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Abstract

Born on the island of Tobago, Marlene Nourbese Philip, an Afro-Caribbean Canadian poet, was shaped by her experience as a colonized subject whose African ancestors had been transported to the Caribbean and whose lives as slaves were largely unrecorded. This loss of history and the marginalization some Afro-Caribbean people feel, weighed heavily on her poetry. The paper examines Philip’s collection *She Tries Her Tongue* (1988) to reveal how she attempts to break silence and survive hardship and adversity. The paper explores her use of myth to highlight her quest for a voice as a strategy of resistance to coercion and investigates her attitude towards the “father tongue,” i.e. the English language of the colonizer. For a theoretical framework, the paper draws on various postcolonial texts with special emphasis on the ‘Calibanic discourse’ and strategies of language and resistance.

Diaspora, as the sociologist Robin Cohen points out, is a Greek word that means the sowing or dispersion of seed (speiro, is “to sow,” dia, is “over”) and it was used by the ancient Greeks to refer to migrations of colonizing Greeks who formed settlements throughout the Mediterranean world, extending the economic, political and cultural power of those who remained at home (ix). According to Susan Friedman, diaspora is migration plus loss, desire, and widely scattered communities held together by memory and a sense of history over a long period of time. This history “has involved oppression against a whole people and thus an attachment to community based on a sense of shared suffering” (268). The African Diaspora, the massive forced migration of Africans with the start of the Atlantic slave trade, resulted in the dispersion of Africans all over the world. The Caribbean was historically the earliest and main destination of the European slave ships that carried them from Africa to the Americas. The slave ships, Sanyu Ruth Mulira states, “acted as the womb that housed the initial transformation of its inhabitants” (116). She adds “the ocean was a liminal space in which the enslaved Africans were faced with the reality that their lives would never be the same. Slavery, oppression, and cultural domination were in front of them” (116). Once docked in the New World, the enslaved Africans, who came from different
ethnic backgrounds, found ways to weave the fragmented pieces of their past into a cultural fabric that could support their lives in a foreign land, in what Edouard Glissant calls “the abyss, the unknown” (1997, 8). Together, they created a multicultural unit. After “incubation” upon the ship, the many African roots were planted together in the soil of a new land. There, they wove themselves together, and finally they became one. Glissant uses the concept of a “rhizome” to explain how Caribbean culture grew out of the experience of slavery. He describes it as an “enmeshed root system, whose plant product appears self-contained and singular above ground. However, underneath the soil it is comprised of a network of roots so intertwined that one could never be freed from the other” (1997, 11).

Enslaved Africans were not only abducted from their country, but also from their language. They were prohibited from speaking in African languages and even had their tongues removed in punishment. The English language was imposed on them by the colonizers “as a conscious strategy of cultural hegemony” (Ashcroft 2009, 3) and it became “not only a codified site of colonial and imperial authority, through which racist discourses [were] mobilized, but also a historical, metaphorical, and literal site perpetuating systematic violence and cultural repression and erasure” (Verhagen 85). Meredith Gadsby asserts that “trapped within the prison that is English; African Caribbean shook its walls with an English Language that to the colonizer was unintelligible.” They constructed a new language, the Caribbean demotic, “which provided a tangible psychic and linguistic link to their histories while creating a new social/linguistic/symbolic order that would provide subsequent generations with the psychic power to resist the master” (125).

In the process of decolonization as expressed in postcolonial literatures, Bill Ashcroft documents three types of language situations. He locates resistance discourses within monoglossic, diaglossic, and polyglossic locations. He identifies the Caribbean linguistic situation as polyglossic, and thus it presents the most complex case of the struggle within a colonial language. The complexity comes out of this history of slavery in which the enslaved Africans, brought over to the Caribbean, were forced to abandon their mother tongues and to adopt the enslaving colonial English language. Over a period of time, these Africans submerged their original mother tongues in the colonial language. These submerged mother tongues strongly influenced the way Afro-Caribbean use English: with heavy African inflexions. The result is the development of Creole/Nation language/Caribbean Demotic (Ashcroft 2002, 39). Each developed as a “subversive language” whose purpose from the start was not simply to communicate but also to conceal the meanings, thereby turning the master’s language against him. In this sense, they are typical forms of Edouard Glissant’s “opacity,” For Glissant, “opacity” is “an active, positive form of resistance” (qtd. in Britton 19).
1. “Sister of Caliban”: The Search for a “New World Song”

