And Unafraid of the Gorgon on the Breastplate, the Stones Speak: The Anguished Drama of Return in M. Nourbese Philip’s ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’

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Abstract
M. (Marlene) Nourbese Philip is one of the most powerful, internationally reputed Afro-Caribbean poets in Canada today. Much of her appeal lies in the dexterous manner in which she intermingles the oral tradition with EuroAmerican traditions of writing. In this essay I will focus on both these traditions with specific reference to the poem ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’ in She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks. The first part of the essay deals with the narrative strategies by Philip to express the loss experienced by the Afro-Canadians, while the second part deals with my readerly response to the poem as a South Asian woman of colour belonging to a minority group, the Parsis. Despite our many differences, Philip’s voice finds an echo in my heart for my people too have known the pain of exile and subsequent loss of identity.
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I
this tongue that roots
deep
in
yank
pull
tear
root
out
that I would
chop
in
pieces
a snake
each to grow
a head
(Gorgon —
to turn my tongue to stone)
a tail
Petrified by the Gorgon on the breastplate of their white colonisers, the Africans who journeyed across the Atlantic to the 'New World' were ruthlessly silenced and dehumanised. In order to prevent them from uniting to foment rebellion and revolution, laws were created to prohibit them from speaking in African languages. With their mother tongues wrenched from their mouths, the equation between experience and expression was destroyed. Explaining this self-alienating process, M. Nourbese Philip writes:

The African could still think and i-mage, she could still conceive of what was happening to her. But in the stripping her of her language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the i-mage — in denying the voice expression, in fact — the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied.... Furthermore, alien and negative European languages would replace those African languages recently removed and, irony of all ironies, when the word/i-mage equation was attempted again, this process would take place through a language that was not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African. (1989a 14–15)

To speak an alien language is to enter an alien consciousness and consequently be estranged from one's own people. Talking similarly about the loss of identity which accompanies the loss of language, the First Nations writer Basil Johnston observes that the colonised 'lose not only the ability to express the simplest of daily sentiments and needs but they can no longer understand the ideas, concepts, insights, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, institutions brought into being by their ancestors; and having lost the power to understand, cannot sustain, enrich or pass on their heritage' (10). The silenced, 'culturally disadvantaged' groups are consequently spoken for/about, labelled indifferently (see Philip's powerful poem, 'What's in a name') and exiled 'into the pale and beyond, into the nether nether land of race' (Philip 1992, 10). They then exist in the margins as 'eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging' (Harris 115); 'the thin mixture of just come and don't exist' (Brand 29). Prompted by the various consciousness-raising movements post sixties, the Afro-Caribbeans in Canada, like oppressed groups in several parts of the world, position themselves as subjects and strive to empower their people by breaking the generations of silence imposed on them. Vehemently refusing to be intimidated anymore by the Gorgon, they, like the narrator in the poem quoted above, aim to confront her, destroy the source of her evil power and tame her with the valour of their tongues.

In 1989 Gayatri Spivak revised her observation that the subaltern woman cannot speak, to suggest that 'if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not the subaltern any more' (283). By returning the gaze, the
disempowered reveal that the coloniser’s value system, which was paraded as ‘universal’, is nothing but a ‘construct’. Their incredulity towards all the master(s)’ narratives disturbs the power equation and shifts, what bell hooks calls, ‘looking relations’ (340) between the coloniser and the colonised once and for all. Since the quest for authentication must necessarily begin with language, M. Nourbese Philip ‘problematise[s] the monoglossia of English-Canadian literature’ (Godard 154) in a powerful and haunting manner in her poem, ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’. She does this by foregrounding the politics of the hyphen that complicates the situating of the subject as both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Vijay Mishra perceptively observes that under the guise of empowering people who came from different ethnic backgrounds and encouraging them to preserve their culture, the hyphen also ‘disempowers them, it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, empoweringly-disempowered’ (10). True to the self-versus-Other consciousness bred by Western dichotomous thinking, those different from oneself cannot be granted power. In ‘Managing the Unmanageable’, Philip detects a deep-rooted fear of the alien Other in the Western psyche:

European thought has traditionally designated certain groups not only as inferior but also, paradoxically, as threats to their order, systems, and traditions of knowledge. Women, Africans, Asians, and aboriginals can be said to comprise these groups and together they constitute the threat of the Other — that embodiment of everything the white male perceived himself not to be. Where the latter was male, the Other was female; where he was rational, the Other was irrational; where he was controlled, the Other was uncontrolled.... If left unchecked, western European thought suggests, these qualities — of the Other — could undermine the social order; for this reason these groups are considered potentially, if not actually, unmanageable. At all times they must be managed. (295)

They are expected to know their place and not disturb the status quo. In She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, Philip rebels against this by consciously setting out ‘to be unmanageable’ (1990 296). ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’ is one such unmanageable, collage-like, unreadable poem, ‘sculpted out of the colonial experience’ (Philip 1990, 297). The centerpiece of the poem ‘is an unbroken refrain on the ambivalence of English being both a mother and father tongue’ (Philip interviewed by Williamson 228). In the Caribbean islands the upper and educated middle class speak standard English, while a variant of it, which Philip calls the Caribbean demotic, is spoken by the people in the street. For European-educated writers like herself, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand, the choice between standard English and the demotic involves much anguish. Since the demotic is dismissed by the speakers of standard English as

this chattel language
babu english
slave idiom
nigger vernacular
she hesitates to regard it as her mother tongue. Moreover, A mother tongue is not not a foreign lan lan lang language l/anguish anguish
-a foreign anguish. ('Discourse' 56)

Keeping her privileged upper middle class background in mind, she then decides to regard it as her father tongue for A father tongue is a foreign language, therefore English is a foreign language not a mother tongue. (‘Discourse’ 56)

The suppression of the mother tongue by the colonising master tongue causes her to be

...tongue dumb dumb-tongued dub-tongued damn dumb tongue. (‘Discourse’ 56)

To the right of this central, chant-sounding text are two historical edicts in italics about African slaves being prohibited from speaking their mother tongues and having their tongues removed for breach of this edict. Writers like T.S. Eliot (in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’) believed that a poem must be depersonalised and removed from its morass of history so that anyone, anywhere can understand and identify with it. Philip however, sneers at the cultural imperialism underlying the concepts of ‘universality’ and ‘objectivity’ which such modes of thought hold dear. She insists on the importance of history, for ‘to forget is to collude in one’s erasure’ (1992 20). ‘Memory is essential to human survival’ (1989c) for it has ‘a potentially kinetic quality’ (1992 19) prompting the colonised to create alternate his/herstories. The edicts in the poem clearly indicate her insistence on combating ‘the amnesia of colonialism through the memory of post-colonialism’ (Hutcheon 89) to write the Africans in the New World into being.

The left-hand margin of the page describes a mother blowing words into the mouth of her newborn daughter. This text which is entirely in capital letters is interestingly turned away from the rest of the page. Philip says that she does this to indicate the manner in which Black women in particular, and all women in
Discourse on the Logic of Language

English is my mother tongue.

A mother tongue is not a foreign language.

Anguish—foreign anguish.

English is my father tongue.

A father tongue is a foreign language; therefore English is a foreign language.

What is my mother tongue?

My mummy tongue?

My mother tongue?

My father tongue?

I have no mother tongue.

No mother tongue to talk to.

No tongue to talk to.

No tongue to talk to.

I must therefore be tongue dumb.

dumb tongue

dumb.

dumb.

dumb.
general, have been positioned in society (Carey 20). ‘[T]here is a gap between
the main text and the woman’s story, and to read the woman’s story you have to
make an effort — a physical effort’ (Carey 20). Patriarchy portrays women in
terms of their relationships with men and regards all forms of female bonding
with suspicion. Signe Hammer perceptively notes that ‘[m]ost of what passes
between mother and daughter falls outside the acknowledged social context....
This has a paradoxical effect of making the mother-daughter relationship an
“underground” one, whose emotional power and importance may be increased
precisely because it is underground’ (qtd in Buss 32.). While the historical edicts
in the right-hand margin record ‘the parameters of silence for the African in the
New World’ (Philip 1990, 297), the mother-daughter text records a silencing based
on gender. The anguish of the Black woman of the central text is thus seen to be
caused by both her race and her gender.

