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**PUTTING POETRY IN ITS PLACE
FORM AS DISCOURSE IN M. NOURBESE PHILIP'S
"DISCOURSE ON THE LOGIC OF LANGUAGE"**

ALOKA PATEL

One of the primary concerns of M. NourbeSe Philip, an African Caribbean writer born and raised in the British controlled Tobago and Trinidad, like most other writers from the Caribbean, is an attempt to represent the ongoing struggles of Caribbeans to come to terms with their various cultural losses. However, although it is true that her works form a part of the literary tradition of Caribbean writers, it also needs to be noted that Philip's writings, more than any other writer, to put it in the words of Patricia Saunders, "draws the reading audience to another sphere of understanding and interpretation, whether it is through her manipulation of form, or the deployment of scientific discourses, Greek mythology, the imagination of young children, or the loud brashness of the notorious *jamettes* of Port of Spain" (64). In her poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language," which is a sequence from her 1989 collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Philip counters colonial exploitation in the Caribbean by exploding various laws laid down by the European masters. These "laws" were generally restrictive, and could refer to legal laws that governed the lives of slaves in the Caribbean, or Western scientific laws and ideologies that tried to rationalize the social, cultural and intellectual inferiority of a race and gender, or linguistic laws that affected the speech of the black people who were brought to work as slaves on the islands, and the literary use of a 'standard' language. The poem foregrounds the historical and cultural compulsions of speaking and writing in English, a "foreign," as the poet struts in painful recollection and longing for something lost and now forgotten "lan lan lang / language" (32). It recalls a history of black slavery and its colonial aftermath by bringing out the tension between the established father tongue (the language of the White European Christian male), and the lost mother tongue (the Black African female). At the same time, it dwells upon issues of race and gender as effects of the cultural clash of the black Caribbean with their white European masters. In the poem, Philip makes use of both 'standard' and broken English, and manipulates the form to counter the colonizer's notion of the 'standard' English as "universal" and "objective". Elizabeth Deloughrey notes, "Philip... de-centre[s] the 'uni-verse-all' voice, while calling attention to the politics that underlie assertion of 'universalism' and 'objectivity'" (131). The "decentring" process emerges from the innovative formal structure of the poem that lays bare the exclusionary and oppressive practices of the master in standard "rule" governed English, while its effects are demonstrated in the jagged language of the black wo/man; and the hybridized culture of the Caribbean is exposed in the way the two languages appear juxtaposed against each other on the same page, engaged in both a discursive and a counter-

discursive act. This paper deals with the ways in which NourbeSe Philip, in her poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language," looks at discourse as "both an instrument and an effect of power," to use Foucault's words (101), and then dismantles the established formal structure of a poem as a discursive act and an oppositional strategy to challenge various ideological positions of the white colonial masters.

Born in 1947, and slaves in the islands having been emancipated in 1833, the poet obviously has no personal experience of slavery but draws the readers' attention to the pain of a loss that is registered through cultural memory. Language emerges as the site of that memory, holding deep beneath its surface legacies of terror, subjugation, and anguish. The period from 1496 to 1833 had seen Africans being forcibly brought to the islands as slaves and flogged and tortured to serve the plantation economy. Where possible, slaves were isolated from their common language groups and transported and sold in "mixed lots," as a deliberate means of limiting the possibilities of rebellion. The policy of language suppression was continued on the plantations for a long time. The result was that within two or three generations the only language available to the Africans for communication either amongst themselves or with the masters was the European language of the master. The history of the slave trade and its social patterns made it impossible for slaves to be unaware of the cruel pressure of an imposed language and the loss of their own "voice." The greatest anxiety for writers of the islands, therefore, is a realization that the Caribbean cannot be their "motherland" as the place of origin, not so much a geographical location but a cultural construction based on a series of displacements and mixtures of languages and communities of people, of "creolization" or "metissage." It is a society born out of forced uprooting and enslavement of Africans, brutality, destructiveness, and rape—not only sexual but also linguistic, and later, an imposed system of imperial education. Bill Ashcroft points out that "language" in these islands has been "the mode of a constant and pervasive extension of cultural dominance—through ideas, attitudes, histories and ways of seeing—that is central to imperial hegemony" (2) and as such, has come to occupy "the most emotional site for cultural identity" (1). Writers from the islands realize that the Caribbean have no mother tongue, but speak the "broken" language of the European colonizer, which takes different forms of pidgin, patois, or creole—a language which Rochester in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) fails to understand when his Jamaican wife Antoinette speaks to the black woman, Caroline. This broken language, or Patois for them then becomes a

