Here, the alliteration of /t/ sounds recalls the alliteration of "**t**wo **t**ongues" at the start of the poem. But now, it is clear that the speaker relates differently to both her languages; she no longer fears losing her native language and can relate to the new language in an empowered way. Finally, alliteration appears in the speaker's description of "**m**y **m**outh." These alliterative /m/ sounds emphasize the speaker's sense of renewed authority in her own body, language, and identity.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "what would"
- **Line 4:** "two tongues"
- **Line 12:** "mother"
- **Line 13:** "mouth"
- **Line 24:** "stump"
- **Line 25:** "strong"
- **Line 26:** "ties," "tongue"
- **Line 27:** "my mouth"
- **Line 30:** "mother"
- **Line 31:** "my mouth"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Search for My Tongue," connecting words together and creating layers of meaning. For example, the opening stanza contains clusters of /t/, /s/, and /r/ sounds. In lines 4-5, consonant /t/ and /s/ sounds connect "two tongues," "lost," and "first," while at the end of the stanza, /t/, /s/, and /r/ sounds appear in "mother," "tongue," "rot," "spit" and "out."

In these lines, the sharp /t/ sounds emphasize the importance of the speaker's "tongues." Meanwhile, the /st/ sounds in "lost and "first" connect these two words, suggesting that what the speaker has lost is not only this language but what is "first" or original within herself. Meanwhile, the more muted /t/ sounds at the end of "rot," "spit," and "out" again create a threatening sense of finality, as though the speaker *has* lost this language and part of herself once and for all.

At the end of the poem, sibilant /s/ and related /z/ sounds appear throughout the speaker's description of her "mother tongue" reemerging. These sounds connect the image of the tongue like a small "stump" of a plant to all of its stages of growth, as it "grows longer" and "grows strong veins." These sounds can be tracked as the "bud" of this plant, or language "opens" and even as it is strong enough to push the foreign language "aside." As one image links sonically to the next, the poem suggests that the speaker's language will always, inevitably, come back, even when she fears she has lost it. Additionally, since sibilant sounds are sounds *made* with the tongue, the poem implies that in a sense the speaker has nurtured the reemergence of this native language by returning to it and seeking it out again and again.

Finally, the consonant /m/ sounds in the poem's last two lines create a similar effect. Note the many /m/ sounds that echo here:

> I think I've lost the mother tongue,
> it blossoms out of my mouth.

Combined with the repetition of /s/ and assonant /aw/ sounds (as in "lost" and "blossoms"), these final lines feel quite musical, packed with poetry and lyricism as the speaker reasserts her language and sense of self.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lost," "tongue"
- **Line 3:** "what would"
- **Line 4:** "two tongues"
- **Line 5:** " lost," " first," "tongue"
- **Line 12:** "mother," "tongue," "rot"
- **Line 13:** "rot," "mouth"
- **Line 14:** "spit," "it," "out."
- **Line 15:** "thought," "spit," "it," "out"
- **Line 24:** "grows," "stump"
- **Line 25:** "grows," "grows," "moist," "grows," "strong," "veins,"
- **Line 26:** "ties," "tongue," "knots"
- **Line 27:** "opens," "opens," "my mouth"
- **Line 28:** "aside"
- **Line 30:** "mother"
- **Line 31:** "blossoms," "my mouth"

ASSONANCE

"Search for My Tongue" uses assonance in much the same way it uses alliteration and consonance, creating moments of music and emphasis throughout the poem. For example, in the opening stanza, the speaker asks the reader to imagine "what would you do / if you had two tongues in your mouth." Here, the consonant sounds of "you," "do," and "two" emphasize the speaker's direction to the reader and the "you," creating a level of urgency in the poem.

Then, at the end of the stanza, /ow/ sounds connect the words "mouth" and "out." Here, the assonance sounds emphasize that what the speaker fears she has lost is part of her own mouth, her own physical being.

