The African Female Body as a form of Resistance in a Post-Colonialist Context: A Study of Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*

Abeer Refky Seddeek, PhD
Lecturer of English Language and Literature
Arab Academy for Science
Technology and Maritime Transport
Egypt

Abstract

The main aim of this paper was to discuss the Afro-Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip's feminism in a postcolonial context as evident in her work She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks (1989). The study aimed to show that She Tries Her Tongue was a clear protest against the gendered, racist and sexist silencing practiced by the colonisers against the colonised. The study illustrated that the tool the black female used to protest against her white master was her body, represented in her tongue that she used to break the silence imposed on her. The themes elaborated were: defying the white patriarchal oppression; repressing female sexuality by Western Christianity and patriarchal authority; challenging patriarchal discourse by resorting to mother tongue and culture; passing the mother tongue to younger generations to preserve identity; and assuming a new shape to find true identity despite all the misfortunes endured. Finally, though Philip did not claim to achieve complete victory over the oppressor's culture or to break his hegemony, she embodied the increasing power of her tongue to maintain her image and identity.

Keywords: female body – hybridity – identity – patriarchal discourse – patriarchal hegemony – postcolonialism – resistance

Significance of the Study

The Afro-Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip (1947 -) is one of the most prolific Caribbean-Canadian writers who explore topics related to feminism and postcolonialism. In her writings, she focuses on the power of language and how words can shape identity, particularly the identity of the colonised female. Though language is attributed greater attention in the literature discussing Philip's poetry, it is not her only weapon of resistance, the female as she delineates plays a major role in retaining the lost identity of the colonised.

This paper refers to the work of the postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft *et al*.'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003), Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) in analysing Philip's poetry. Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* (1989), for which she was the winner of La Casa de las Americas in 1988, is discussed from postcolonial and gender perspectives. The reason for focusing on postcolonial poetry is that it takes just a small portion of postcolonial studies compared to fiction or drama because, as Jahan Ramazani says, "it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies" (4). Also, the important role of woman as the guardian of the mother tongue and culture in a postcolonial society is a significant topic that needs to be highlighted in Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue*.

Introduction

Philip emphasises the significance of her mother-tongue in her essay "Ignoring Poetry" from her book *A Genealogy of Resistance* (1997):

> 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 be-ing? … How does the poet work a language engorged 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? (120).

Here Philip questions the possibility of forging a new language that the enslaved can use to defy the coloniser. In her essay, "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy," Philip explains that the coloniser has destroyed the language of the colonised, thus depriving her of her ability to think, imagine and express her feelings: "in stripping her of her language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the image – in denying the voice expression, in fact – the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied" (14). According to Philip, using alien European languages would only negate the Africans' personality, the ability of expression, and the power of creation as if they were trying to replace their own consciousness with that of the coloniser ("The Absence" 15).

Hence, the Africans had a sense of estrangement due to what Edward Said called Orientalism. Said defines Orientalism as "a political vision of reality" that provokes the difference between what is supposed to be the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them") (43). For Said, colonisers believe that the "Oriental" refers to "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'" creatures (40), hence colonisers dominate their lives. Philip believes that the colonisers despise the colonised and think only on how to exploit their labour in the New World. This degrading attitude towards the colonised explains why the colonisers despised their language as inferior. Bill Aschcroft *et al*. explain in *The Empire Writes Back* how the "englishes," emerging from standard English, establish themselves as distinct languages and obtain linguistic variance. Nevertheless, these englishes are always deprecated by the coloniser who calls them "colloquialisms" or "idiom" (Ashcroft *et al*. 56). The standard language was perceived as the only prestigious language even by the colonised. Philip's usage of the Caribbean language was an attempt to prove that her dialect can be used as a literary language and that it is as valuable as the standard language.

According to Philip, it is not sufficient either to write in any dialect or in standard English ("The Absence" 18-19). She believes that the English language must be dislocated and acted upon, sometimes destroyed, to serve the writer's purpose ("The Absence" 19). Philip faces the challenge of using "the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated" ("The Absence" 19). Hence, she uses what she calls the Caribbean "demotic variant of English" ("The Absence" 18). She argues that to represent the truth of the experience, a writer has to use both standard and Caribbean English ("The Absence" 18).

In her poetry, Philip refers to the new English used by the Caribbeans as the father tongue, because it is tainted with a certain history of colonialism and imperialism (*A Genealogy* 129). She wants the language she uses to show the brutality and resistance between the coloniser and the colonised. She says that for a female Caribbean to learn the English language is like "learning of her non-being, her lack of wholeness" ("The Absence" 20). This is because the English language degrades the colonised, so by learning it, the colonised learns to despise herself. For Philip, language must be "the truest representation, the mirror image of the experience" ("The Absence" 18), that is why she wants to resort to her mother-tongue to retrieve her own consciousness.

Using both languages leads to what Homi Bhabha calls "Hybridity" which is "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (112). Disavowal means the medium through which the coloniser exercises his oppressive powers. It is "the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority" (Bhabha 112). This discrimination is reflected in considering the language of the colonised impure and insignificant. Combining both languages in Philip's poetry is "overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (Bhabha 2) when both cultures are brought together, or when opposites meet. Philip uses hybridity to confront the colonisers with their actions of mass destruction and cruelties. Such cruelties are manifested in abduction of Africans, slavery in colonies and discrimination against black Caribbean women.

In her interview with Kristen Mahlis, Philip says that she is a writer in exile. It is not only exile from a certain place, but an exile from "your original language, your mother tongue, your culture, your spirituality" ("A Poet" 690). Even if she returns to Tobago, she would still be in exile; hence it is a permanent exile ("A Poet" 690).
Thus she has lost her African culture, identity and, most importantly, mother tongue. This is due to the cruelties of the colonisers who prevented the African slaves from using their language, and hence their ability to express their identity and image is destroyed (Guttman 58).

The relationship between feminism and postcolonialism has been discussed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984).