weapon [that] "wrecks havoc" on the English language, resisting the colonizer's attempt at suppressing African history and language. More importantly, patois as a fusion of English and West African languages, is a creative subversive response to a linguistic system whose brutality mirrored the physical, social, and political situation of enslavement. Trapped within the prison that English built around their experience, African Caribbeans shook its walls by inventing an English that to the colonizer was unintelligible. (Gadsby 149)

The throbbing wound of the loss of a mother tongue violently uprooted from its African origins to be forcibly replaced by English, a foreign language to the black Caribbean, is painfully suggested in the broken rhythmic utterances of the first person speaker in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," the poetic voice "I", who has lost the ability of effortless speech:

lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
english
is a foreign anguish (30)

Discourse as a mode of "verbal communication" (Collins Concise Dictionary, 1988) in this case appears to have failed. But in the manner in which the poet goes on to play with the broken words, and then manipulates the formal structure of the poem, she develops a discourse of resistance by defying conventional structures, and formal use of language. In the poem, English becomes the language of dispossessions, entwined, as the poet sees it, in a history of slavery, colonisation, and racial discrimination.

If discourse, as Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short note, "is linguistic communication...as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its purpose" (qtd. in Mills 4), the poem as a "Discourse" seems to argue that the master's discourse is that of exploitation and oppression, and the slave's discourse is that of pain, suffering and resistance. Michel Pecheux stresses on this conflictual nature of discourse:

the *meaning* of a word, expression, proposition, etc., does not exist 'in itself'... but is determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the socio-historical process in which words, expressions and propositions are produced (i.e., reproduced)... *words, expressions, propositions, etc., change their meaning according to the position held by those who use them*, which signifies that they find their meaning by reference to those positions, i.e., by reference to the *ideological formations*... in which those positions are inscribed." (111)

The poem begins with apparent contradiction as the poet first asserts that "English/ is my mother tongue," and then falters, "A mother tongue is not/ not a foreign lan lan lang/ language" (30) to recognize it as "a foreign anguish," (30) and so, as she notes in the second stanza, has the authority of a "father tongue" not "a mother tongue." There is hardly any ambiguity here:

Ultimately, Philip is 'laying claim to two heritages—one very accessible' [white male] 'the other hidden' [black female]. This dichotomy of the white male versus the black female reader highlights Philip's difficult position in relation to the English language. As a black, female, native English speaker, "English is both a mother tongue and a father tongue". The father tongue carries the history of early imperialism, the African diaspora and the values that are associated with European, logocentric epistemology. (Deloughrey 124)

English as a foreign language belonging to white masters, becomes the language of the father as the law giver, of authority given in the Edicts that appear alongside the poem. Although this paper does not attempt a study of the gender issues, it cannot also be ignored that the poet, in referring to the mother tongue and the father tongue is obviously pointing to the contradictions between the powerful and the powerless, the exploiter and the exploited, the master and the slave, with power and authority vested with the white/ male, while the black/ female is presented as a victim of this authority. Philip draws on these contradictions, which, she later says in an interview with Patricia Saunders, "were what [she] wanted," (216) and explores a unique writerly devise that could point to the different discourses of the powerful and the powerless, to "explode" the restrictions imposed by the white colonial masters: "I think the impulse to mess with form may have to do with our history and how much the colonial powers attempted to restrict us and put us into categories and forms" (Saunders 215). As the language of authority, the *Edicts I* and *II* (30-32) lay down the brutal laws by which the powerless slaves are rendered voiceless, and are printed on the right-hand side of the poem, pointing to the political correctness of the space that they occupy. While the faltering, broken language of the black African Caribbean is positioned to the left of the edicts.