Afro-Caribbean women writers in Canada, including Marlene Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris, Lorna Goodison, and Cynthia James are often described as “sisters of Caliban” a term used by M. J. Fenwick in his anthology of Caribbean women writers in Canada. For Ashcroft in *Caliban’s Voice*, Caliban is celebrated as a symbol of resistance; “a symbol for representations of the subaltern exploitation and resistance” (17). Resistance discourse within Afro-Caribbean culture is a Calibanic discourse that has its origin and tradition in language. It is the perceived history and story of the enslaved Africans in Western culture. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is a symbolic and iconic text in postcolonial literature. Two figures have become the models of colonizer and colonized: Prospero, a usurped duke who is cast away and takes over an island, and Caliban, his enslaved native who is depicted as savage and deformed. Ashcroft asserts that “Caliban is the prototype of the colonized subject whose baseness as constructed by the colonizer is the justifying perquisite of colonization” (2009, 19). Prospero takes Caliban’s island and makes Caliban a slave for him and his daughter Miranda who in turn tries to teach Caliban language, the language of Prospero that he utilizes as a means by which he can effectively control Caliban. Caliban learns language from his oppressors and in turn uses it to curse them and break his silence. *The Tempest* is “a complex staging of the struggle between ‘the cannibal’ and ‘the oppressor,’ close anagrams of Caliban and Prospero respectively” (Singh 191). James Coleman defines the “Calibanic discourse” term as follows:

Calibanic discourse is the perceived history and story of the black male in Western culture that has its genesis and tradition in language and non-linguistic signs. It denotes slavery, proscribed freedom, proscribed sexuality, inferior character, and inferior voice. In summary, the black male is the slave or servant who is the antithesis of the reason, civilized development, entitlement, freedom, and power of white men, and he never learns the civilized use of language. His voice is unreliable; his words fail to signify his humanity. (3)

In Afro-Caribbean women poetry, Calibanic discourse and a responsive story of resistance and liberation are largely inseparable. Like Caliban, Afro-Caribbean women writers try to break their silence, attain an empowered status in a racist world and recover their voice and identity within Afro-Caribbean history and language. Their writing is preoccupied with a struggle with language that “connects [them] to [their] people and [their] histories of resistance to physical, emotional, psychic and linguistic conquest.” They “suck coarse salt” and “speak out against the hardships suffered in a hostile landscape, using mother tongue to give tongue to their rage and lash out against repression” (Gadsby 124). Meredith M. Gadsby adopts the terminology and imagery of “sucking salt” in examining their literature.
According to Richard and Jeannette Allsopp’s *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, “sucking salt,” which has Caribbean origins, means “to suffer much hardship and to have a rough time of it” (485). The term connotes desperation and hopelessness but carries with it the will to overcome hardship, take stock of the situation and rebuild it. “Sucking the salt,” then, “is a survival skill passed on from generation to generation of Caribbean women” who turned the notion into a “battle cry” (Gadsby 3).

A major Afro-Caribbean writer in Canada, Marlene Nourbese Philip or “sister of Caliban” sucks coarse salt and in her writings attempts to break the different forms of silencing imposed by the New World. Philip was born in Tobago in the West Indies in 1947. She took her first degree in economics at the University of the West Indies, and then she moved to Canada to continue her studies. She is a lawyer by profession, practicing law from 1975 to 1982. In 1983 she became a full time writer, and in 1988 she won the Casa de las Americas Prize for her collection, *She Tries Her Tongue* (1988). In addition to her poetry, she has published two novels and two books of essays that investigate racism, colonialism, and the position of the woman of colour in Canadian cultural life. Philip describes herself as an “Afrosporic” writer; a short form for African and Diaspora, as in her original coinage for black Caribbean authors in North America. She makes the experience of the African Diaspora central to her writing and focuses on the issue of language and the way in which colonially inherited European languages have exiled the Caribbean speaker/writer, reducing them to “linguistic squatters” (Sage, Greer & Showalter 472–473).