Spivak argues that "the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism" (235), while Mohanty claims that the production of the image of the "third world woman" as always and everywhere oppressed is what sustains the illusion of "first world" women's autonomy: the assumption that they are "secular, liberated, and hav[e] control over their own lives" (353). Both writers support what Judith Butler propagates in her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). She says, "The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (1). This is because both Spivak and Mohanty believe that the category "woman" can no longer be considered to live in an "unchanging, existing in a transhistorical state of othered oppression, patiently awaiting the intervention of feminists who have themselves somehow escaped this position" (Chambers and Watkins 298) through the "feminist individualism" indicated by Spivak (236).

According to Ofelia Scutte, postcolonial feminism is "Those feminisms that take the experience of Western colonialism and its contemporary effects as a high priority in the process of setting up a speaking position from which to articulate a standpoint of cultural, national, regional, or social identity" (65). She adds:

> Postcolonial feminisms differ from the classic critique of imperialism in that they try to stay away from rigid self–other binaries. In addition, an intense criticism is directed at the gender stereotypes and symbolic constructs of the woman's body used to reinforce outdated masculinist notions of national identity. (65-66)

In establishing their identity, postcolonial feminists exploit the tools the colonisers use against them to dominate. They attempt to get a theoretical ground from the real experiences of the colonised.

Nancy Arden McHugh states that postcolonial feminism "challenges self-other binaries dominant in Western thinking" and "works to the differences and to build solidarity among Third World women" ("Postcolonial Feminism") Postcolonial feminists criticise marketing for the idea of the colonised Other, taking advantage of the Third World Women and forcing her to harsh labour. Moreover, they highlight the relation between gender and national identity.

Claudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa illustrates that slaves were taken from Africa to the New World having nothing except their bodies and a memory of a lost home. Females were carrying their "inner spaces" that were looked upon as "merchandise and reproductive means to sustain the plantation system" (3). Philip herself indicates that the black female slaves had nothing but her body, "*The* body – repository and source of everything needed to survive in any but the barest sense. ... The African body. Its resources: strength, resistance to disease. The African body. Including the space between the legs, the raison d'être of her importation to the New World" (*A Genealogy* 91).

Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* is a clear protest against the gendered, racist and sexist silencing practiced by the colonisers against the colonised. In it, she strives to break the silence and to re-obtain the language that has been inhibited inside the African female slave. For Philip, to speak another language was to "enter another consciousness" ("The Absence" 15), and that consciousness is definitely that of the European masters who tried to teach them the "Father language" as a means of obliterating their mother tongue as a means of expression and a sense of being or existence. Hence, obliterating their existence.

Philip's "The Absence of Writing…" describes how she came to write *She Tries Her Tongue* about the complexities of language and its major role in a colonial society. The quest Philip is depicting is not a personal quest, but rather the quest of all oppressed black females. Philip wants to recreate the Black people's history, mythology and most painful experiences, namely losing history and identity. As her silence softly breaks, Philip is able to create her own image or identity (O'Callaghan 117). Philip suggests that the body of the African female is "site of exploitation and [the] profoundly anti-human demands [of] forced reproduction along with subsequent forceful abduction and sale of children" ("The Absence" 24).

In "Writing a Memory of Losing that Place," Philip states that yearning to return to the mother in Diasporic writing indicates keenness on going back to the motherland, Africa. So, Diasporic writing represents themes such as the loss of original land and disruption of the African family (229). Hence, Proserpine's quest for mother is an attempt to regain that sense of place in the New World where the colonised are enslaved by showing physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual displacement.

Diane Sadoff indicates that "Black feminist criticism must reject contemporary theory so as to celebrate survival against racial oppression, sexual exploitation, and institutionalize discrimination" (123).

In enslavement history, the mother is deemed the only keeper of culture and tracer of memory. Slaves used to honour the place where their grandmothers exist as a means of honouring their origin. Hence, Philip's remembering of her past brings to mind "not only the trauma of being an enslaved African and female, but also the enduring esteemed position of the mother" (Carr). She writes in "Managing the Unmanageable," "body, text, history, and memory--the body with its remembered and forgotten texts is of supreme importance in both the larger History and the little histories of the Caribbean. I believe this to be one of the reasons why the body erupted so forcibly and with such violence in the text of *She Tries Her Tongue*" (298-9).

"And Over Every Land and Sea" is the first section of *She Tries Her Tongue*. It begins by a quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "Meanwhile Proserpine's mother Ceres, with panic in her heart vainly sought her daughter over all the lands and over the sea" (*She Tries* 28). This quotation relates Proserpine's abduction from her mother Ceres and is employed by Philip to reflect the loss of land/mother land incurred by the African Diaspora in the Middle Passage to the New World. According to Mahlis, that Philip "allies the loss of homeland and mother tongue with the topos of the mother searching for the lost daughter shows that the model of cultural transmission Philip favours is that of mother to daughter ("M. Nourbese" 173), hence Philip seeks self knowledge and cultural identity through the mother-daughter relationship.

In "And Over Every Land and Sea," Philip presents classical mythological figures; mothers, daughters and sisters who endured injustice at the hands of male gods, yet survived to find their mother tongue and escape the white patriarchal oppression. In the story of Ceres and Proserpine and that of Philomela, the sexual desires of men or male gods utterly damage familial relationships for the oppressed females. Ceres loses her daughter, Proserpine, to Pluto – the king of the underworld and brother of Proserpine's father Jupiter and mother Ceres; Philomela, raped by her brother in law, was afraid that her sister Procne treats her as an enemy. Both Ceres and Procne avenged themselves from the tyrant males. Ceres, the goddess of corn, creates a cold weather where corn cannot grow; whereas Procne kills Tereus' son and served him as meal to his father. Yet, the oppressed females, the daughter, Proserpine, and Philomela were doomed to suffering until finding their true identity, their true image. Thus, Philip signifies the oppressed mother-daughter relationship within a male dominated society.

The first poem in "And Over Every Land and Sea" is "Questions! Questions" (*She Tries* 28) and it shows how the mother tongue is defying the father tongue:

Where she, where she, where she
be, where she gone? …
Before the questions too late,
before I forget how they stay
crazy or no crazy I must find she. (1-16)

The separation of the mother and daughter symbolises the separation between Africa and her people. The mother wants to find her daughter and bring her back to the physical place she has lost.

