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Navigating the Hyphen: Diaspora and Identity in the Poetry of Sujata Bhatt and Marlene Nourbese Philip

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex and nuanced ways in which diaspora, displacement, and the search for identity are articulated in the poetry of Sujata Bhatt and Marlene Nourbese Philip. Though originating from distinct geographical and cultural contexts—Bhatt from India and Philip from Tobago—both poets grapple with the fragmented selfhood inherent in the diasporic experience. By analyzing selected poems from their respective oeuvres published up to 2017, this study explores how Bhatt and Philip utilize language, form, and imagery to navigate the complexities of belonging, alienation, and the reclamation of voice in a postcolonial world. Their poetic journeys, though unique, converge in their exploration of the hyphenated existence, the negotiation of multiple cultural landscapes, and the enduring impact of historical trauma on individual and collective identity.

Introduction

The concept of diaspora, encompassing displacement, migration, and the formation of transnational communities, has become a defining feature of the contemporary world.¹ For poets, the diasporic experience offers a fertile ground for exploring themes of identity, belonging, and the complexities of navigating between cultures.² This paper focuses on two such poets, Sujata Bhatt and Marlene Nourbese Philip, whose works offer powerful and insightful reflections on the challenges and possibilities of living in a hyphenated world.

Sujata Bhatt, born in India and raised in the United States and Germany, writes from a space of multiple belongings, her poems traversing continents and languages. Marlene Nourbese Philip, born in Tobago and residing in Canada, explores the legacy of colonialism and slavery in the Caribbean, her poetry serving as a tool for resistance and reclamation.³ Despite their different backgrounds, both poets share a profound engagement with the diasporic condition, their works offering a nuanced exploration of the fragmented self, the negotiation of cultural boundaries, and the enduring search for home.

Poetic Techniques: Language, Form, and Imagery

Both Bhatt and Philip demonstrate a masterful command of poetic techniques, employing language, form, and imagery in innovative and evocative ways to express the complexities of the diasporic experience. Bhatt's poetry is characterized by its lyrical quality, its use of vivid imagery drawn from nature and mythology, and its exploration of multilingualism. She often weaves together different languages, creating a



tapestry of voices and perspectives. In "A Different History," she seamlessly blends English and Gujarati, demonstrating the fluidity of language and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. Her use of free verse allows for a natural flow of thought and emotion, mirroring the fluidity of the diasporic experience itself. Bhatt's imagery is often drawn from the natural world, with recurring motifs of water, trees, and animals. These images serve to connect her characters to their ancestral land and to evoke a sense of rootedness in the face of displacement.

Philip's poetry, on the other hand, is marked by its experimental use of form and language, reflecting the fragmented and disjointed nature of the diasporic experience. In "Zong!," she utilizes a fragmented and disjunctive style, mirroring the dehumanizing experience of the enslaved Africans. The poem's visual layout, with its broken lines and scattered words, reinforces the sense of fragmentation and loss. Philip's language is often stark and visceral, conveying the brutality of history and the enduring trauma of colonialism. She employs repetition, wordplay, and unconventional punctuation to disrupt conventional syntax and challenge the reader's expectations. This disruption of language mirrors the disruption of identity and the struggle to reclaim voice in a postcolonial context.

In addition to their distinct linguistic styles, both poets utilize powerful imagery to convey the emotional and psychological impact of diaspora. Bhatt's poems often evoke a sense of longing and nostalgia for the homeland, using sensory details to create a vivid picture of the lost world. In "The One Who Goes Away," she writes: "The smells of cardamom and cloves/ rising from the kitchen/ where my mother is making tea" (Bhatt, *Point No Point*). These sensory details transport the reader to the speaker's childhood home, evoking a sense of warmth and familiarity. Philip's imagery is often more stark and unsettling, reflecting the trauma of displacement and the violence of history. In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," she uses the image of a "knotted tongue" to represent the silencing of the colonized voice. This visceral image captures the pain and frustration of being denied one's own language and cultural expression.

By employing these diverse poetic techniques, Bhatt and Philip create a rich and nuanced tapestry of the diasporic experience. Their poems challenge readers to confront the complexities of identity, belonging, and the legacy of history in a world marked by displacement and cultural hybridity.



The Fragmented Self: Negotiating Identity and Belonging

The experience of diaspora often involves a sense of fragmentation, a feeling of being caught between two worlds, neither fully belonging to one or the other. Both Bhatt and Philip grapple with this sense of divided selfhood in their poetry, exploring the complexities of identity formation in a transnational context.