A reading of Philip’s collection *She Tries Her Tongue* with special emphasis on her masterpiece “A Discourse on the Logic of Language” reveals that she is searching for a voice that adequately expresses the specific experience of black people in Diaspora. For Philip, breaking silence is one of the means for recovering a voice in order to resist the politics of erasure apparent in her multiple locations as a poet “triply displaced through race, gender and language” (1997, 59). In a reading held at Florida International University on January 1999, Philip spoke out of trying to create a language in which to efficiently communicate the experience of the Middle Passage, its results, and its legacies for Black peoples. Philip tries to create in her poetry what Gayle Jones, an African American writer, in her novel *Corregidora* (1975), refers to as “a new world song,” the creation of a language capable of expressing the experience of diasporic Africans in the west; a language that connects them to their “histories of resistance to physical, emotional, psychic and linguistic conquest” (Gadsby 3).

In an interview, Philip says that she considers herself to be a writer in exile. However, it is not merely exile from a particular place, but it is “an exile from a number of things on many layers – your original language, your mother tongue, your culture, your spirituality.” She adds “even if I were to go back to Tobago, I would still be in exile, and so it’s almost a permanent exile” (Mahlis 690).
What she means is that she has eternally lost most of her African culture and, very importantly, her original mother tongue. These losses have been caused by the actions of the colonizer. Some of the questions she asks herself in her poetry are summarized in the following quotation from her essay “Ignoring Poetry”:

How does one write from the perspective of one who has mastered a foreign language, yet has never had a mother tongue; one whose father tongue is an English fashioned to exclude, deride and deny the essence of one’s being? How does the poet confront and resolve the profound loss and absence of language - a language which can truly be the house of one’s being? How does the poet work a language engorge on her many silences? How does she break that silence that is one yet many? Should she? Can she fashion a language that uses silence as a first principle? (1997, 120)

2. A Creolized Version of the Myths of Persephone, Io and Philomela

Nourbese Philip employs Greek mythology in her collection to highlight the loss of language and mother tongue and to stress her struggle to break silence. She is interested in the myths of Persephone, Io and Philomela. In Greek mythology, Persephone is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Hades, god of the underworld, abducted Persephone from a field in Sicily where she was gathering flowers and took her with him down to the underworld. Luke and Monica Roman in Encyclopedi...
The story of Philomela is a well known mythological narrative of abuse, suffering and poetic song. In Greek mythology, Philomela, daughter of King Pandion of Attica, was raped by her brother-in-law who then cut out her tongue to silence her. Philomela embroidered her calamity into cloth, which she sent to her sister. She thus manages to overcome – albeit symbolically – the silence that was enforced upon her. Her brother-in-law tried to kill her and her sister, but the gods changed them into birds. Philomela became a swallow and her sister a nightingale. Philomela transforms her tonguelessness into her victory.

In the vein of Philomela, Philip has had her tongue ‘cut out ‘by colonialism. Yet, just like Philomela, Philip was able to tell her version of history. In the same way that Philomela’s embroidery enabled her to write her story through art, by weaving the name of her rapist, Philip conveys her story through poetry. The association between Philip and the image of the nightingale has come to indicate creative experience arising from loss, darkness and seclusion. Io and Philomela share a similar destiny as they are both raped and they both have to struggle to reacquire a language, a way of communicating with the rest of the world. Philip has been interested in the myths of Io, Philomela and Persephone because they reverberate “the predicament of the many female slaves raped by their white masters” and because they echo “the experiences of the African slaves in the New World who, deprived of their mother tongues, had to find a new language to express themselves” (Fumagalli 74). Philip’s poem “Questions’ Questions” is another poem of loss and suffering and an excellent example of a mother’s desire for a reunion with her lost daughter. The mother is searching for her daughter everywhere. Philip writes:

Where she, where she, where she
Be, where she gone?
Where high and low meet I search,
Find cant, way down the islands’ way
I gone – South. (1988, 26)
In “Adoption Bureau,” it is the daughter who searches for the mother and wants to reunite with her. For “Afrosporic” people, the search for their mother is not only a search for the lost mother, or even the lost mother tongue, but it is also a search for origin, for the lost land. “Questions’ Questions” is written in the Caribbean demotic while “Adoption Bureau” is in Standard English in order to point out Philip’s loss. Philip mentions another Greek character, Cyane, a nymph who tried to prevent Hades from abducting Persephone, her playmate. Upon failure she dissolved away in tears and melted into her pool. Philip writes: “As for Cyane, she lamented the rape of the goddess. [...] / Nursing silently in her heart a wound that none could / Heal” (1988, 27).

3. English is a “Foreign Anguish”

Moreover, the quest for reunion with the mother and the recovery of the mother tongue are dealt with greatest intensity in Philip’s masterpiece “Discourse on the Logic of Language.” The poem is constructed out of four texts written next to each other on two opposing pages. Some of the means used by the colonizer to eradicate the language and destroy the identity of the African are effectively shown in the poem. Philip imitates the voice of the colonizer by using two edicts which represent the way in which the law forced the colonized to dismiss their own language. She writes:

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Every owner of slaves
Shall, wherever possible
Ensure that his slaves
Belong to as many ethno-
Linguistic groups as
Possible. If they can-
Not speak to each other
They cannot then foment
Rebellion and revolution (1988, 55)
```

Enslaved Africans were prohibited from speaking in African languages and even had their tongues removed in punishment. The lack of language was experienced as a lack of being, in Britton words, “not having a language that adequately, immediately, and fully expresses what one wishes to say about the world and, perhaps particularly, about oneself, becomes equated with not having a fully realized self.” Because enslaved Africans were not allowed to use their native language, “their ability to express their “i-mage” was efficaciously destroyed” (Guttman 58). In her essay “The Absence of Writing,” Philip introduces her concept of the “i-mage,” She points out that the image is fundamental to any art form, whether it be the
physical image as created by the dancer, the musical image of the composer, the visual image of the plastic artist or the verbal image of the writer and poet. She asserts that the “i-mage” is the heart of all creative writing and uses the word “i-mage” to convey what can only be described as the irreducible essence, the “i-mage” of creative writing. It can be likened to the DNA molecules at the heart of all life. She asserts that the tangible representation of the “i-mage” in creative writing is the word and “the success of the execution of this “i-mage” depends to a large degree on the essential tension between the “i-mage” and word or words giving voice to the “i-mage” (1988, 12–14).

According to Philip, the colonizer destroyed the “equation between i-mage and word” for the black Caribbean. The colonizer did not cause the enslaved African to lose his ability to think and i-mage, but “in stripping [him] of [his] language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the i-mage – in denying the voice expressing, in fact–the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied,” In short, “the bridge that language creates, the crossover from ‘i-mage’ to expression was destroyed, if only temporarily,” the African in the Caribbean was never able to overcome the experience of slavery because the experience had “never been reclaimed and integrated metaphorically through the language and so within the psyche” (1988, 14–15). Certain images that contained an African consciousness were considered to be “primitive, naive, and ugly” (1988, 13) and were repudiated not only by the West, but also by the Africans living outside Africa. This gives evidence of how far Africans themselves were “removed from their power to create, control and even understand their own i-mages” (1988, 14). Philip is trying to create a new world song and a new language in order to reflect the “i-mage” of the African people in the Caribbean. Philip writes in \textit{Edict II}:

\begin{quote}
Every slave caught speaking  
His native language  
Shall be severely  
punished. Where necessary  
Removal of the tongue is  
recommended. The of-fending organ, when re-moved, should be hung  
On high in a central place,  
So that all may see and tremble (1988, 57)
\end{quote}

Colonial language has always presented itself as dominant, the proper, correct, civilized, way to behave. The colonizer looks at the languages of the colonized as bad, childish and impure. But this very dominance means that its appropriation by the colonized can be empowering. The impure languages of the colonized are
typically seen as the opposite of the pure Standard English language as spoken by the colonizer. Philip writes in standard English but nevertheless allows African and Creole influences to penetrate into this English in order to fully reflect the “i-mage” of her people. In this way she shows the importance of the culture of the Afro-Caribbean colonized without asserting the division between colonizers and colonized. The impurities that African and Creole influences cast upon the Standard English language of the colonizer are not only a means of restoring the tension between word and “i-mage,” but also a strategy of resistance to the coercion of the West.

This resistance to submersion by colonial powers throughout the Caribbean signals what Louise Bennett refers to as “colonization in reverse” (215). Gadsby asserts that “nation language, thus located within the culture of the enslaved, in fact recolonizes the plantation and island space at the level of culture. Language becomes the battle ground for the colonial struggle between colonizer and the colonized” (14). For Glissant, language operates as “a mode of cultural resistance.” The colonized consciousness is opaque in that it cannot be “read” by the colonizer. The colonizer is unable to understand the colonized. There is a dynamic relationship between the lack of language, as “a passively determined condition,” and opacity as “an active strategy of resistance,” a strategy that transforms lack into a positive force. In this sense “opacity” as described by Britton becomes a militant position (19-20). Glissant states, “We must fight against transparency everywhere” and he claims that opacity is a right: “We demand for all the right to opacity” (1997, 209). He equates opacity simply with freedom: “their [opacity] which is nothing, after all, but their freedom” (1999, 256). This “subversive language” becomes a strategy of resistance. Hence, colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation.

In another text, Philip shows the way in which the colonizer tries to prove his superiority to the colonized in a scientific way. The text discusses the work of the famous Dr. Broca who tried to prove that the brains of black people, women and coloured people were smaller and that because of that, they were less intelligent than white males. In Orientalism, Edward Said wrote about this polarized difference between the West and the ‘Other’ that “the sense of Western power” over the subject colonial population “is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (46). Philip writes:

Those parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are named after two learned nineteenth century doctors, the eponymous Doctors Wernicke and Broca respectively. Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to proving that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to women, Blacks and other peoples of colour. (1988, 56)