The mother speaks in the Caribbean demotic punctuated with aphasic-repetitions shown in line breaks as in the first two lines. The syntax is broken "find can't, way down the islands' way" (4) in defiance to the colonial language and patriarchal text as the phrases "down by the just-down-the -way sea" (7) and "she friending fish and crab with alone" (8) reflect the rhythm, diction, and syntax of the Caribbean demotic. Such breaks in the style are deemed by the writer the way out for the silence that will softly break and regain its place and existence. Such a position is a clear refusal to "You better know your place" which was an expression to remind children of their inferior place in a society dominated by colonisers. So, Philip's position is a refusal to "'know my place', the place set apart for the managed peoples of the world" ("Managing" 296). The new position is one that offers a redefinition and change of space and place. The lost daughter is becoming similar to the Caribbean landscape with "skin green like lime, hair indigo-blue / eyes hot like sunshine-time" (11-12).

Philip creates a link between two mothers, that from an ancient western mythology and that who symbolises the universal experience of female subjugation within patriarchy. As Naomi Guttman says, "The kidnapping and rape of Proserpine is what sets Ceres on her journey … to reclaim her daughter; the kidnapping, rape and slavery of her African ancestors is what inspires Philip to search for her mythological 'mother-tongue'" (61).

According to Evelyn O'Callaghan, the seeking mother uses a variety of voices ranging from colloquial Afro-Caribbean/Amercian ("where she, where she, where she / be, where she gone") to more studied lyricism ("her skin of lime casts a glow / of green, around my head indigo / of halo") (118) since, according to Philip, forging new and different words is a form of resistance: "the formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out, and even sometimes erased" ("The Absence" 17). The colonisers called this language "Bad English. Broken English. Patois. Dialect" ("The Absence" 17). The Afro-Caribbean makes this new language a symbol of getting rid of slavery and as the only possible means of expressing her harsh experience. The syntax of the poem reflects the syntax of Caribbean demotic, the African language, the mother-tongue. Hence, the search in this poem is not for a daughter or mother, but for a mother culture and a mother tongue.

The next poem, "Adoption Bureau" (*She Tries* 29), begins with a fragment about Cyane who "lamented the rape of the goddess...nursing silently in her heart a wound that none could heal...." Pluto turned Cyane into water when she tries to prevent him from taking Proserpine. He also deprived her of language so that she could not tell Ceres where her daughter is. Philip resorts to myth as a means of "retrieving a language that may never have been spoken" (Guttman 63). The daughter is now looking for her lost mother. She tries to find resemblances between herself and her mother:

Watch my talk-words stride,
like her smile the listening
breadth of my walk—on mine
…
her skin of lime casts a glow
of green, around my head indigo
of halo—tell me, do I smell like her? (1-7)

The daughter finds similarity between the smile, walk, "skin of lime," "head indigo" and "smell," all reflecting the bonds of biology and culture. Also, the Caribbean weather links mother and daughter as their bond can be sensed in the feel of wind, the smell, taste of salt, female bodies, and the blood lost when giving birth. Such bonds cannot be fully described by words and hence the ellipses in line 12: "the yet else and... something." In the last line "She whom they call mother, I seek" (16), the pronouns "I" and "she" given in the first poem are reversed and it becomes clear, as Mahlis suggests, that what "the poet seeks is not simply one mother but a whole lineage of mothers, from her own mother and homeland to the ancestral mother, Africa" ("M. Nourbese" 176). Reversion of pronouns makes the search and the sense of loss mutual between mother and daughter.

The next poem is "Clues" (*She Tries* 30) where the daughter plays the roles of both mother and daughter in her search. As a mother, she creates connection, but as a daughter, she tries to find whatever connects her to her lost mother, history, memory, and time:

She gone—gone to where and don't know
looking for me looking for she;
is pinch somebody pinch and tell me.
up where north marry cold I could find she. (1-4)

The daughter describes places in and around Toronto and her alienation in exile: "don't look for indigo hair and / skin of lime at Ontario Place" (9-10). However, "stop looking for don't see and can't—" (12) urges the searcher not to stop searching or to lose hope nor to expect failure. For searching is her destiny and she has to continue:

you bind she up tight tight with hope,
she own and yours knot up in together;
although she tight with nowhere and gone
she going find you, if you keep looking. (13-16)

Since both the mother and daughter are displaced, they must search for their rightful home.

In her next poems, Philip attempts to define the nature of the dual quest of mother and daughter. Will they find their lost tongue? "The Search" (*She Tries* 31) begins by trying to find the whereabouts of both lost mother and daughter: "someone tell me she living—up / there in the up-alone cocoa hills of Woodlands," (2-3).

The metaphorical journey Philip describes took "four-day night of walk" and shows the strength of feelings upon reunion "come child, come" and "welcome." From lines 8 to 11 she and I are not brought together, indicating separation and this separation is reinforced, that "call and response" are hindered by "tongue and / word that buck up in strange;" the barrier Philip describes throughout *She Tries Her Tongue*.

The desperate search of the mother for her daughter and the daughter's search for her mother embody the life of the African Caribbean people who have suffered and are still suffering because of the "dismemberment of families by slavery and Diaspora" (Fumagalli 164). The epigraph of "Dream-skins" (*She Tries* 32-34) uses the words of the nymph Arethusa who describes her journey to the underworld in Ovid's poem: "…the earth opened up a way for me and, after passing deep down through its lowest caverns, I lifted up my head again in these regions, and saw the stars which had grown strange to me" (*She Tries* 32). Arethusa's journey can be described as an exit from hell. According to Fumagalli, this journey "represent[s] the awakning from the hellish, dark nightmare of history and the Middle Passage" (166). She has seen Proserpine in the underworld and told Ceres that her daughter has become the queen of the world of shadows.

After the introductory line of "Dream-Skins" Philip writes "in two languages" as Philip juxtaposes worldly images like "rainbow-flower" and "feather-skin" with poetic glosses:

Feather-skin / lizard-headed / i suckle her / suckling me / flat / thin / like the / host / round and white / she swells enormous with / milk and child. (11-20)

According to Mahlis, the metamorphosis represented by Ovid is represented in the timeless dream world. Philip shows "I" as "Lizard headed" that when suckles and is suckled by the mother or daughter her body changes strikingly ("M. Nourbese" 179). Mahlis also refers to the Christian tradition where the "body-made-word" is flat and thin like the host. In this poem, the white of the host is the white of the mother's milk. Also, the round and flat host is the fertile female body that is swollen as a result of the new life's burden ("M. Nourbese" 179). The two languages represented by the poet reflect the metamorphosis and the tension between the law of the father and the emergent body of the mother.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes the journey into the "lowest caverns of the earth" by saying: "Symbiosis between mother and daughter continues...and female corporeality erupts into the text." The woman's body becomes enormous with milk and child and the poem is written in a way that "suggest[s] birth of both life and language" (127). However, this birth comes with blood and wound, as shown in the concluding lines.

