

The theme of identity  
in three poems from  
different cultures by  
agard, bhatt, and...



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The three poems explored in this essay each different explore ideas and views towards identity. In 'Half Caste,' John Agard writes as a representative for biracial people and addresses the problem of racism. In 'Search for My Tongue,' Sujata Bhatt explores who she has become after moving countries and questions her ethnicity while Grace Nichols' 'Hurricane Hits England' expresses her feelings as an immigrant in a foreign country where she reconnects with her cultural background. Each of the three poets show hard search for their sense of belonging in society.

The motives of the three poems differ, where Agard addresses the problem of racial prejudice and discrimination, while the other poems express the power of ethnicity. In 'Caste' Agard writes as a representative for all biracial people and connotes his wishes to stop racism: 'yu mean Picasso mix red an green is a half-caste canvas?' In this rhetorical question, he compares himself to a piece of art, questioning why people look up to Picasso's 'distinct coloured' artworks and yet accuse him of being 'mixed.' In the end, Agard addresses the reader directly: 'an I will tell yu de other half of my story. He tells the reader that there is more to him and how people need to open their minds to accepting people of different ethnic origins.

In contrast to 'Caste,' we see how 'Search for My Tongue' and 'Hurricane' address the power of ethnicity. Bhatt's poem is formatted into one column, her mother language, Gujarati, is placed in the middle of the poem. This suggests interruptions, showing how her mother tongue comes back effortlessly and is always present in her subconsciousness thus showing us how powerful ethnicity is. Similarly, Nichols demonstrates the power of her Caribbean heritage.

The fifth stanza is reminiscent of an action of worship where she tries to connect with the spirits in questioning the meaning of the hurricane. 'What is the meaning of trees ... Their cratered graves?' The constant references made with the Caribbean shows us her influenced thinking thus showing us the power of ethnicity. One of the biggest differences between 'Caste' and the other two poems is in the use of tone. Agard holds a strong sarcastic tone, shown straight from the beginning: 'Excuse me standing on one leg I'm half-caste.'

Agard interrogates the prejudice people confidently with no sense of doubt. Unlike Agard, Bhatt's 'Search For my Tongue' has a light-hearted tone shown from the beginning: 'You ask me what I mean by saying I have lose my tongue.' The line is rather conversational but does convey a sense of vulnerability, where the pronoun portrays 'you' as someone who doesn't understand 'I's' anxiety. 'Hurricane' similarly, presents a sense of doubt towards the poet's Caribbean roots.

The constant use of questions throughout the poem reflects this: 'Tell me why you visit An English coast? The mantra in the second stanza also shows her desperation to connect with the past. The desperation in her writing gives a sense of isolation provoking a weak tone. All three poems convey a sense of the poets having two identities. Agard is Afro- Guyanese and therefore grew up with two identities. While there is prejudice and discrimination towards his mixed identity, Agard is happy for who he is. He is not willing to change, reflected by the use of phonetic language and imperatives where he addresses the readers as 'yu,' which is considered rough and insulting.

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The phonetic spelling reflects Agard's dialect and ethnic origins. However, he uses the proper spelling of 'you' instead of 'yu' in 'I'm sure you'll understand' where he further mocks others and shows that he can speak properly but chooses not to. He is proud of being biracial and will not change. In *Search for My Tongue*, Bhatt has a fear of being Americanised and losing her ethnic background. Unlike Agard, she is not confident and seems to reject her new identity and is scared of losing her ethnicity.

Your mother tongue would rot, rot and die in your mouth until you had to spit it out. 'The personification shows how the poet's identity changes along with the struggles of emotional battles between her mother language and English. The immediate repetition of the word 'rot' emphasises the unpleasant fear she has, showing her weakening ethnicity. However, we see that she grows stronger and becomes more confident towards the end: 'Every time I think I've forgotten, I think I've lost the mother tongue, it blossoms out of my mouth.'

The end of the poem connotes an energetic tone depicted by the word 'blossom' symbolising rising power and beauty. The metaphor of a plant portrays the mother language as the 'roots' of her identity. Bhatt understands who she is and accepts it. In 'Hurricane,' Nichols talks about her life as Caribbean woman who is also an immigrant in England. She conveys a sense of split identity.

Like Bhatt, she is not confident but is then reassured by the storm in the end 'That the earth is the earth is the earth. Her split identity becomes shared.'

She understands that it's all the same wherever she is. Her past and present identities have merged and become one.

Ultimately, we can see how the three poems address different views towards the idea of identity. Undoubtedly, Agard, Bhatt, and Nichols had overcome many hardships in exploring for their place in society. The three poets hold unique and different views, but they all show the immense power identity holds and emphasise its importance.