In Bhatt's poem "Search for My Tongue," the speaker articulates the struggle to retain her mother tongue in a foreign land.⁴ The poem vividly depicts the fear of losing one's linguistic and cultural roots, symbolized by the image of the mother tongue growing like a plant in the speaker's mouth:

"You ask me what I mean by saying I have lost my tongue. I ask you, what would you do if you had two tongues in your mouth, and lost the first one, the mother tongue, and could not really know the other, the foreign tongue."⁵ (Bhatt, *Brunizem*)

This fear of linguistic and cultural erasure is echoed in Philip's work, particularly in her groundbreaking long poem "Zong!," which confronts the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.⁶ The poem, constructed from the fragmented language of a legal document related to the massacre of enslaved Africans, reflects the dehumanization and fragmentation inflicted upon them.⁷ Philip utilizes disjointed syntax and fractured language to convey the trauma of displacement and the loss of identity:⁸

"the said negroes men women & children to be thrown alive into the sea" (Philip, *Zong!*)

The fragmented language mirrors the fragmented selves of the enslaved Africans, stripped of their history, their culture, and their humanity.

The Burden of History: Memory and Trauma

Both Bhatt and Philip engage with the weight of history, exploring how the past continues to shape the present experiences of diasporic communities. Bhatt's poems often delve into the history of India, particularly the partition and its lingering impact on individual lives. In "The Peacock," she writes:

"My father born in the year India split into two he still remembers the riots the trains overflowing with dead and dying." (Bhatt, *Monkey Shadows*)



The poem highlights the intergenerational transmission of trauma, as the father's memories of violence and displacement become ingrained in the speaker's consciousness.

Similarly, Philip's poetry grapples with the historical trauma of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean. In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," she explores the enduring impact of colonial language on the psyche of the colonized:

"English is my mother tongue. A mother tongue is not not a foreign lan lan lang language l/anguish anguish a foreign anguish."⁹ (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*)

The poem powerfully conveys the violence inherent in the imposition of a foreign language, which becomes a source of both expression and oppression.

Reclaiming Voice: Language and Resistance

Language plays a central role in the poetry of both Bhatt and Philip. It is not merely a tool for communication but a means of resistance, reclamation, and self-expression. Bhatt, who writes in English, Gujarati, and German, often incorporates multilingual elements in her poems, challenging the dominance of English and celebrating linguistic diversity.¹⁰ In "A Different History," she writes:

"Which language has not been the oppressor's tongue? Which language truly meant to murder someone?" (Bhatt, *Brunizem*)

The poem questions the power dynamics inherent in language and advocates for the preservation of linguistic diversity as a form of resistance against cultural homogenization.

Philip's engagement with language is equally complex and multifaceted. In "Zong!," she subverts the language of the oppressor, transforming the legal document into a poetic testament to the resilience and humanity of the enslaved Africans. By reclaiming and reworking the language of colonialism, she challenges its power and gives voice to the silenced.

The Search for Home: Memory and Imagination

The search for home, both literal and metaphorical, is a recurring theme in the poetry of Bhatt and Philip. For the diasporic individual, home is often a contested space, a site of both longing and alienation.¹¹ Bhatt's poems often evoke a sense of nostalgia for her homeland, India, while also acknowledging the complexities



of her relationship with it. In "The One Who Goes Away," she writes:

"The one who goes away will remember more than the one who stays behind." (Bhatt, *Point No Point*)

The poem suggests that distance can sharpen memory and intensify the longing for home.

Philip's search for home is intertwined with her exploration of Caribbean history and identity. In "Looking for Livingstone," she writes:

"Livingstone, I presume, is dead. But his ghost still haunts these shores." (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*)

The poem alludes to the colonial legacy in the Caribbean, suggesting that the search for home is complicated by the ghosts of the past.

Conclusion

Sujata Bhatt and Marlene Nourbese Philip, through their powerful and evocative poetry, offer a nuanced exploration of the diasporic experience. Their works delve into the complexities of identity formation, the burden of history, and the search for belonging in a transnational context. By utilizing language as a tool for resistance and reclamation, they challenge dominant narratives and give voice to the marginalized. Their poetic journeys, though unique, converge in their exploration of the hyphenated existence, the negotiation of multiple cultural landscapes, and the enduring impact of historical trauma on individual and collective identity. Through their poems, Bhatt and Philip illuminate the challenges and possibilities of living in a world marked by displacement and cultural hybridity, offering a testament to the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in the face of adversity.



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