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Amity Reading

ENG 141

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Enjambment through Exile

Kedarnath Singh's 'Mother Tongue', translated by Kalpna Singh-Chitnis, gives readers a glimpse of the emotional complexities of immigration and the struggle that comes with displacement. Singh meditates on how language shapes an immigrant's identity and explores the emotional toll of cultural displacement. He uses vivid imagery and a tone of quiet reverence to reflect on the lasting bond that an immigrant has with their native tongue. This explication will analyze the poem line-by-line to examine how Singh uses certain literary devices to express the deep emotional resonance that comes with linguistic return.

“As ants return to
their nests,
a woodpecker
returns to the wood,
and the airplanes return to the airport” (Singh 1-5).

Singh starts with an overarching parallel structure based on similes, comparing the speaker's return to their language with the instinctual returns in both nature and technology. Singh compares the human biological pull of home with that of ants and woodpeckers, suggesting that it is universally ingrained in every biological being. The man-made image of airplanes returning to the airport further reinforces this idea, highlighting the physical and psychological journey that the speaker undergoes to follow the impulse of returning to their

homeland, placing them in a global and modern context. Singh underscores how this very impulse is both natural and inevitable.

Singh mentions the “red sky” in line 7 to evoke symbols of nostalgia and transition. Generally, red and orange in the sky often signal the presence of longing and the passage of time; here, it’s a metaphor for the emotional weight that the memory carries. The memory triggers a sentimental response, tinged with equal parts joy and regret. Singh hints at how the speaker has these feelings because of time spent away from their native tongue, and in effect, from a part of themselves, too.

“O my language,
I return to you,
when my tongue feels
stiff from
remaining silent,
hurting my soul.” (Singh, 8-13).

There is a shift felt in the poem when going from the first to the second stanza. Perhaps because of the movement from external to internal imagery. The speaker directly addresses their mother tongue, giving it life as a beloved companion. This direct address gives a devotional tone to their mother tongue. Singh tells readers how linguistic alienation is a form of existential pain. He uses enjambment to further emphasize metaphors like “stiff” tongue to get this idea across. The enjambment after the word “feels” makes readers pause, as if the tongue is feeling intense discomfort. This then sets up the ‘stiffness’ in the next line. This enjambment technique is used throughout the second stanza, personifying the speaker’s pain and feelings of discomfort. While

also underscoring how the forced assimilation that immigrants go through severs a vital connection to their cultural and personal identity.

The poem was written in Hindi originally and was later translated into English by Kalpna. This embodies the themes of displacement throughout the poem. The speaker's journey back to their native land and tongue parallels the act of translation, both attempting to restore the connection and meaning that has been taken away from them. Singh's diction throughout the poem is purposefully unembellished and simple, and yet it retains the evocative and emotional intensity that conveys the speaker's turmoil. When ants return to their nests and woodpeckers to wood, they seek out familiar spaces, similarly, the speaker speaks plainly, as one would speak to a close companion in a shared language. Singh employs a gentle yet resolute tone throughout the poem, seemingly trying to capture the speaker's journey of reclaiming something inside themselves that was lost through displacement. The poem's transitions from simile-driven to direct emotional appeal reflect the speaker's psychological journey, from external observation to internal reconciliation. The poem concludes with a moment of clarity and resolution, implying that language is a vessel for identity, belonging, and memory. Singh restores a fractured part of the speaker through the return to their native tongue. In doing so, Singh also reminds readers that identity is ever changing and is not rooted in place, but in the words and phrases we use to define our external and internal observations.

Works Cited

Singh, Kedarnath. "Mother Tongue." 1988. Trans. Kalpna Singh-Chitnis. *World Literature* 19th February. Accessed 31 April 2025.
<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/poetry/three-poems-india-kedarnath-singh>

Changes from the first draft:

I started this rewrite by fixing comma splices, grammatical errors, and logical issues. Then I proceeded to rework run-on sentences and reword certain parts that I felt needed to be expressed clearly. In the first draft, I used semi-ambiguous constructions, such as words like “themselves” instead of “themselves” and other informal expressions. I fixed these structural errors and used them to elevate the tone and match the context of the assignment. I also paid close attention to improving transitions and subject clarity. In this draft, I specified tonal shifts and literary devices and techniques used to convey the feelings that Singh was trying to convey. I also added new sections and interpretations of the poem that I felt like needed to be talked about. Singh expresses a feeling in this poem that I can relate to, and I wanted to give that justice to the best of my ability. In this draft, I also aimed to fix the moments of listing in the first draft, and did so by building connections between sentences and paragraphs more smoothly.