Assonance also occurs in the /uh/ sounds of "mother," "other," and "tongue," in both the first and third stanza of the poem. These instances of assonance connect these words, implying that the speaker's "mother" language and culture is inextricably connected to her "tongue"—her language but also her means of communication and self-expression. This assonance makes clear that if the speaker loses her native language, she will also lose much more, including a sense of heritage. At the same time, the word "mother" juxtaposes with its rhyme word, "other," highlighting the difference between the speaker's native language and the "other" language, while also showing that she must navigate both at once.

In other moments, assonance simply makes the poem sound more musical. In line 16, for example, the long /i/ sounds of "overnight while I" subtly elevates the phrase, preparing the reader for the dream to come. Assonance again turns up on the volume on the final lines of the poem. Notice the long /i/ sounds that repeat thickly in lines 28-29:

[...] aside.
Everytime I think I've forgotten,

Also note the /aw/ and /ow/ sounds of lines 30-31:

I think I've lost the mother tongue,
it blossoms out of my mouth.

Altogether, these final lines are filled with self-assured rhythm, reflecting the fact that the speaker has once again found her voice.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "you do"
- **Line 4:** "you," " two"
- **Line 5:** "one," "mother tongue"
- **Line 6:** "other"
- **Line 12:** "mother tongue"
- **Line 13:** "mouth"
- **Line 14:** "spit it," "out"
- **Line 15:** "spit it," "out"
- **Line 16:** "overnight while I"
- **Line 26:** "other tongue"
- **Line 27:** "bud," "bud"
- **Line 28:** "other tongue," "aside"
- **Line 29:** "Everytime I," "I've"
- **Line 30:** "lost," "mother tongue"
- **Line 31:** "blossoms," "out," "mouth"

IMAGERY

Imagery plays an important role in "Search for My Tongue," as the speaker depicts her native language in vivid ways. First, the speaker imagines her "mother tongue [...] rot[ting]" and dying in her mouth, until she would have to "spit it out." This imagery makes the sense of threat in the poem immediate and frightening. It suggests that for the speaker, her native language is a living thing and a crucial part of herself, and that the loss of it would be terrible to experience.

Later, the speaker also uses vivid imagery when she describes her native language, and "mother tongue" reemerging like a plant. When the speaker describes this plant growing from a "stump" into something with "strong veins," the reader can imagine this imagery both within the context of a plant and a literal tongue. The imagery, then, makes the extended metaphor of the poem feel real and immediate, as though the tongue (and the language it represents) isn't only *likened* to a plant; it *is* in a sense a plant, a living thing with its own vitality and urge to grow.

Finally, the image of the speaker's native language flowering and "blossom[ing]" out of her mouth emphasizes the beauty and resilience of this aspect of the speaker's identity.

Interestingly, this last image appears in the form of a verb, as the speaker says that her native language "blossoms." This image, then, can be read as ongoing, continuous, implying that the speaker's language will "blossom" again and again.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "if you had two tongues in your mouth,"
- **Lines 12-14:** "your mother tongue would rot, / rot and die in your mouth / until you had to spit it out."
- **Lines 24-28:** "it grows back, a stump of a shoot / grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins, / it ties the other tongue in knots, / the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth, / it pushes the other tongue aside."
- **Line 31:** "it blossoms out of my mouth."

ENJAMBMENT

"Search for My Tongue" shifts between enjambment and end-stopped lines. In the first stanza, for example, the first and third lines end with moments of enjambment:

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue.

And then:

I ask you, what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,

In these instances, enjambment propels the reader over the line ending, before the reader must pause again at the end-stopped line that follows. Through its pacing, then, the poem enacts what the speaker describes. Its back-and-forth movement asks the reader to navigate between two different experiences of language on the page, just as the speaker must navigate between two different languages and aspects of her identity.

A notable instance of enjambment also occurs later in this stanza, when the speaker says ask the reader to imagine, "And if you lived in a place you had to / speak a foreign tongue." Here, the enjambment is particularly hard, since the line ending splits the infinitive "to speak." This enjambment, then, creates a kind of disruption that matches the poem's meaning, as the speaker recounts what it is like to feel disconnected from herself and her own native language in this new culture.