That the white master takes the place of the Father is also not very surprising, not only because of his 'legal' imperial authority, but also literally as the biological father considering the extent of physical and sexual violence, and rape of black slave women in the Caribbean islands. The story printed in all bold letters on the left margin is strategically placed to boldly narrate the effect of the white

master's exploitation of the black woman, and the enforced laws of the edicts that have silenced the native languages. "THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE" covering the body of the "NEWBORN CHILD" (30) while symbolic of the superficial identity of the Caribbean as a consequence of the corruptive influence of the white master, it is also suggestive of the dehumanization of the black people by the white. The black female body then, like the language that it uses, becomes the site of conflict between the two races. Like an animal cleaning its new-born of the amniotic fluid covering its body the mother in this section licks her child "UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE" (30). The suggestion is clear—the dehumanization of the black slave through sexual abuse and physical exploitation. If as a symbol, the tongue refers to "the overseer's whip," (33) as an organ of the human body, a sexual organ and "the principal organ of articulate speech" (33) it becomes a synecdoche for all forms of English "oppression and exploitation" (33). It is only a mother[s] tongue that can help, through metamorphosis of the organ of exploitation into an organ for fostering through transformation of the "whimper" of the new-born child into "HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER" (32), to overcome the oppressor's language. Philip lays claim that "in the absence of any 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" ("Absence of Writing" 18). She draws our attention to "Africa as a powerful presence in the Caribbean," and to the association between a nurturing mother and Africa: "For me, it is a mothering presence, a mother who has been hidden and despised and who has nurtured that effervescent ability to overcome this attempt to erase you and to create something that is living, breathing, and beautiful" (697). Her play on the words 'mother' and 'tongue' also makes us wonder of an implicit reference to Isaiah XI: 15¹, the drying up the Red Sea to bridge the distance between Europe and Africa as a reminder and reproach to white man's incursions into the African lands, and the Middle Passage. Drawing associations between the land and the violated body, the poet refers to the loss of a mother land/ tongue:

I have no mother
 tongue
 no mother to tongue
 no tongue to mother
 to mother
 tongue
 me

Phillip discovered that she could not challenge the history of African displacement and slavery, of plantation economy, and colonisation without challenging the language that she had inherited. Evie Shockley, in her Foreword (2014) to Philip's collection, draws attention to what Philip sees as the "challenge... facing the African Caribbean writer" of "us[ing] the language in such a way that the historical realities... are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is" (xii). But the irony, the poet realizes, is that in order to achieve her purpose, she has to use the same English language. Jamaica Kincaid, another Caribbean writer, remarks in her polemical work, *A Small Place*: "isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?" (44) Narrative itself then becomes a problem. As an answer to this problem of narrativization in a foreign language Philip says that she "look[s] at language more as an artist looks at paint" (Mahlis 693). Like other writers from the Caribbean, such as Merle Hodge, Lorna Goodison, and Grace Nichols, who claim a right to creole forms of the English language in favour of what Kamau Brathwaite calls "nation language," Philip also claims such a right, but prefers to refer to it as "Caribbean demotic" because "nation," as she says, "is a

male discourse," (Mahlis 684). She poses this demotic against the British or "Queen's English" as a subversion of what is considered as standard, and claims the broken language, "a dumb tongue," of silences laced with "another tongue": "dub-tongued," (30) as her mother tongue. The demotic as a reminder of European colonial incursions into African space is explained by Philip in her interview with Mahlis:

I'm far more interested in playing with the whole idea of *demos*, going back to Egypt, to draw a bead, so to speak, on the hidden histories of the people responsible for the richly subversive language of the Caribbean. The demotic was the popular or vulgar form of Egyptian writing and opposed to the hieratic or priestly style. And it was this meaning and the fact that it is specifically related to Egypt that attracted me to this word as a descriptive term for Caribbean languages. Because as you know until recently Western scholarship had been successful in removing Egypt from Africa. To rename what was traditionally described as "bad English" with a word of Greek origin harking back to Egyptian writing as a nice riposte and subversive of categories (684-85).