The pages facing the poem describe the physiology of speech and a series of
multiple-choice questions on the tongue as an organ. These texts reveal that the
English language is inflected by institutionalised racism. The ‘language of logic’
used to describe the production of speech in human beings conceals the racist
objectives of De Broca who set out to prove that ‘white males of the Caucasian
race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and
other peoples of colour’ (Philip 1989b, 57). Through this, ‘Philip develops a
critique of the entire system of signification, showing that the overseer’s whip is
the unacknowledged metonym for the production of linguistic meaning in Euro­
American civilisation. Such concepts of inferior intelligence and lesser value of
the speech of Blacks were theories of white supremacy justifying the practices of
Black slavery’ (Godard 163). Though Philip does not comment on the absurdity
of these seemingly objective, ‘scientific’ texts, we are made to perceive them as
both racist and sexist.

The four multiple-choice questions with which the ‘poem’ ends, likewise
foreground what Barthes calls the ‘stickiness’ of ‘encratic’ (40) language (which
is language produced and spread under the protection of power). Under this system
of discursive violence, the oppressed find themselves in ‘the double bind
situation.... For the choices offered are in fact no choice’ (Godard 163). The first
question emphasises the fact that, like the penis, the tongue too is an organ used
for wielding power. The second indicates the destructive-redemptive power of
the tongue which is both the principal organ of taste and articulate speech and the
principal organ of exploitation and oppression. The third offers no choice as the
options merely give physiological descriptions of the tongue. The latter part of
the final option however, sounds a non-scientific note with ‘contains ten thousand
taste buds, none of which is sensitive to the taste of foreign words’ (Philip 1989b,
9). The final question about the metamorphosis of sound to intelligible word
focuses on the undeniable fact that ‘systems of discourse are often synonymous
with systems of power’ (Garrett-Petts 83). Philip says that though this realisation
was crucial to her growth, it caused her to become ‘an epistemological orphan’ (Philip 1990, 299).

Philip says that for her, ‘working in English, is like coming to terms with an abusive parent’ for it involves ‘coming to terms with this mother/father tongue that I love, but that has meant so much pain for me and my people’ (1990 299). In the central text of ‘Discourse’, she dramatises this anguished drama of return by making the word ‘language’ itself physiologically difficult to articulate...

... lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
- a foreign anguish. (56)

Adam, who was moulded in his ‘white’ Maker’s image, joyously exclaims in Milton’s Paradise Lost ‘To speak I tri’d, and forthwith spake / My tongue obey’d and readily could name/ Whate’er I saw’ (Bk 8, ll. 271–73) but when the silenced return to voice, they are both terribly confused and hesitant. In ‘Making the House Our Own’, Philip asks if an attempt should be made to transform the ‘father tongue’ into the mother tongue (43). Afrosporic people do not in fact have much choice for ‘[I]n the absence of any other language by which the past may be repossessed, reclaimed and its most painful aspects transcended, English in its broadest spectrum must be made to do the job’ (Philip 1989, 18). The ‘enemy’s language’ (which is what the Amerindian writer Joy Harjo regards English as) must be ‘detoxified’ before it can be made to articulate their reality. Such a language, emerging phoenix-like out of the ashes of loss and silence, could restore the equation between experience and expression and heal the wound. The Black woman in ‘Discourse’ therefore cries out:

tongue mother
tongue me
mother tongue me
mother me
touch me
with the tongue of your
lan lan lang
language. (‘Discourse’ 58)

The father tongue may begin to ‘mother’ in the manner of the woman in the mother-daughter text but the quest for it will be constantly interrupted. The poem itself is so full of interruptions that, true to the African musical tradition, it reminds one of jazz music ‘where you might have the main riff going and the musician interrupts and goes off on another musical path’ (Williamson 230). Philip interrupts the text also to reflect a historical reality: ‘the African in the New World represented a major interruption of both the European text of the Old World and the African text of a more ancient world that had continued uninterrupted for millennia, as
well as the text of the aboriginal world of the Americas and the Caribbean’ (1990 298). The interruptions make the poem seem so hybridised that it can be labelled ‘postmodern’ but it is a lot more rewarding to read it as ‘[t]he restless product of a long history of miscegenation, assimilation, and syncretisation, as well as of conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence’ (Sangari 158).