Without knowing Gujarati, it is difficult to tell whether the lines in the second stanza are enjambed, but the reader can note that the lines appear without punctuation. In this case, though, the absence of punctuation works to create a sense of fluidity, as the speaker speaks freely and fluently in her native language.

Finally, in the last stanza, enjambment appears in a notable way at the end of the stanza's opening line, when the speaker says,

"it grows back, a stump of a shoot / grows longer." Here, the enjambment divides the subject ("shoot") from its verb ("grows"). In this case, though, rather than conveying disruption or alienation, the enjambment helps to convey the sense of the speaker's native language growing back inevitably and quickly, overcoming the constraints of the line endings and of social pressures to assimilate. The enjambment in this moment, then, creates a different effect than those moments of enjambment at the beginning of the poem. Here, the enjambment shows the energy and resilience of the speaker's native language as it reemerges.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "mean / by"
- **Lines 3-4:** "do / if"
- **Lines 8-9:** "together / even"
- **Lines 10-11:** "to / speak"
- **Lines 13-14:** "mouth / until"
- **Lines 15-16:** "out / but"
- **Lines 24-25:** "shoot / grows"

END-STOPPED LINE

Alongside its moments of enjambment, "Search for My Tongue" also contains numerous end-stopped lines. These include lines that end at the end of a clause, lines that end with a comma, and lines that end with a period, coinciding with the end of a sentence.

These end-stopped lines work in tension with the moments of enjambment in the poem. As the reader must shift back and forth between moments of enjambment, and pausing at the end of the end-stopped lines, the poem creates, in its rhythm, a sense of inner conflict similar to the one the speaker describes. The poem's pacing, then, helps to create its meaning; it asks the reader to inhabit, to some degree, the speaker's own experience of duality, of being torn between two identities.

Notably, the first stanza also contains several instances of full-stopped lines—end-stopped lines that end with a period. These instances reinforce the sense of finality the speaker describes, suggesting that perhaps she really has lost her native language once and for all, and implying that such a loss would be permanent.

Interestingly, in the poem's last stanza, end-stopped lines create a different effect. Here, as the speaker describes her native language growing back and reemerging, the line endings help the reader make sense of everything that's happening; they insert a sense of order and control. Here, the end-stopped lines imbue what the speaker says with authority and confidence, linking each line to the next.

It is important, finally, to note that both of the first two stanzas are end-stopped, but not full stopped. The first stanza ends with a comma, implying that it moves organically into the Gujarati section that follows. The Gujarati stanza presumably ends at the end of the Gujarati phrase that closes it, but here, too, the absence of punctuation suggests that it leads inevitably into the poem's closing stanza. These transitions are important, suggesting that the two aspects of the speaker's identity and language are not as mutually exclusive or separate as they might initially appear. Instead, the poem's form brings them together, showing that it is possible for the speaker to form an identity inclusive of all aspects of her experience.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "tongue."
- **Line 4:** "mouth,"
- **Line 5:** "tongue,"
- **Line 6:** "other,"
- **Line 7:** "tongue."
- **Line 9:** "way."
- **Line 11:** "tongue,"
- **Line 12:** "rot,"
- **Line 14:** "out."
- **Line 16:** "dream,"
- **Line 23:** "chay"
- **Line 25:** "veins,"
- **Line 26:** "knots,"
- **Line 27:** "mouth,"
- **Line 28:** "aside."
- **Line 29:** "forgotten,"
- **Line 30:** "tongue,"
- **Line 31:** "mouth."

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora a few times in the poem, first by repeating the word "and" at the start of successive clauses in the opening stanza. This creates a sensation of things piling up, as the speaker makes clear to the reader that she must always negotiate some kind of "and"—her native language *and* the foreign language of this new country; her own identity *and* that of the culture in which she now lives. As the instances of "and" accumulate, they convey the complexity of the speaker's experience and her sense of struggle. By the end of the first stanza, it seems as though what the speaker describes is overwhelming and even impossible to negotiate.