The above statement is also a reminder of the Biblical discourse, referred to earlier, which justified white man's crossing over the "Egyptian sea" and invasion into African lands. We should not also forget that the Bible, and "Cursed be Canaan" had also been cited in America to justify slavery.

The strategy that Philip adopts to go beyond the mere use of language as an instrument to curse, as Caliban did in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is to boldly experiment with the 'form' of a poem. She shares her views regarding the importance of form for her in illustrating black African experience in the Caribbean: "The form of the poem becomes not only a truer reflection of the experience out of which it came, but also as important as the content. The poem as a whole, therefore, becomes a more accurate mirror of the circumstances that underpin it" ("Managing" 298). Shockley makes note of Philip's experimentation in "Discourse on the Logic of Language":

Though it is technically four pages, I read it as two two-page spreads, each of which contains four 'voices' speaking in distinct discourses. One speaks in a recognizably 'poetic' discourse; this text, which is lineated and centered on the left-hand page, progresses via repetition, with subtle but powerful variations. Another, represented in italics and located in the right margin of the left-hand page, announces 'edicts' in a legal discourse. A third, in the left margin of the left-hand page, in all capital letters and landscape orientation, offers a storytelling discourse. And the last 'voice' dominates the whole right-hand page; like the first, it is in normal typeface, but its unlineated paragraphs communicate through the 'objective' discourse of education: the prose of a textbook or reference volume. (xii)

Unlike in conventional poems, where the work of art attempts a verbal message in poetic discourse, Philip's "Discourse" engages in an intertextual discursive act as a mode of resistance. The several discourses are so positioned in the text that the discursive act becomes more meaningful within the formal structure in which they are laid. Conscious of the presence of a reader on both her right and her left side, the three discourses on the right hand pages of the four page long poem are situated strategically on the left, right, and centre, their position determined by the nature of their discourse. Philip writes, "As a writer, I had been aware for some time of a reader over my right shoulder: white, Oxford-educated, and male. Over my left shoulder...was an old wizened and 'wizened' black woman" (Managing 297). In "Discourse on the Logic of Language" the effect on the left margin, is explained by the cause on the right in prose. The poetry, which illustrates the subjective experience of dispossession and deformity is situated in the middle, between the two prose narratives. The framing of the three discourses on the same page give to the reader three different voices, which when textually analysed give to us the result in the last page as a set of 'objective,'

multiple choice type, but rhetorical questions. The text then begins to speak for itself as the different voices confront the reader on the face of the page. Dorothy Smith notes, "The notion of discourse displaces the analysis from the text as originating in writer or thinker, to the discourse itself as an ongoing intertextual process" (161). On the right margin are the *Edicts* of white slave holders in unembodied voice, addressed to a second person, and framed to suit the purpose of their formulators in brutal 'standard' language of enforced law. On the left margin is the third-person narrative voice in poetic prose as a story-telling device, which uses imageries to illustrate the dehumanizing effect of the law. In the middle, in poetic form is the illustration in broken, spliced language, of the subjective experience of the first-person "I" as it undergoes the pain of being uprooted and dispossessed of mother/tongue, of what is given only in the form of imageries in the third person narrative voice. Whereas the *Edicts* represent the master's voice imposed on the slaves, the inherited language of the mother can use only imageries for telling the story of a painful severance from the original mother/tongue. The writer realizes that narrative representation of the Caribbean experience in a broken/spliced language, in standard forms, whether as history or story, then becomes problematic. The residues of the tyrannical history on the cultural memory have such a corrosive effect that rational thinking gets affected, representation, though not untrue, becomes deformed, and speech becomes impossible. Speech fails to express the pain of the loss suffered, and the narrative voice becomes "dumb-tongued/ dub-tongued" (30). It is then that language stutters, words become utterances, and discourse reversed.

