

The business of
language in 'to the
welsh critic who
doesn't find me
identifiably...



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In the poem *To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian*, Arundhati Subramaniam explores the politics of language and how it affects the identity of Indian immigrants in England. She poses questions about where and with whom language belongs and implies that it is for the English to judge. Subramaniam also comments on how Indian identity is decided by the English and this is reflected on rather bitterly in the poem. The English expectations of Indian authenticity are highlighted by Subramaniam to be incorrect and slightly ridiculous. This analysis of Subramaniam's position on the "this business of language" will explore these ideas further.

Language plays a significant role in identity (Joseph, 2004). Language and identity have a dynamic relationship. Language creates a sense of group identity, whether it is national or ethnic. And the need for identity through expression continually shapes language. Identity itself affects the way one interprets what is said. The language one speaks identifies one to others the place which one comes from and will subsequently label one as an outsider or insider. This applies to even the way one speaks a language. Speaking a language with a different accent still alerts people to the fact that one is not the same as them. With language having such an effect on identity, it can be used to control certain groups of people. In the poem *To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian*, Arundhati Subramaniam speaks about the English categorising Indians on the basis of language and how 'Indian' an Indian is behaving.

The title of the poem refers to a critic from Wales. Wales has a history of fighting for the country's autonomy as they are part of the United Kingdom.

They have managed to establish their own government but the United

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Kingdom still has ultimate power. There is the concern amongst some of the Welsh that their culture will be absorbed into English culture and so it is very relevant that the poem is addressed to a Welsh national. The Welsh would be quick to criticise anyone whom they thought was giving up their culture, especially the submission to English culture. They themselves are determined to retain their culture and identity in the face of a more powerful nation. Subramaniam is using the title of the poem to address the Welsh critic but also possibly to give a message to anyone who feels it their duty to determine another's identity.

The use of first person point of view for the speaker creates a better sense of what a person in a foreign country might feel with regards to the difficulties around adopting that language. Subramaniam begins with commenting on how the English believe that their culture and language is elite and assume that it is a goal that India wants to achieve. ' You believe you know me" (Subramaniam 1). The word ' believe' indicates that in fact the English do not actually know the speaker and the sense of cultural arrogance is highlighted. " You imagine that you've cracked / my deepest fantasy" (Subramaniam 7-8). Subramaniam mentions Dharma (Subramaniam 10), which means to have a cosmic order or purpose. This comment has a rather sardonic tone and could imply that the speaker feels the English think Indians aim for English life in an almost spiritual manner and possibly finds it offensive, or on the contrary laughable. But then the speaker creates room for a possible argument in the third stanza when she says, " You may have a point" (Subramaniam 13). The speaker admits to not knowing much about what is supposedly Indian, namely cricket and speaking fluent Tamil. She

also indicates that she agrees with some first world concepts and would enjoy certain first world luxuries such as things being “ odour-free, / bottled in Switzerland, / money back guaranteed” (Subramaniam 19-21). But on the contrary, “ You may have a point” (Subramaniam 13), means that it is merely something to consider and not the absolute truth. These few things that the speaker admits to not being very familiar with cannot determine or declare an Indian identity untrue.

In the global village that the world has become, cultural characteristics have become more of a stereotype that what truly happens in society. The aspects of European culture that the speaker comments on appreciating doesn't mean that she has rejected her own culture. It is merely a new mixing and combining of cultures. But it appears that, from the comments in the poem, “ Smear my consonants / with cow-dung and turmeric and godhuli” (Subramaniam 48-49), that the British expect exoticism and for Indian culture to be completely opposite to English culture. One could say that the English are trying to create a new Indian identity based on a lack of understanding of Indian culture and what one could call the tourist's idea of India. The reference to “ rustic” (Subramaniam 38) implies that the English expect India to be rural. This misunderstanding possibly stems from cultural arrogance on the English side; possibly the lack of desire to get to know Indians properly. But in the poem, Subramaniam is challenging this expectation because as the title of the poem *To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian* indicates, the English are deciding that the Indians as not really Indian enough if they do not meet these false expectations.