Importantly, then, when the speaker says, "*but* overnight when I dream," the reader experiences a kind of turn along with the speaker. As the repeating conjunction "and" shifts to "but," the poem shows that there is another side to the speaker's experience, one of inner clarity, connection, and directness. This experience is then enacted in the rest of the poem, as the speaker drops her use of "and" and describes the reemergence of her native language and sense of self.

Later, the speaker uses anaphora in lines 24-25 with the repetition of the word "grow":

it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,

Once again, this adds a sense of emphasis to the speaker's words. She says that her language keeps expanding, getting bigger and stronger, and insistently repeating the words "grows" adds confidence and authority to this declaration.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "and lost the first one"
- **Line 6:** "and could not really know the other,"
- **Line 10:** "And if you lived"
- **Line 24:** "it grows back"
- **Line 25:** "grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears in two key moments of "Search for My Tongue." At the end of the first stanza, the speaker uses asyndeton when she describes her fear of losing her native language: "And if you lived in a place you had to / speak a foreign tongue," she says, "your mother tongue would rot, / rot and die in your mouth / until you had to spit it out."

Here, the speaker omits the conjunction "and" between "your mother tongue would rot" and "rot and die in your mouth." Instead, one clause leads to the next, as though inevitably, implying that the speaker will inevitably experience this kind of loss of language and identity through living in this new culture.

However, the speaker goes on to reply to this fear at the end of the poem, when she shows how her native language isn't lost at all. Here, the speaker uses asyndeton as she describes the reemergence of this language through the metaphor of a flowering plant:

it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,
it ties the other tongue in knots,
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,
it pushes the other tongue aside.

Notably, asyndeton occurs not only once, here, but *throughout* this description. The speaker omits numerous conjunctions as she links one image directly to the next, showing not the inevitability of loss, but rather the strength, vitality, and persistence of her sense of self, language, and identity. This later asyndeton, then, can be understood as replying to the first moment of asyndeton in the poem, showing that the speaker's native language and her identity are stronger than any pressures of assimilation she might face.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "your mother tongue would rot, / rot and die in your mouth"
- **Lines 24-30:** "it grows back, a stump of a shoot / grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins, / it ties the other tongue in knots, / the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth, / it pushes the other tongue aside. / Everytime I think I've forgotten, / I think I've lost the mother tongue,"

REPETITION

Repetition is a crucial part of "Search for My Tongue." In addition to the previously discussed anaphora, the speaker repeats numerous words and phrase throughout the poem, including "you," "lost," "tongue," "mouth," "mother," "foreign," "rot," "spit it out," "grows," and "the bud opens." The Gujarati section of the poem, too, contains sound echoes and instances of repetition, as in the lines "may thoonky nakhi chay," "modhama kheelay chay," and "modhama pakay chay."

This repetition creates emphasis in the poem, highlighting key elements of the speaker's struggle: the struggle with language and between two "tongues"; the struggle between the "you" of the new culture and her own identity; and the struggle between a sense of loss and a sense of new life and growth at the poem's end.

Additionally, the poem's repetition sometimes works to emphasize *differences*. For example, when the speaker repeats the word "tongue" (through diacope) with changing modifiers, shifting from "mother tongue," to "foreign tongue," the repeating word ("tongue") highlights the difference between these two languages in the speaker's experience—one is familiar and deeply connected to where she comes from, while the other is unfamiliar, even strange.

Similarly, when the speaker repeats the phrase "the bud opens" in the last stanza (a moment of epizeuxis), describing the reemergence of her native language, this repeated phrase recalls the *earlier* repeated phrase in the poem, when the speaker described her fear that she had lost her native language once and for all, and had to "spit it out." In this case, the speaker's repetition recalls her *earlier* repetition, and emphasizes the difference between the two.