The speech of the master is characterized by exclusions and restrictive conditions. The impact of the exclusions can be subjectively experienced in the distorted language of the slave. Whereas the master uses logic as a tool of exploitation, the language of the muted race is that of shame, of protest, of enforced loyalty, of withdrawal into the dark recesses of foetal non-existence. Visibly pregnant with the "I/anguish" that the black African Caribbean was forced to use, the "language of my oppression... the only one I had" as a language of resistance "to subvert... the discourse of my non-being" ("Managing" 296), the palpitating broken rhythm of the poem makes the reader undergo the pains of a difficult labour, and the birth of a new language. It makes the pain 'speak itself' instead of merely reporting. The form of the poem is so manipulated that it brings about a dialogue between "two modes of discourses"—between the "objectivity" of a narrative "defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator" and the "subjectivity" of the discourse "given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an ego" to borrow from Hayden White's (3) reading of Benveniste while trying to make a distinction between discourse and narrative.

Whereas in conventional poems the ambiguous nature of language is employed to convey several layers of meaning, in Philip's "Discourse", the context remaining the same, with different narrative voices—coercive, empirical, prose and poetic confronting each other on a single platform, the political purpose of the text becomes apparent, communicated to the reader without ambiguity. In the two narratives on the right and the left, where events are recorded as they "appear on the horizon of the story.... no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves" (White 3). So that the new "Discourse," the "demotic" now pushes the language of logic to the "horizon," displacing the standard, legal and authoritative language of the powerful English colonizer and slave owner to the margins, and itself taking the central position. The shifting margin between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' narratives reverses the relation between the centre and the periphery. The third person narrative on the left makes the narrative voice ambiguous with implicit reference to the black female identity of the narrator. And if this third person narrative of and about the black mother on the left, uses the standard English which she inherits from her white master, is positioned to the left margin, it is printed in bold letters and is in landscape orientation, so that the page needs to be turned sideways to be read, it is as if to underscore boldly the demotic "tongue" of the African Caribbean. As Foucault states

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourses can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (100-101).

What emerges in Philip's text, with poetic and non-poetic discourses confronting each other, then may not at all appear as a poem. However, the "Discourse" presents itself as poetry "in which the dominant function is the orientation toward the message" (Waugh 58). The "Discourse" may be seen as the "complex superstructure" of Roman Jakobson's *vers libre* depending on the co-presence of both poetry and prose to serve its end. The poetry in first person in the middle, trapped between the literary and fictional prose on the left, and the legal discourse on the right, best illustrates the Afro-Caribbean cultural and linguistic situation in spatial terms as undergoing a transitional phenomenon. Similarly, it is also bound between scientific writing and 'objective' textbook/evaluative discourse. As such, these various texts exemplify Jakobson's notion of prose as "transitional phenomena" (Waugh 59) or an intermediate state in which 'literary prose' "closer to the poetic end," and 'practical prose' "closer to the referential" become intertwined (Waugh 59). Seen as a structural whole, the "Discourse" calls attention to its autotelic and autoreferential nature, and foregrounds the social and historical dimensions of the Afro Caribbean reality. The poetic message gets communicated best and becomes more effective by bringing out the dialectical relation between the referential qualities of the prose that is used within the "Discourse" and the paradigmatic associations of the poetry as part of a historical and cultural context. As Linda Waugh puts it so appropriately, "What in the referential use of language remains latent and subordinate can become in the poetic function patent and predominant" (70). In a manner, by literally placing the text and the context on the same plane, Philip combats not only literary norms, but also the hierarchy of the several discourses. History, memory and language come together to demonstrate that "even poetry and the way it was brought to, and taught in, the Caribbean was a way of management" ("Managing" 296). The poem is so structured to redefine the 'margins' to which the blacks were pushed as 'frontier' from where, Philip says, "our perspective immediately changes. Our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead... spaces in which we can empower ourselves." ("Managing" 296)