Philip uses images to represent both the oral and written transmission of language: "the wide of open mouth" (78) is the mouth open to receive maternal milk or mother tongue, which is figured as life-sustaining "blood of rush" (79). Philip then gives some images to depict the slavery of the Black female and how she carries loads and bears children that are not her own on her "broad back" (89). "Clean of white" (86) refers to the white gown she wears as a slave and to her white masters who violently punish her for using her own language "wounded mouth" (88), thus force her to silence. At the end, Philip says, "the voice, the voice, the voice" (94), referring to the voice of her ancestors that will never be silenced.

Philip uses metaphor to signify the lost land and the lost language her ancestors were deprived of. Philip has been in a continuous search "to find the literary form of the demotic language," and "to keep the deep structure, the movement, the kinetic energy, the tone and pitch, the slides and glissandos of the demotic within a tradition that is primarily page bound – that is the challenge" ("The Absence" 23). Thus, through metaphor, where sound and sense merge, Philip attempts to give literary form to the Caribbean demotic.

In "Sightings" (*She Tries* 35) Philip portrays the daughter's desperate attempt to remember her mother, who can only be seen in a dreamlike world where all the senses are altered and confused. The daughter uses senses of smell, sound and sight to recognize her lost mother/motherland:

Nose to ground – on all fours – I did once / smell that smell, / on a day of once - / upon a time, tropic with blue." She goes on: "the voice of her sound, or didn't I once / see her song, hear her image call / me by name… / the sound of a song sung long past time' (1-13)

Here Philip links nostalgic longing and imagination. By incorporating the fairy-tale phrase, "once- / upon a time," she is stressing the way in which the imagination is able to exaggerate aspects of a lost home.

The last poem in the series is "Adoption Bureau Revisited" (*She Tries* 36). Philip begins by Ovid's quotation "For behold, the daughter I have sought so long has now at last been found—if you call it 'finding' to be more certain that I have lost her, or if knowing where she is is finding her" (*She Tries* 36).

The speaker follows the lost daughter to the north, away from her African home, following a trail that has no beginning or end and going to the "not-known." She continues:

dream-skins dream / the loss / ours and ancient / unfelled tears / harden / in the sun's attention / diamond / the many-voiced one of one voice / ours / betrayal and birth-blood / unearthed (8-18).

This part depicts the hardships slaves have been through in their Middle Passage to the New World and the metaphor "betrayal and birth blood" shows the bitterness they feel. The paradox "ours and ancient" and "the many-voiced one of one voice" reflects the torment they are experiencing and the need to connect with their past ancestors. At the end, Philip emphasises this connection:

Something! Anything! of her. / She came, you say, from where / she went—to her loss: / "the need of your need" / in her groin. (19-23)

Here the pain of loss is likened to the pain of birth, the separation between mother and child. This wound can only be healed by healing or "speaking in tongues" or the wounded mouth speaking the mother tongue:

The oozing wound / would only be healed / on sacred ground / blood-spoored. (24-27)

Finally, the journey has become a circular one, beginning and ending at the same point and what remains is the oozing wound: "the trail… / following / she / follows..." (28-31). Using ellipses suggests the endlessness of the journey as DeLoughrey writes, "This is no Utopian vision for the African in the New World. The burden of history, the fragmentation of cultures, the loss of languages and peoples mean that the quest is as yet. Unfulfilled" (129).

Philip believes that when the Afro-Caribbeans recover their African ancestry, they can recover their voice and history. The African past and history are always idealised by Philip. She says in her interview with Mahlis, "We do fantasise, we do romanticise the lost mother, that's what the poem "And Over Every Land and Sea" is all about; it's that feeling of trying to find a lost parent to reunite with her or him" ("A Poet" 696-97). This clearly shows that Philip is romanticising her African heritage, identity, as if it is her mother.

Moreover, Paul Gilory suggests that the term "tradition" should not be used "to identify a lost past nor to name a culture of compensation that would restore access to it" (198). However, Philip is able to restore the link with the idealised African heritage by using the African rhythms and orality that were able to survive the coloniser's destruction. Philip uses the African tradition to call to mind the images of the lost land as shown in "And Over Every Land and Sea."

The section of poems that follows is titled the "Cyclamen Girl" and it traces the trail left open at the previous section. Each of the poems in this part represents a photographic image not a mythic journey. According to O'Callaghan, "Cyclamen Girl" is another exercise in defamiliarisation. A simple confirmation-day photograph, circa 1960, "black girl white dress," is examined from the point of view of different "focal lengths" (racial, sexual, religious, and historical) to determine what reflections emanate from the image of the flower-like girl (118).

The poem "The Catechist" (*She Tries* 38) is about the photograph of an Afro-Caribbean cyclamen girl. The catechist wants to show the black girl as a fixed object. This picture is taken on the day on her confirmation and she is dressed like a Western child on the day of its confirmation in the sixties. There are three men in the poem: the speaker, who is the catechist and the one who christianises the black girl; the photographer, who takes her photo; and the slave owner, who thinks of her as property. These characters are combined in the speaker of the poem and they all represent the coloniser.

In this poem Philip describes a black girl in a white dress; symbolising the female sexuality that has been repressed by Western Christianity and patriarchal authority. Describing the girl as a sheltered flower emphasises the fact that she is ignorant of her sexuality and her confinement in a white dress reflects her innocence and purity. Her legs are described as shiny "sheen" and "skinny" and this is strengthened by the white dress she is wearing "black girl white dress." The white dress imposed on the girl reflects how black she is and how the coloniser wants to see her from his own perspective.