Interestingly, the poem also creates meaning when it *diverges* from the patterns of repetition that have driven much of it. At the very end of the poem, the speaker concludes, "Everytime I think I've forgotten, / I think I've lost the mother tongue, / it blossoms out of my mouth." Here, the phrase "I think" repeats, emphasizing that what the speaker fears is different from what is actually the case. At the same time, though, these closing lines seem to move into new territory, as they bring together a variety of sounds, and the "bud" repeated earlier transforms into a "blossom." Implicitly, the poem suggests that despite its own patterns, it is also possible for something new to emerge,

for the speaker to gain a *new* sense of self that isn't only governed by the terms of the larger society with which the poem began.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You ask me"
- **Line 2:** "I have lost my tongue"
- **Line 3:** "I ask you," "you"
- **Line 4:** "you," "tongues," "your mouth"
- **Line 5:** "lost," "the mother tongue"
- **Line 7:** "the foreign tongue"
- **Line 11:** "foreign tongue"
- **Line 12:** "mother tongue"
- **Lines 12-13:** "rot, / rot"
- **Line 13:** "your mouth"
- **Lines 14-15:** "until you had to spit it out. / I thought I spit it out"
- **Line 17:** "jeebh," "bhasha"
- **Line 18:** "chay"
- **Line 19:** "mari bhasha," "chay"
- **Line 20:** "jaim," "mari bhasha," "jeebh"
- **Line 21:** "modhama," "chay"
- **Line 22:** "jaim," "mari bhasha mari," "jeebh"
- **Line 23:** "modhama," "chay"
- **Line 24:** "it grows back"
- **Line 25:** "grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins"
- **Line 26:** "the other tongue"
- **Line 27:** "the bud opens, the bud opens," "my mouth"
- **Line 28:** "the other tongue"
- **Lines 29-30:** " I think I've forgotten, / I think I've lost the mother tongue"
- **Line 31:** "my mouth"

VOCABULARY

Tongue (Line 2, Line 4, Line 5, Line 7, Line 11, Line 12, Line 26, Line 28, Line 30) - In addition to being a physical part of someone's body, the word "tongue" can also refer to a language. In "Search for My Tongue," the speaker uses the word in both ways. When she talks about her "mother tongue" she refers to her native language. Yet she also asks the reader to imagine what it would be like to have two literal tongues and have to navigate both of these tongues, and the languages they represent, at the same time.

Foreign (Line 7, Line 11) - If something is "foreign," this means that it belongs to a country or culture that is not one's own. The word can also refer to something being unfamiliar and strange. Both meanings are relevant in the poem, as the speaker describes what it is like to have to speak the language of a different country and a different culture, and to find this language unfamiliar.

The Gujarati Section (Lines 17-23) - In the middle stanza of the poem, the speaker speaks in Gujarati, her native language. In the original text of the poem, this appears as both Gujarati script and the transliteration of the script, so that the reader can sound out the words. This stanza is then translated into English in the last stanza of the poem.

Shoot (Line 24) - A "shoot," as a noun, refers to the new life or growth that a plant sends out as it is beginning to grow. These first "shoots" are often slight and not very strong, but can get stronger over time.

Stump (Line 24) - A "stump" often refers to the part of a tree left in the ground after the tree has been cut down. A stump can also, though, be the very beginning of a new plant.

Bud (Line 27) - A bud is a new growth on a plant that, at first closed, will open into a leaf or flower.

Blossoms (Line 31) - A "blossom" is a bloom or flower. In the poem, however, the speaker uses the verb form of the word; she says that her native language "blossoms" out of her mouth. This means that her native language emerges like a flower opening completely.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Search for My Tongue" does not follow a fixed or traditional form. Instead, the poem creates its own form that is important to its meaning.

The poem is written in three stanzas. The first and third stanzas are written in English, while the middle stanza is written in Gujarati, the speaker's native language. This structure suggests that for the speaker, Gujarati is, in a sense, at the center of her identity. Connecting with this language and this aspect of herself is essential, the poem suggests, and since the Gujarati section of the poem describes the speaker's dreams, the poem also implies that this language lives in a deep part of the speaker's consciousness.