The different discourses in Philip's poem have also been referred to by other critics, but differently. Naomi Guttman, for example, chooses to look at the other discourses besides the legal discourse as discourses of amnesia, aphasia, and mythical discourse. The mythical discourse, of course, makes reference to the mother-daughter story as illustrated through characters like Ceres and Prosepine in other poems in the collection. While the aphasic and amnesic discourses make obvious reference to scientific discourses on 'linguistic disorders.' I go on to elaborate the way the poem cites only to challenge nineteenth-century scientific discourses, which used the white man's "knowledge" as an instrument to justify and establish the superiority of the white races over women and other races. The prose used in this discourse is that of textbooks to give the 'findings' of two nineteenth-century physicians, Dr Broca and Dr. Wernicke. According to these physicians the physiological structure of the brain determined human intelligence:

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 people of colour.

Understanding and recognition of the spoken word takes place in Wernicke's area—the frontal lobe, situated next to the auditory cortex; from there relevant information passes

to Broca's area—situated next to the left frontal cortex—which then forms the response and passes it on to the motor cortex. The motor cortex controls the muscles of speech. (31)

Pierre Paul Broca, a nineteenth century French physician, anatomist and anthropologist is well-known for his discovery in 1861 of the seats of articulate speech in the left frontal region of the brain, which later came to be known as Broca's area. His work revealed the cause of aphasia, or "speechlessness"—the inability to comprehend or formulate language, to be lesions in Broca's area. Similarly, Carl Wernicke, a German physician and anatomist's research, along with that of Paul Broca, dealt with of the effects of brain disease on speech and language. He noted that damage to what is now known as Wernicke's area or the left posterior resulted in deficits in language comprehension. The associated syndrome is known as Wernicke's aphasia or receptive aphasia.

Although anatomists and neurologists have studied diverse forms of aphasia, Philip's poem works to demonstrate that the association of the broken language of the Afro-Caribbean with a pathological condition ignores the cultural amnesia, the actual factors responsible for the lack of a mother tongue among the coloured Caribbean. Roman Jakobson suggests that even before it can be considered as a neurological or psychological problem it must be realized that "aphasia is first and foremost a disintegration of language" ("On Aphasic Disorders..." 93). The linguistic impact on a mass of people of the tyrannical history of colonization, displacement and slavery, and consequent miscegenation, hybridization and creolization cannot certainly be explained simply as a pathological condition. The poem directs the readers' attention towards the existence of mixed or hybrid cases of language/aphasia against what neurologists would look at as 'pure' forms of language. As if in an answer to the pathologized understanding of language which ignores acquired and spontaneous use of it in many cultures, the poem in broken English is significantly placed between the 'pure' usages. The pure usage, on the other hand, the poem displays, is either imposed, and therefore, oppressive as in the *Edicts*, or acquired as 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" (32). In either case both languages are 'acquired.' Tyrone Williams in her review of *She Tries Her Tongue* points to Philip's description of the "relationship between one's 'mother' and one's 'acquired' languages" (227). She notes that all the poems in Philip's collection "argue that all language is acquired and that all languages, therefore, may be regarded as either one's actual or potential mother tongues. But it's precisely the differences between the actual and the potential that constitute history—here, the history of colonialism" (227).

However, as later research reveal, Broca was also a polygenist, who believed in the plurality of races. He wrote influential works on "hybridization," concluding that descendants of miscegenous relationships, of different racial groups could be agenesic, dysgenic, paragenetic, or eugenic as different degrees of in/fertility, to be belonging to 'superior' or 'inferior' races, thereby, contributing to ambiguity regarding understanding of distinct racial types. "The hybridized space [can be] therefore...recognized as a site of contention" (41) says J. A. Brown-Rose and goes on to cite Bakhtin for whom the hybrid is "profoundly productive" (41) capable of re/producing new cultures and languages. The space marked for the hybrid, as an in-between space, becomes the site which allows for a dialogue between the white master races and the black slaves using the medium of the creolized language. Philip manipulates the language inherited from the white masters just so as to claim it as her own, in agreement to Kincaid's words:

it didn't bother the Dutch at all to take a flower that didn't grow in their country and just take it on so that now the world thinks of tulips as Dutch. And it adds to the Dutch. But we can't do that; we don't do that. More and more people who look like me cling to their narrow definitions of themselves. They will not take anything that doesn't have some sort of phony or some kind of ancestral image—to Africa or anywhere else. But it is really a sign of defeat when you cling so much. What you ought to do is take back. Not just claim.