Philip often talks about the violent ‘eruption of the body into the text’ (1990 298) of She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks. This is because ‘when the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which body could contain’ (1990 298). Furthermore, she was ‘managed’ not only by the ‘ overseer’s whip’ but also by the penis: the ultimate symbol of control in male-female relations. Philip observes that the long poem form of the poems in She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, helped her satisfy a very strong desire during her second pregnancy to occupy more space. In the Western culture the only time women are allowed to take up space physically and be physically big, is during pregnancy. During an interview in 1996 she said: ‘Intellectually, I really had a sense of wanting to take up space with my ideas — physical space, somehow spatially to expand, and this is where I believe the idea of the long poem begins for me’ (Vevaina 21). By writing the ‘real’ (not symbolic) Black female body, Philip wants to make her readers stop regarding Black women as either highly sexed and castrating or matriarchal and asexual. This is not a form of biological essentialism for, as the postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, it is ‘a way of making theory in gender, of making a theory a politics of everyday life, thereby rewriting the ethnic female subject as a site of differences’ (44).

Philip believes that she is working within ‘the tradition of alchemy, which derives from the Arab word al-kamiya, meaning the art of the Black and of Egypt. It is a tradition of transformation and metamorphosis — transforming the conventional and standard into something new, like lead into gold’ (Carey 21). True to this statement made by Philip, Brenda Carr recognises a trickster element at play in her impersonation of styles and forms not her own; she deploys an ‘aesthetics of ruse’ or ‘transformation and transmutation’ that historically allowed the subjugated to survive. ‘This,’ she feels, ‘may be closely related to the traditional female trickster figure from Western African Dahomean mythology who used wit, disguise, and concealment to overwhelm a larger and more powerful foe’ (83). Philip regards current street talk, hip talk or black talk as ‘one of the most overt, explicit and successful acts of subverting the English’ (1985 43) designed to trigger the alchemical process. The transformation could make the language of enslavement, the language of liberation. It is important to note that though Philip sees this process as desirable, she does not mindlessly glorify the culture of her homeland as she is not interested in creating an Afrocological, millenarian discourse which is ‘every bit as imperialistic as the coloniser’s own project’ (Mishra 5). By naming the oppressors, the process of oppression and the effects of
oppression, she hopes to enable her people to create their own images and see themselves as distinct and valuable people.

Philip’s reactive and recuperative agenda is designed to lead her people along the political and spiritual path to healing and change. As a Black woman writer, she feels the need to go beyond confrontational writing for, by writing from a reactive position, one is responding to ‘someone else’s agenda’ (Philip 1992, 67). In ‘Why the United States’, Julia Kristeva perceptively remarks: ‘[As] everyone knows every negation is a definition. An “opposing” position is therefore determined by what is being opposed. And in this way we arrive at two antithetical systems, which internalise and reflect one another’s qualities’ (qtd in Philip 1992, 63). Philip thus urges writers to transform negation into affirmation and reaction into initial statement by seeing themselves ‘[a]s centre, not Other’ (1992 69) and reconstruct their identities piece by piece in their own images (1992 65). She therefore urges Blacks not to collude in their victimisation by thinking of themselves as marginal or marginalised. Self-empowerment demands that the ‘margin’ must be thought of as ‘frontier’ but she realises that it is not as simple as it sounds for ‘that authentic leap from margin to frontier demands nothing less than a profound revolution in thinking and metamorphosis in consciousness’ (1990 300). Such a transformation will liberate the coloniser too for those who oppress others cannot themselves be truly free.

II

Every time we raise our voices, we hear echoes.

Jo-Anne Elder

Philip’s voice strangely finds an echo across thousands of miles of land and sea in my own heart. Why does this text about the loss of language and culture of Afro-Caribbeans in Canada move me as deeply as it does? Are we not products of very different histories and socio-religious backgrounds? Yet, despite the many differences, my position in India as a woman belonging to a minority group, the Parsis (also called Zoroastrians — the followers of Prophet Zoroaster), is in fact very similar.