Importantly, the last stanza is actually a *translation* of this Gujarati; the speaker translates what she has just said into English. The poem shows, then, that while Gujarati is an essential part of the speaker and who she is, the English language is also now part of who she is, and she can use *both* languages, together, to fully express her experience.

Finally, it is notable that the first stanza ends with a comma, and the second stanza ends without punctuation; each, then, leads fluidly into the next. This suggests that these two aspects of the speaker's experience and identity are not as disparate or mutually exclusive as they might initially seem. Instead, the poem's form suggests that the speaker can bring these elements of her experience together, into an integrated, complex whole.

METER

As a free verse poem, like many contemporary poems, "Search for My Tongue" does not use a fixed meter. Instead, the poem sounds spoken and even colloquial. From the beginning, when the speaker addresses a "you," to the middle of the poem, when she speaks in Gujarati, the speaker seems to be addressing the reader—and herself—as though in conversation.

Since the poem itself is *about* communication and self-expression, these qualities are important to its meaning. Just as the speaker celebrates her native language reemerging organically, like a flowering plant, the poem itself seems to emerge organically from the speaker's communication about her experience, suggesting that the speaker values an experience of language that is natural, immediate, and direct.

RHYME SCHEME

"Search for My Tongue" is a free verse poem that has no fixed rhyme scheme. However, the poem does contain patterns of sound and meaning throughout.

For example, in the opening stanza, the assonant sounds of "you," "do," and "two" emphasize the speaker's address to the person she is addressing and ask the reader, too, to imagine themselves within her situation. Later in this stanza, the consonant /t/ sounds in "rot," "spit," "it," and "out" convey the violent finality the speaker fears experiencing with the loss of her native language. Instead of rhyme, then, the poem uses other kinds of sound echoes to connect words together and create music and meaning.

SPEAKER

Several aspects of "Search for My Tongue" suggest that the speaker is someone living in a new country, who must now use a new foreign language and fears losing her native language as a result. The speaker asks the reader to imagine, for example, what it is like to "liv[e] in a place" where "you had to / speak a foreign tongue." These lines imply that the speaker is an immigrant facing pressure to assimilate to a new culture and adopt its dominant language. As a result, the speaker fears that her "mother tongue" will "rot" and that she will lose it altogether. In the middle of the poem, the speaker then *does* speak in her native language, showing that in fact this language isn't lost at all; she is bilingual and both aspects of her identity are alive within the poem.

While the speaker of the poem remains unnamed and ungendered, the poem can be read as in the voice of the poet, Sujata Bhatt. Bhatt was born in India but immigrated to the United States with her family when she was 12. Her native language, like that of the speaker in the poem, is Gujarati. And Bhatt has remarked that the Gujarati language and her childhood in India is "the deepest layer of [her] identity."

At the same time, the open-ended quality of the poem and of the speaker's identity is important to its meaning. While the poem specifically invokes Gujarati, a language from the state of Gujarat in India, many other immigrants and people of mixed ancestry might find some aspect of their experience reflected in the dynamics of language, identity, and culture the speaker describes.

SETTING

While the setting of "Search for My Tongue" remains unspecified, the speaker suggests that she is living in a new, foreign culture—implicitly an English-speaking culture such as the United States or the United Kingdom. The setting isn't physically described, but its pressures on the speaker are evident, as she mentions, for instance, *thinking* in both languages (English and Gujarati) but not being able to *speak* in both of these languages at the same time. Implicitly, the culture where the speaker now lives demands that she assimilate in both identity and language and speak *only* in English, the dominant language of this society.

At another level of the poem, the setting can be understood as that of the speaker's consciousness. Within this "setting," the speaker is able to free herself from the constrictions of the larger, social setting. She can dream in Gujarati, and experience the reemergence of her native language like a flowering plant in a natural landscape. This setting of the speaker's inner world, in contrast to the threatening, deadening effect of the larger culture she describes, is vibrant and vividly alive.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Search for My Tongue" was included in Sujata Bhatt's first collection of poems, *Brunizem*, first published in 1988. The collection's title refers to a type of dark soil or earth that can be found in North America as well as Asia (including India) and Europe; the title, then, alludes to the creative "earth," or source, of Bhatt's poems, which draw on a range of cultural influences and languages, including Bhatt's childhood in India and her experiences immigrating to the United States. Bhatt moved to Germany shortly after *Brunizem* was published and lives there now with her husband and daughter.