The words "black girl, white skin" are similar to Frantz Fanon's theoretical work *Black skin, White Masks* (2008), in which a mainly male-centred view on colonisation is given from the colonised's perspective. Fanon says, "The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence" (228). This may be the reason behind the girl's wearing a typical Western dress and behaving like a good Christian girl. However, this confinement and repression are threatened to disappear under the "heat" (18) signifying the Caribbean heat or the girl's sexual maturity. Philip satirises patriarchal culture when she says: In those days nothing could be counted on—/ least of all cyclamen girls / early bloomers in the heat of it all / with the lurking smell of early pregnancy. (19-22)

These lines ridicule the assumption that the female is responsible for the sexual transgression that will distort her innocence by "early pregnancy."

The girl is represented as the "Other," the figure the white man uses to embody his conception of the black woman. However, the cyclamen girl is a "Self" projected as the "Other" seen by both the speaker and the conception of Christianity of black and white. The skin constitutes a very significant image as the photographer is truly impressed by the shiny black skin of the black colonised girl. Bhabha's theory of the skin as racial fetish reveals that the skin is a scene of both "mastery and pleasure" (75). In other words, the skin image portrays the beautiful black girl that the photographer, representing the coloniser, finds pleasure in looking at whereas at the same time enjoys the fact that she is subjected to him, a matter adding to his pride and perceived superiority.

From a different perspective, the skin is shown as a scene of defence and "anxiety" (Bhabha 75) as the coloniser fears that the colonised may destroy his hegemony. So, this explains why the girl is depicted as inferior, stupid and weak, so that the coloniser can prove to himself that she will never defy his powers. Inferiority is also highlighted in the depiction of the girl as a pair of legs. Hence, imposing the coloniser's culture is clearly depicted in having the girl compelled to assume a role which does not fit her, imposing Christian traditions on her and forcing her to wear clothes which are not suitable for the Caribbean hot weather. She is also threatened by the possibility of rape "with the lurking smell of early pregnancy" (22). The coloniser is accusing the black girl of weird sexual life to improve his dominating image.

As a kind of humiliation, the girl is also described as ignorant: "a stiff-petalled cyclamen / hot-housed / on green stalks of ignorance" (9-11). She is compared to a flower whose petals are stiff and restrained to show her as a fixed object in the photograph. Also, the cyclamen is not "hot-housed," but the description emphasises that she has to grow up in an artificial colonial environment imposed on her by the coloniser. The following lines of the poem clearly depict how the coloniser wants to dominate her, yet in vain:

The finger now traces the negative,
outline of the white dress
- or is it the positive form of the girl
where sudden edges meet?
Images blur- bleed into each other
as if the fixer didn't quite work,
or maybe it was the heat that caused the leak; (12-18)

These verses explain Bhabha's hybridity. Though the photographer wants to depict the girl as a fixed object, she remains active. Philip shows that the boundaries between coloniser and colonised cannot be seen "as if the fixer didn't quite work." A fixer is a chemical solution that fixes the photographic image and Philip's usage of it is for keeping the binary opposition between the black colonised and the white coloniser. However, this binary opposition no longer exists by the blurring of the image. This suggests that the black opposition is penetrating the white coloniser's culture. Thus, the attempt of the white coloniser to impose his culture on the black colonised is denied (Bhabha 2).

DeLoughrey remarks that the "Catechist" mentioned in the title and the one taking the picture, is "both the Christian master and the slave massa of the black woman" (7). This is what is meant by the lines:

Photograph of the cyclamen girl / caught between / blurred images of / massa and master. (26-29)

In this way, Philip "weaves important historical connections between the colonial legacies of racial, religious and social hegemony" (DeLoughrey 7).

This poem shows the total dominance of the West since it implants in the colonised its racial, religious and social ideas. The black girl is described as an ignorant and subordinate creature because she is black, her religion is inferior and must be replaced by Christianity and she has become a slave to serve and satisfy the desires of the coloniser.

In "The Catechism" (*She Tries* 40), Philip describes the cyclamen girl as swinging between the code of Victoria and the code of mama:

The code of Victoria –
no sex before marriage
no live after / and
the code of mama—
'now you's a young lady
you can press your hair' (11-17)

Mahlis suggests that Philip "traces the puritanical Christianity imposed on the colonised by their British colonisers to the code of Victoria, which promotes a rigid morality that hinges on the preservation of female purity" ("M. Nourbese" 185). The poem concludes that both the coloniser and the mother are repressive forces: "Blood and deceit / twinned / in always" (18-20).

In "Transfiguration" (*She Tries* 42-3), Philip wants to replace the western culture and religion imposed on the girl by mythology. The girl responds to names representing western tradition and patriarchal authority, such as Mary and Aphrodite, with "rote answers / About promises / Of the godfathers" (5-7), while she accepts willingly the other names, her name "Atabey" and the other name "Oshun." Atabey is the earth goddess of the Antilles and Oshun is the Yoruban goddess of love and beauty. Both names connect the girl to her Caribbean origin. The girl hears the drums and then a woman called her name "Atabey! / Her other name / Oshun!'"(13-15). This shows that the girl still remembers Africa, the rhythms from the drums that brought to her mind the goddess of love in whose place the coloniser attempts to impose his own god. The original goddesses she remembers are the only ones able to help her through her transformation from a girl to a woman. By resorting to the original goddesses and her own culture, the African girl rejects and opposes imposing Western names and symbols on her. Also, mentioning different goddesses reflects the hybridity of the Caribbean culture.

The act of naming found in the western European traditions and the traditional African culture connects both cultures: "Aphrodite! Mary! Atabey! / Orehu! / Yemoja! / Oshun!" (31-33). "Name her" is repeated thrice to show how important and urgent it is to name the girl. The act of naming links the girl to her identity, her Caribbean culture and refers to all Caribbean women who want to be brought back to their origin. The act of naming also reflects the power of the Caribbean language that Philip uses to free the little girl and make her able to tell her own story. Hence, the poem shows Philip's ability to defy patriarchal discourse.