Take—period. Take anything. Take Shakespeare. Just anything that makes sense. Just take it. That's just fine." (Ferguson 168)

Philip will not just claim a mother tongue, but she will use it to manipulate the "form" of a standard English poem to put it "in its place":

by cramping the space traditionally given the poem itself, by forcing it to share its space with something else—an extended image about women, words, language and silence; with the edicts that established the parameters of silence for the African in the New World, by giving more space to descriptions of the physiology of speech, the scientific legacy of racism we have inherited, and by questioning the tongue as organ and concept, poetry is put in its place. ("Managing" 297)

This "Discourse" of Philip as such stands out as a subversive linguistic and cultural act. It is the rule governed nature of discourse that is challenged by the dismantling of a structure to arrive at a discourse, not of communication but confrontation by breaking previously held notions of language and representation. At the same time this 'defiance' of traditional forms of poetry also is a reminder to what C. L. R. James had noted, and Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott also problematised, that for a poet from the Caribbean there is no national literary tradition to follow, no "continuous flow... to rediscover and stimulate the invention of new forms and new symbols" (James 184-185). Hence, the new form that could now be visualised could only depend upon an African culture that is lost, or a culture imposed upon the Caribbean by English institutions—the school, the church, the law courts—a creolized culture.

Sometimes, Philip's play with words gives her poems a feel of jazz, an improvisation of a West African musical tradition by the black slaves of America. And yet, her "Discourse" although is an attempt at subversion of the 'standard' English lyric, it cannot also be sung in the tradition of jazz. Philip says, "that in setting out to destroy the lyric voice what I had in fact done was replace it with a polyvocal, multivocal chorus.... I realized too that the presence of the chorus meant that I had been successful in displacing the lyric voice" (Mahlis 686). This gives the poem an impression of a postmodern text, fragmented, multivocal, and representative of the cultural experience of a race that has lost its tradition and history. It must, however, be remembered that the term 'postmodern' had not yet been coined when her collection *She Tries Her Tongue* was published. The poem in fact follows no tradition. Philip denies even a Black tradition, as she declares in her essay, *A Genealogy of Resistance*: "my work does not fit the traditions of Black poetry" (130-131). Recognizing the "paradox of her linguistic subversion" (Verhagen 83-84) the impossibility of reading her poems aloud, she acknowledges, "I had so succeeded at my 'subversion', I found it difficult to 'read' many of the poems in the collection" (126).

Although it is not on the performativity of the Afro Caribbean experience as a subversive act that her poem depends, one cannot also deny the performativity of Philip's poem. With multiple voices adding to the dramatic image, as it happens in her other works like "Universal Grammar," her poems have also been performed. But as Katherine Verhagen so appropriately points out while making reference to a "three-tiered" performance of "Discourse on the Logic of Language" by Coomi S. Vevaina with a group of students, "though Philip and others see performance capability even in her more 'difficult' poems, that understanding did not precede the print publication of her work but only came into being afterward" (87-88). Rather, just as the black body had been an object to be exploited and violated, the "Discourse" becomes a graphic image of a collective experience that not only needs to be 'seen' but understood as a linguistic object. As a "text" that can be visualised and experimented with to suit its poetic purpose, the poem helps the reader to conceptualize the linguistic violation of a race just as the tongue as an "offending organ" of the "slave caught speaking his native language" was to be put on display "so that all may see and tremble" (Edict II, 32).

NOTE

- 1 KJV, Isaiah 11: 15: And the Lord shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make men go over dryshod.

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