"Search for My Tongue," and other of Bhatt's poems that incorporate different languages, can be understood through the lens of bilingual poetry. In bilingual literature, writers bring together different languages into a single work in order to convey experiences of language, culture and identity that can't be expressed in a monolingual way.

A more recent term that could also be applied to Bhatt's work is

that of translingual writing and poetry. Translingual poetry attempts to displace the centrality of English as the presumed, dominant mode of writing; it creates room for different languages and modes of expression. In "Search for My Tongue," it is clear that *both* English and Gujarati are centrally important to the speaker's experience and to her identity. Both, then, are necessary for the poem's meaning.

As a poem, "Search for My Tongue" has reached many readers who can relate to the speaker's depictions of her multicultural experience and the pressures of assimilation. The poem is taught in British schools as part of the AQA (Assessments and Qualifications Alliance) anthology, and in 1994, the poem was choreographed by Daksha Sheth. The UK-based South Asian Dance Youth Company performed the poem with Sheth's choreography, under the title "Tongues Untied," in nine cities across the UK.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A key part of the historical context of "Search for My Tongue" begins long before the poem was published in 1988. The poet, Sujata Bhatt, was born in India, which had been a British colony until 1947. The legacy of colonialism in India means that English is still a dominant language, particularly in education, and Bhatt attended an English school while a child in India. Even though she was in her own country, then, and her native language was Gujarati, she already navigated two languages—a colonial language, and her own "mother tongue."

In "Search for My Tongue," too, it is clear that the speaker doesn't only negotiate *between* two languages; one language, the "foreign tongue," is dominant, and essentially oppressive to the speaker's native language. This dynamic of power in language, culture, and identity, is crucially important to the poem, as the speaker eventually resists the pressures of assimilation to claim her own native language and all aspects of her identity.

More immediately to the time the poem was published, the 1980s were the era of the Reagan administration in the U.S. and the Thatcher administration in the UK, a period of intense conservatism and anti-immigrant policies. States in the U.S. began to establish English-only laws during this decade, making it illegal for people to speak a language other than English. When the speaker of the poem says, then, that she lives in a place where she "ha[s] to / speak a foreign tongue," she invokes real pressures of xenophobia and assimilation that are also acutely present today.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Interview with Sujata Bhatt — Read this interview with Sujata Bhatt to learn more about why she values poetry and how different cultures influence her work. The interview includes an audio and video clip in which Bhatt discusses the importance of poetry to her. (https://poetryarchive.org/interviews/interview-sujata-bhatt/)
- Sujata Bhatt on the Blending of Languages in Poetry — Watch this short video to see Sujata Bhatt discuss why she writes poetry in English, as well as why in some poems, including "Search for My Tongue," she combines English and Gujarati, her native language. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8tUC_tRcM0)
- "Search for My Tongue" Recited by Fatima Djalalova — Watch this clip from a 2019 Ted Talk to hear 11th-grader Fatima Djalalova from Uzbekistan recite Bhatt's poem and discuss what it means to her. Djalalova is a native speaker of Russian and Uzbek, and a student in an international school where English is the dominant language. In this clip, she explores the connection between language and identity and talks about the importance of linguistic diversity. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BnKF8OD7C8)
- Biography of Sujata Bhatt — Read more about Sujata Bhatt's life and work in this article from the British Council. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/sujata-bhatt)
- Audio of Poems from Brunizem — Listen to Sujata Bhatt read a number of poems from her first collection, Brunizem, in which "Search for My Tongue" first appeared. Like "Search for My Tongue," many of the poems in this collection draw on different cultural influences and linguistic traditions. (https://voetica.com/voetica.php?collection=17&poet=900)

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