In another poem "Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones" (*She Tries* 52-3), the girl with the flying Cheek bones asks "In whose language / Am I / If not in yours / Beautiful" (46-48). She discovers that the English language does not describe her as beautiful, but rather ugly. In addition, this is the only language that she knows and hence she sees herself as ugly. For Philip, "in a very real sense, it can be argued that for the African in the New World learning the English language was simultaneous with learning of her non-being, her lack of wholeness" ("The Absence" 86). The word "declension" used by Philip means "The set of various forms that a noun, pronoun, or adjective can have according to whether it is the subject, object etc[etera] of a sentence in a language such as Latin or German" (*Longman* 356). So, the form of a noun depends on its position in the sentence. This is typical to the colonial society where the person is judged according to his position in the society as the imposing coloniser (subject) gives the passive oppressed colonised (object) either a positive or negative image. Since the English words do not express what she feels and because she never finds the right words, she has the right to claim English as an insufficient language for her.

In "Discourse on the Logic of Language" (*She Tries* 56-9), Philip searches for a language that can express the anguish of the displaced people as she plays on the word "language," repeating "lan" so the reader is not sure whether she means "land" or "language." The coloniser's attempts to destroy the self-esteem of the African slaves are clearly manifested in this poem.

The poem is made up of four texts on two opposing pages. Corrêa asserts that the father tongue needs to go through a deeper deciphering process in order to "reinvent the Black female within the Americas" and the "African presence in the New World needs to be asserted and relived via the ancestral words carried within the Black female enslaved body" (6). All the secrets, myths and traditions have to be recalled to demolish the master's land. The Black female is unable to locate herself within the father language, the language described by Philip as "anguish." Since females are the guardians of traditions, secrets, history and myth, they must also be the guardians of the mother tongue that they pass on to the younger generations. Blowing words into the child's mouth is breathing a new life into the next generation and sustaining and preserving the word, language or identity.

In this poem Philip writes two edicts. The first one represents the announcement of the slave owner who "wherever possible, [must] ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethnolinguistic groups as possible" in order to discourage communication and hence rebellion; whereas the second edict calls for the removal of the tongue of "every slave caught speaking in his native language..." (*She Tries* 56, 58). These edicts are clear examples of the brutality and the violence practiced by the colonisers under the pretext of building the empire.On the opposite page of the first edit, Philip shows how the coloniser attempts to prove his superiority to the colonised by discussing the work of Dr. Broca who tried to prove that the brains of black people, women and coloured people were smaller than the brain of the white man, hence they are less intelligent.

In the first text, Philip repeats the words "my mother tongue" in different dialects of the Caribbean so as to find her mother tongue:

What is my mother / tongue / my mammy tongue / my mummy tongue / my momsy tongue / my modder tongue / my ma tongue? (16-22)

Finally, she says, "I must therefore be tongue / dumb" (30-31) as if she accepts the fact that she has no mother tongue. However, this acceptance is revealed to be untrue because of the text written in a vertical way in the left margin of the page. For Guttman, this text has the "mythical discourse of the rediscovered mother tongue" (65).

> WHEN IT WAS BORN, THE MOTHER HELD HER NEWBORN CHILD CLOSE: SHE BEGAN THEN TO LICK IT ALL OVER. THE CHILD WHIMPERED A LITTLE, BUT AS THE MOTHER'S TONGUE MOVED FASTER AND STRONGER OVER ITS BODY, IT GREW SILENT-…. (*She Tries* 56)

The second text:

> 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. (*She Tries* 58)

These two parts turn their back to the other discourses indicating that the speaker has finally determined the solution and found the mother tongue or land she has been looking for. It is then in the margins that the mythological mother and daughter meet, where the mother-tongue licks the daughter's mouth and body. The mother blows her language, women language, into the child's mouth as if passing culture and history from one generation to another.

According to Guttman, the position of this text "shows how important perspective is in reading, as in culture, and how one culture's margin is another culture's space in which to write" (66). This recalls Said's definition of Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). It shows how the Western view of the Other, is not the image the Other has of herself. The coloniser believes that the Other is passive and unable of any resistance, yet the mother is able to pass on the mother tongue though colonisers believe that they have completely demolished this language. The language passed is that of women alone. The coloniser cannot control the process of birth giving and passing the mother tongue to the next generation, an obvious form of resistance. As Giselle Liza Anatol puts it, "Redefining the categories of 'motherhood' and 'family' is essential if women are to find ways out of the constrictive roles determined by patriarchal dictates" (939). Since the mother shows her resistance to the colonised in passing on her language to her newly born child, the process of giving birth and motherhood attains political significance. This affirms what Bhabha calls "the personal is the political" (11) as the life of the colonised has become a political form of resistance.

In her interview with Mahlis, Philip reminds her people of their mother land, Africa which 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" ("A Poet" 697). The mother in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" represents Africa. Though the coloniser tries to destroy the relationship between the Afro-Caribbean and their African ancestors, this relationship survives, through language. Philip's depicts the Afro-Caribbeans' power to overcome slavery and to represent themselves in their own way ("A Poet" 697). Philip also shows the colonial father-tongue in contrast to the African mother-tongue torturing the new world African female lost in her search for her origins:

My father tongue
is a foreign lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
a foreign anguish
is english—(43-49)

According to Joseph Campbell, myth is a dream everyone has just like everyone who dreams her/his personal myths: "dream is the personalised myth, myth the depersonalised dream" (13.) In *She Tries Her Tongue*, mother and daughter meet in a dream and because Philip values myth as a verbal method of expressing her meanings, she is capable of "dreaming and creolising a depersonalised dream/personalised myth and in producing an alter/native epic" (Fumagalli 168). Philip's poem offers the space to bring together mother and daughter, past and present, Africa and the Western world, Creole and standard English can finally meet and bring about something new and creative.

In a colonial society, "the imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalises all 'variants' as impurities" (Ashcroft *et al.* 7). So, the coloniser imposed his language in order to assume power. Ashcroft *et al.* write, "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' become established" (7). After the African language was lost, the colonised had no other option than to "use a foreign language expressive of an alien experiential life," according to Philip ("The Absence" 16). This is a language "comprised of word symbols that . . . had affirmed negative i-mages about her [the colonised], and one which was but a reflection of the experience of the European ethnocentric world view" ("The Absence" 16). Philip expresses the "paradox at the heart of the acquisition" of English as a situation in which "the African learned both to speak and to be dumb at the same time, to give voice to the experience and i-mage, yet remain silent" ("The Absence" 16). The Afro-Caribbean may learn the grammar and vocabulary of the standard English language, but she will never be able to express her deepest feelings using them. Hence, she speaks, but in fact, she is silent.