In line 22 "This business about language" (Subramaniam), the speaker poses the question of language and proceeds to ask who it belongs to, where it comes from and what it represents. Subramaniam uses parallelism by starting eight lines with "how much" (Subramaniam 23-30) and three lines with "how I say" (Subramaniam 31-33). This repetition suggests the complexity of this business of language and the amount of different aspects one should look at when discussing it. There are so many different questions that need to be asked. There is also the suggestion of the importance of point of view in "how I say". Written language can be objective but verbal language is subjective in the way it is received. The shift takes place in line 34 when the speaker hands the question over to the person she is addressing: "It is all yours to measure" (Subramaniam 34). She does not answer it herself. One can argue that the English are the owners of the language they speak and have a right to judge how it is spoken and perhaps the speaker is implying that in a foreign land the question isn't hers to answer. The question is simultaneously rhetorical and begging an answer. Perhaps the speaker would like to answer it but feels her view would be seen as invalid.

In the first four stanzas, each stanza is one sentence. The mood changes after the shift in line 34 and becomes somewhat bitter. The stanzas become longer and are broken up into sentences. The short sentences create a sense that the speaker has become irritable. The imagery becomes unpleasant. Words like "Pathology" (Subramaniam 35) and halitosis (Subramaniam 36) are used and are both associated with and create an image of disease. This could suggest that the speaker is expecting to get judged quite negatively

when her speech is assessed by the English. The speaker refers to the Englishman as the "Arbiter of identity" (Subramaniam 40). There is a slight sardonic tone to this address but simultaneously there is possibly recognition of the power someone has over one when one speaks their language. The speaker states rather defiantly: "remake me as you will" (Subramaniam 41). It can be argued that the way an Indian person speaks English will open him/her up to being classified by English terms according to their own understanding. This implies that the true identity of an Indian individual cannot be communicated to an English speaking person if it is not in a way that the English can understand. So in an English world it is possible for an Indian's identity to be completely lost. The speaker refers to this idea of an English world in the line "Teach me how to belong, / the way you do, / on every page of world history" (Subramaniam 56-58). The English are seen to naturally have a respected place in the world. This could possibly also be commenting on how history and current affairs are mostly told from the west's point of view.

One could challenge the expectation of Indians having to be so-called authentic when their point of view is rarely taken into account by first world countries. This authenticity that is expected is not very respectful or of high opinion either. Imagery of Cow-dung (Subramaniam 49) and rancid sweat (Subramaniam 50-51) is used in the last stanza. They both give off unpleasant smells and paint the speaker in a rather unclean light. This could refer to how the speaker believes the English see her. The word "teach" (Subramaniam 45, 56) is used twice in the last stanza. It is said in a slightly mocking tone and one could say that the speaker is only pretending to be

subordinate, reflecting the English belief and missionary ideas that they can teach other cultures how to “ come of age” (Subramaniam 45) and “ belong” (Subramaniam 56). This mocking tone perhaps indicates the feeling of the speaker that regardless of being misunderstood, Indians will retain their identity. But the line “ Grant me a visa / to the country of my birth” (Subramaniam 54, 55) does create a sense of true displacement - to be applying as an outsider to enter the country where one was born. Where does one really belong then? One could say that Subramaniam is bridging the gap between the two cultures through language by communicating the Indian point of view in a way that the English can understand.

Subramaniam gives critical comment on the assumptions made about Indians and the power of language in those assumptions. She is painting a picture of what it feels like to be on the controlled end of language, especially in a colonial setting. But Subramaniam is also making it clear that there is a true and valid Indian identity despite being misunderstood. Her critical position on the politics of language supports the Indian voice and looks at issues from a different perspective.

References Joseph, J. (2004). Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious. UK: Palgrave Macmillan