My culture received its first big blow when, three hundred years after Zarathushtra founded his religion, Darius the Great lost Persia (now Iran) to the Greek conqueror, Alexander. As a result of this defeat which took place around 300 B.C. (Dhalla 24), Zoroastrian religion and culture lost their royal patronage. Additionally, Alexander and a Persian courtesan named Rukshana (Roxanne in Greek), torched the royal library at Persepolis in a drunken orgy. At a time when only two sets of our religious and historical texts existed, one of them was lost forever when the archives were burnt down. About ten centuries after this event, my people fled from our ‘motherland’ Persia, to escape persecution and forcible conversion to Islam by the Arab conquerors. According to legend, Jadav Rana,
the ruler of Sanjan (the small village on the west coast in the province of Gujarat where we landed) seemed reluctant to grant us asylum at first. To indicate this, he sent us a cup of milk, filled to the brim, to show that there was no room in his village for us. Our head priest cleverly returned the cup with a spoonful of sugar stirred in, to signify that we would mingle with the villagers and sweeten their lives. Pleased with the gesture, Jadav Rana granted us refuge but on certain conditions. We were allowed to practise our monotheistic religion but had to give up our language, customs and mode of dressing and adopt those of the Hindus. We were also made to give up arms, celebrate religious feasts and marriage ceremonies only after sunset and not inter-marry with the local population. What we did not realise at that time was that Jadav Rana our protector, was also the destroyer of our culture.

By the time the European traders arrived in India, we Parsis had established ourselves as successful agriculturists, artisans and traders. We traded with the Portuguese, then the Dutch, the French and finally the British who became the rulers of India in 1770. The Raj changed things dramatically for us. We soon developed a ‘fairer-therefore-better-than-most-Indians’ complex, gleefully embraced British culture and excelled as Western-educated lawyers, doctors, teachers and creative writers. Though some intellectuals resisted the British and even joined the independence movement, most of us felt pleased with the preferential treatment meted out to us by our colonisers. The post-independence years however, left us feeling confused and bereft. How could our ‘Mai-baaps’ (parents) have forsaken us? While many who could not endure their ‘reduced circumstances’ emigrated to ‘better’ lands, those who remained in India once again needed to fit in by developing survival strategies. A few intellectuals insisted that despite our socio-historical reality, we Parsis had forged a distinct identity and had contributed to Indian culture and progress in important ways. In their opinion, we should strive to see ourselves as postcolonial ‘Indians’ for by now, our position in this country could not be truly termed ‘diasporic’. Most Parsis, however, lost their moorings. Some tried to assimilate with the Hindu mainstream by tapping their feet and clicking their fingers to Hindi film music while others deluded themselves into believing that we Parsis are definitely superior to other Indians on account of our ‘British’ life style, our ‘British’ accents and our passion for Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt and Chopin.

Uncle Sam’s forays into Indian culture via Michael Jackson and the Star TV with programmes like Santa Barbara, The Bold and The Beautiful and Dallas have made it possible for the Westernised group to once again breathe more freely. With the young and the not-so-young Indians wanting to look and live like those bold and beautiful white people ‘out there’, the general unexpressed feeling among this group now is, ‘At last Indians (some, even today, refer to themselves as “Persians” or just “foreigners”) have learnt the only decent way to live’. Blissfully unconscious of their ‘colonial cringe’, they ignore even our step-mother tongue.
Gujarati, and encourage their children to learn only English in the hope of seeing them emigrate to the Whitelands while they are still wet behind their ears. Unfortunately for the community, even the superficially Indianised Parsis seem to be faring no better. The rhetoric of ‘Hinduvata’ voiced by muscle-flexing politicians in the nineties has created a kind of fearful psychosis among them. To add to the damage, those who claim to be the ‘protectors’ of our religion and culture are themselves lost in self-aggrandisement and stuck in the mire of orthodoxy. Unable to interpret Zoroastrianism connotatively, they cling to the letter rather than the spirit of our religion and propagate purist notions of our culture and religion, totally unmindful of our hybridised identity. Estranged from our language and ethnicity, our numerically dwindling community cannot survive in this (American) global village for more than a few decades. Where are our creative writers? Why aren’t writers like Rohinton Mistry, Saros Cowasjee, Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa able to lead us into the future by taking us back into our past? Which past? What past? Are they too as lost as we are? ‘What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do?’ (Eliot ‘The Wasteland’, II.133–34).

Teetering on the brink of despair, I applaud the efforts of those communities which refuse to collude in their erasure. I am neither arrogant nor so naive as to claim that I truly ‘understand’ writers like Philip. I do not walk in their shoes and cannot occupy their headspace but I thank them for allowing me a few glimpses into their way of ‘becoming’. They have touched me, I have grown.¹

NOTES
¹ This section is a modified version of the final section of my paper ‘Black Woman “Righter” and the Anguish of English’. The present text reflects the changes in my thinking about my culture and my position as a reader of Afro-Caribbean Canadian literature.

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The Anguished Drama of Return


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