In "Managing the Unmanageable," Philip writes that "when the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which body could contain" (298). As "the text of her history and memory was inscribed upon and within the body," the body "would become the repository of all the tools necessary for spiritual and cultural survival" (298). Through her body the woman of African descent can speak up, while remaining silent.

The poem "Universal Grammar" (*She Tries* 62-67) continues this theme as Philip takes a quotation from a book titled *Mother's Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours or How Not to Get Raped:*

Slip mouth over the syllable: moisten with tongue the word.
Suck Slide Play Caress Blow--Love it, but if the word
gags, does not nourish, bite it off--at its source—
Spit it out
Start again (*She Tries* 67)

In these closing lines, the Afro-Caribbean female refuses what Philip ironically calls the "linguistic rape." This part links sexual violence or rape to enforcing "universal grammar," which indicates the language of the coloniser claimed to be "universal."

Moreover, the poem discusses the same theme of a mother-daughter search for their mother-tongue. This search for history and culture wants to prove that "motherhood" is the source primary of history and culture. The coloniser wants to block out the discourses of the oppressed and to force them to silence. However, they struggle to remember their mother tongue rather than adopting a language imposed on them to speak.

In another poem, "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue" (*She Tries* 77-82), Philip represents the resistance of the colonised as the poem shows how the Afro-Caribbean can "[reclaim] [her] image-making power in what has been for a long time a foreign language" ("The Absence" 21). According to DeLoughrey, "the poem's speaker searches for 'the somewhere of another mother tongue' while attempting to break the 'prison of these walled tongues'" (13). The coloniser's language is "walled" because he considers it as pure and perfect and must not be stained by the language of the subordinated subjects. So, he establishes barriers to protect it. This poem, in its six sections, suggests several ways of demolishing these walls. In part I, the speaker portrays how the English language makes the colonised feel degraded. The speaker mentions the "honed keen" (7) which means "sharp lament," "at the very centre of every word" (9). Philip says that the English words imposed by the coloniser describe the colonised, the Other, as inferior human beings or species.

According to DeLoughrey, "the speaker's 'mind and body concentrate' on the 'confusion of centuries that passes,' trying to instill a presence of 'the absent in image' and word" (13). Using the present tense in "the confusion of centuries that passes" (17) suggests the influence of the English language that imposes another consciousness on the colonised. Also, words such as "kinks hair" (19) and "thickens lips" (21) attribute negative connotation to the African body:

> There are historical and sociological, not to mention etymological, reasons why when we hear certain words and phrases, such as 'thick lips' or 'kinky hair', the accompanying images are predominantly negative; such expressions connote far more than they denote. From whose perspective are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky? Certainly not from the African's perspective. How then does the writer describe the Caribbean descendants of West Africans so as not to connote the negativity implied in descriptions such as 'thick lips'? ("The Absence" 20)

The coloniser wants to represent the colonised as a malformed, ugly and stupid creature. Yet, the poem shows that the resistance of the coloniser has become powerful as reflected in lines such as "to unleash the promise / in ugly / the absent in image" (20-22). This resistance will be done through the "mind and body" who "concentrate" (11). Reference to the body here is significant as the African woman will definitely show her abilities and negate the negative image imposed on her. Philip proves that the "absent" or "Other" will finally get the position she deserves in the "image." Gilroy speaks about how the colonised female and her experience bring down the omnipotence of Reason. He says:

> The traditional teaching of ethics and politics – practical philosophy – came to an end some time ago … This tradition had maintained the idea that a good life for the individual and the problem of the best social and political order for the collectivity could be discerned by rational means. …, this tradition lost its exclusive claim to rationality partly through the way that slavery became internal to western civilisation and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror. (39)

Hence, the "sacrilege of zero" (26) in Part II suggests that the way the coloniser treats the colonised has brought down the moral superiority of the West's rationality shown as "the mathematic of heart" (28). To further defy this mathematic of heart, the speaker requires those who do not have a legitimate role in the society to pass on their African language "touch tongue to tongue" (32), the coloniser claims to be strange and devalued "release / the strange sandwiched between / tongue and cheek and lip" (33-35). Thus, the Afro-Caribbean woman can make a language her own.

These lines are also making fun of the coloniser. The tongue and cheek are essential for the Afro-Caribbean woman's communication as she can speak without the coloniser knowing what she means. Hence, it is a way by which the colonised can recover her language to say what cannot be uttered before. This is what Ashcroft *et al.* refer to as "double entendre" (146). For the enslaved Africans, who were deprived of their language and homeland, compensated themselves by a kind of "psychic survival" through the skill of double entendre which means "saying one thing in front of 'massa' and having it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves" which "involved a radical subversion of the meanings of the master's tongue" (Ashcroft *et al.* 146).

In Bhabha's theory, mimicry is not always beneficial for the coloniser. It can be used against him, because "in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse," mimicry "disrupts [the] authority [of colonial discourse]" and because of this disruption, the "gaze of otherness" can be reversed (Bhabha 88-9). In "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue" Bhabha's "gaze of surveillance" can be found in the lines "Those who would / inhabit / the beyond of pale" (23-25). She calls the coloniser "pale" which has a negative connotation as it indicates that the coloniser is either discoloured or sick and weak. In this way the universality of the aesthetic superiority of the Western beauty ideal is contested, because the black colonised has been made aware of her difference by the white coloniser's discourse and uses this difference against the coloniser. Thus, the colonised's culture questions the validity and the superiority of Western Reason. In the following fragment, Philip shows how the shameful way in which the coloniser treats the colonised ("the sacrilege of zero") causes the image of the moral superiority and the supposed unity of the Western man ("the mathematic of heart") to be distorted. This destruction of moral superiority is what happens when the displacing gaze of the coloniser is reversed by mimicry. In part III, Philip shows the effects of imposing the English tongue on the colonised and how this tongue limits her mind and deprives her of her consciousness: "tongue / that wraps / squeezes / the mind round / and around" (48-52). The Foreign tongue is described as:

the prison of these walled tongues

- speaks

this/
fuck-mother motherfuckin-
this/
holy-white-father-in-heaven-
this/
ai! ai! (40-47)

The kind of language the slaves were exposed to were orders and insults as Philip says, "If you think of the kind of language, any European language, that we would have been exposed to, it would have been orders, commands, insults: it was not language at its highest or its finest" (Mahlis, "A Poet" 697). The above lines show a clear insult by the coloniser to the colonised. The line about the holy white father in heaven refers to the words the slaves used to say in church. The word "white" refers to the god of the white coloniser which also projects into the white coloniser himself. The word "ai! ai!" embodies the harm the female slave endures when she opposes the orders or speaks in her tongue.