Philip attempts to create a mother tongue that will save her from the “foreign anguish” of her ‘father tongue’ English. Gadsby asserts that “fatherhood symbolizes a patriarchal dominance, enslavement, and linguistic violence perpetrated by the slave master and the slave narrative: therefore ‘English is a foreign anguish’” (1988, 57). Philip refuses to regard the English language as her mother tongue, instead naming it her “dumb tongue” and her “father tongue.” In the beginning of the second text, Philip writes:

English
Is my mother tongue
A mother tongue is not
Not a foreign lan lan Lang
Language
L/anguish
Anguish
A foreign anguish (1988, 57)

Naomi Guttman points out that “Philip connects between language and displacement by playing with the word “language.” She repeats the word ‘lan’ a few times so that the reader is not sure whether the next word will be ‘land’ or ‘language’” (64). Accordingly, English becomes a position from which black people are forced to speak. Philip repeats the words ‘my mother tongue’ in different dialects of the Caribbean demotic to emphasize her quest for a mother tongue. Philip emphasizes the “foreign anguish” (1988, 55) caused by living half-submerged in the mother-tongue while burdened with the colonial violence of the father-tongue. Philip highlights the complex relationship between the mother tongue and the father tongue. From the father tongue’s rape of the mother tongue, a “dumb-tongued / dub-tongued” child was born (1988, 55). The struggle by the dominated “to adopt a language which has been forced upon them at the expense of remembering their mother tongue is a struggle characterized by conflict and anxiety” (Guttman 56). She writes:

What is my mother
Tongue
My mammy tongue
My mummy tongue
My momsy tongue
My modder tongue
My ma tongue? (1988, 30)

Yet, Philip does not find her original African language, as it has been destroyed by the colonizer. She concludes by saying “I must therefore be tongue / dumb”
Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is “expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination.” Marginalization deprives one “of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction” (Young 53–55). Philip is marginalized both by her colour and her gender as a female black writer. The whole text is written in capital letters to emphasize the quest for a mother tongue:

THE MOTHER THEN PUT HER FINGERS INTO HER CHILD’S MOUTH – GENTLY FORCING IT OPEN; SHE TOUCHES HER TONGUE TO THE CHILD’S TONGUE, AND HOLDING THE TINY MOUTH OPEN, SHE BLOWS INTO IT – HARD. SHE WAS BLOWING WORDS – HER WORDS, HER MOTHER’S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER’S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE – INTO HER DAUGHTER’S MOUTH. (1988, 55)

The image of a mother licking her newborn child is a powerful image. With her tongue, the mother cleans the “creamy white substance” off of the baby’s body (Philip 1988, 53). The mother not only cleans the baby of the birth-fluid, but also cleans the baby of what she has been born into a long history of colonial violence, oppression and adversity. The mother blows “her words, her mother’s words, those of her mother’s mother, and all the mothers before” into her child’s mouth (Philip 1988, 55), an act that is challenging, resistant and defiant. The mother feeds her child with the words of her female ancestors. She gives her daughter voice through breath, “communicating vast land of memory, history, culture, and tradition without uttering a word.” Even though the mother’s gift to her daughter is language itself, “language is re-envisioned as a space outside of the ideological weight of the father tongue, a space in which the daughter can remember what has been forgotten and move towards a better future” (Deloughrey 134).

The speaker’s voice tries to find her mother tongue, but does not know where to look. When she asks, “What is my mother tongue” (1988, 55), she expresses a desire to find a language that can voice the “concerns of a displaced people” (Guttman 64). Yet the language of the people has already been penetrated by the “principal organ of oppression and exploitation” (1988, 58), the colonial discourse of the father tongue. The speaker cannot find her mother tongue because it has been cut off from its cultural and linguistic origins. Just as the “slave caught speaking his native language” (1988, 57) is punished and silenced by the removal of his tongue, so too has the mother tongue been cut out of the mouth of the people. Philip is trying to break the silence of black people by using language as a strategy of resistance to coercion. For Philip, the struggle with language is
the struggle to create powerful images for oneself. Philip discusses how colonial language has oppressed colonized African people. She uses experimental form to resist English as a colonial language. The poem breaks away from conventional and poetic techniques in order to highlight the oppressive strategies of the English language that is presented in the poem as an accomplice of the colonizer in the abduction of Africans. The “mother tongue,” is referred to in the poem as “a space in which to counter, mediate and resist the homogenizing forces” and “disruptive linguistic oppression that standard English has affected and continues to affect” (Verhagen 85).

Conclusion

In *She Tries her Tongue*, Marlene Nourbese Philip tries to overcome the colonial imposition of Standard English which she regards as a language of oppression that silences the natives. She subverts it as a neutral construction and engages in discourses of decolonization that encourages remembrance of the silenced voices of oppressed people. She moves from silence to voice; from the ‘dumb’ silence that the linguistic ‘rape’ forces upon the Africans in the New World, to the resistant voice that records their struggles for liberation. Like Shakespeare’s Caliban, Philip is trying to speak in an empowering voice, to achieve freedom from slavery and racism, to define the self, and to fashion a humane character and a secure, empowered status in the New World. Her poetry is a political statement of the rebellion of African Caribbean women against their colonizers, of the continuity of African history through language and of the uncut umbilical cord with the continent from which Africans were forcibly removed.

Notes

2. She uses the word “I-mage” in reference to the Rastafarian habit of giving special favour to the ‘I’ in many words.

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