

Reading poems from other cultures: 4. *Search for My Tongue*

This audio bite is about *Search for My Tongue* by Sujata Bhatt.

ALIX: *Search for My Tongue* is about language. A tongue is what you speak with, but it also means 'language', so your mother tongue is your first language. And the title, *Search for My Tongue*, gives us the idea that it's a person who's lost their first language, and they are trying to find it again.

ELIOT: The poet's mother tongue is Gujarati, spoken in India, where she was born, but later she moved to America and then spoke mainly English. So one of the ideas in the poem is that she may be forgetting her first language – instead she talks to people in English. And in the poem she talks about her feelings about speaking two languages.

ALIX: The poet starts by talking about having two tongues in her mouth. Here she is using a metaphor – she means her two languages. She says that one language doesn't really know the other and it's as if she thinks differently in the two languages. She can't use both together, so perhaps it's like she's a different person when she uses the other language.

ELIOT: Just like when you have to learn a foreign language at school, or if you go abroad on holiday – you sometimes can't really explain what you want like you can in English.

ALIX: And she finishes the first part by saying if you lived abroad, your first language would die, apart from when you dream. And suddenly the next part of the poem is in Gujarati. Which most people in England can't read or understand. So now we begin to know how she feels when she is in a new country – she feels lost, or she can't communicate, or she feels an outsider.

ELIOT: The last part is in English again, and it's a translation of the middle section. It is the dream she mentioned earlier, saying that while she sleeps her mother tongue gets stronger and stronger and becomes her first language again. The poet uses another metaphor here – she compares her language to a plant which grows, has veins, then buds and then the plant blossoms.

ALIX: So at the start, she saw her mother tongue as something that was rotting away, and at the end as something that was growing stronger all the time.

ELIOT: The middle part of the poem, in Gujarati, seems odd at first. There is a guide in brackets about how to pronounce it, so we can all have a go saying it, but most of us don't understand what it means. And the English version comes second, after her mother tongue. So the poet again gives you an idea of how she

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feels – you can make the sounds, but you still feel it's all foreign to you.

ALIX:

So the main idea in *Search for My Tongue* is that if you live somewhere new and have to learn a second language, you might feel that this new language is taking over.

Your first language seems to die away, but the poem suggests that when you dream, your first language comes back and gets stronger.

The poet might want us to think of more difficult ideas too - perhaps that your first language is part of your culture. It is your link to your family, your childhood, and it is the link to who you are.

Because of this, you can use *Search for My Tongue* to write about coping with change, or about living in different cultures, or about your identity. You can also use it to show how important language is.