In part IV, Philip compares the coloniser's language to the Greek mythical figure of the Gorgon, which turns human beings into stone with a glance. The poem is written like a snake to imitate the curls of hair on the head of the Gorgon. When the Gorgon is beheaded, a new head and a new tail come out, so she is immortal. Philip depicts this Greek mythical figure as haunting "the absence" (71) of the mother tongue and restrains the language of the colonised by turning "my tongue to stone" (69). Using a figure from Western culture again emphasises that the English culture is Philip's father culture and that she cannot get away from it. It also asserts the hybridity of the images Philip as an Afro-Caribbean poet uses.

Philip gives the Western symbols either negative or positive connotations. In this poem, the Gorgon symbolises the imposed language and in "Transfiguration" Aphrodite tries to replace the Afro-Caribbean goddess giving a negative impression. Other figures, such as Ceres and Proserpine are given new meaning relevant to the Afro-Caribbean environment. This is because, according to Guttman, Philip wants to find the mother-tongue and to get away "from white patriarchal oppression" (61). Combining images from both cultures emphasises "the universal experience of female subjugation within patriarchy" (Guttman 61) and shows that both cultures are important to shape the identity of the Afro-Caribbean.

In part V, the speaker again tries to resist the snakes of the Gorgon head and to "tame them" (76) by feeding them "milk / from black breasts" (79-80) or by lying with them "I shall / lie / with them / bed them with silence" (91-94). Hence, Philip shows that "these snakes wisdomed with the evil / of words" (95-98) to nurture the coloniser's culture, whereas the colonised acquires new means to resist the colonised and retrieve her identity. The result of having sex with the coloniser, or more symbolically between the speaker's silence and the snake words, is "a warrior race / of words" (104-105) or "a nest-egg / that waits / to hatch the ever / in wait" (106-109) that is able to defy the coloniser's hegemony.

Part V is divided into two parts by the word "or." In the first part the speaker suggests to get rid of the English language "shall I / strike / under tongue and foot / them / – these words" (110-114) by using the same violence it was imposed by "the word / that claims / and maims / and claims" (119-122), while in part two she suggests using words of her mother tongue in place of words of her father tongue "use / the father's tongue / cohabit in strange / mother / incestuous words" (127-131). This will be a way to "revenge the self" (132) that is "broken / upon / the word" (133-135) or because of the cultural imposition. Thus the poem presents various means of resistance against the coloniser. It also shows that it is not right to completely destroy the English language because it is the only means the poet can express herself and be heard by the West.

In the final section of the book, "She Tries Her Tongue" (*She Tries* 84-99), Philip endeavours to seek healing through remembering her ancestry. She uses Ovid' *Metamorphoses* again: "All Things are alter'd, nothing is destroyed" (*She Tries* 84) translated by Dryden. Philip regrets the loss of an unbroken connection with the past and cultural wholeness:

The me and mine of parents
the we and us of brother and sister
the tribe of belongings small and separate,
when gone...
on these exact places of exacted grief
i placed mint-fresh grief coins
sealed the eyes with certain and final; (1-7)

Putting "mint-fresh grief coins" (6) on the eyes confirms connection with ancestors, yet at the same time, indicates the "certain and final" (7) sense of loss and the only feeling she has is that of grief and mourning. This feeling should go through the whole body:

When silence is, Limbs dance
The grief sealed in memory;
That body might become tongue
Tempered to speech
And where the latter falters
Paper with its words
The crack of silence; (104-11)

Here the body can speak a language that breaks the silence.

In the final lines of the poem, Philip refers to the Greek mythology of Philomel who has been raped by her brother in law and her tongue has been cut out. Choosing this particular figure clearly invokes the main cause Philip is fighting for: the female body that is always threatened by rape and violation and subjected to violence. Philomel has later been transformed into a nightingale. She lost her female body to retrieve her being again and find her way of expression by singing "Song word speech" (L. 128). Philomela's new shape, a bird that can sing, promises renewal, survival and hope. Philip concludes, "Might I...like Philomela ...sing / continue / over / into / …pure utterance" (129-33). Like Philomela, Philip tries to compensate for the loss of the mother tongue and find a voice in her poetry. She is no longer a victim, but becomes a speaking subject that will refuse to be in the "ashes of once" and will give a "pure utterance" for the world to hear. Hence, misfortunes have not silenced her.

So, it becomes clearer that Philip is a writer in exile searching for her mother culture and tongue through which she can express her identity and her image. However, it was destroyed by the English language the coloniser attempts to impose on her. Hence, through her poetry she tries to revive the Afro-Caribbean language to represent a "hybrid culture" combining both the Afro-Caribbean and the European. She says, "Europe has to be acknowledged as one of the progenitors of the Caribbean" (Mahlis, "A Poet" 696). So, she admits that Europe shapes a part of her identity. She sees the Afro-Caribbean as hybrid or a "separate tribe" that has its "roots in Africa, but also being of the new world" (Mahlis, "A Poet" 697). This clarifies why Philip's imagery combines symbols from Africa and from the European heritage like Philomela. This image was very powerful to Philip because it symbolises the Afro-Caribbeans who are forced to speak a language different from theirs or to remain silent (Mahlis, "A Poet" 686).

The story of Philomela "resonate[s] with the experiences of the African slaves in the New World: deprived of their African tongues they had to 'find' a new language to express themselves and, in particular, they echo the predicament of the many black female slaves raped by their white masters" (Fumagalli 163-4).

Philip also explains that the colonised is alienated from her body because it no longer belongs to her as a slave. This alienated body is deprived of speech and self-expression. In "She Tries Her Tongue," the reclaiming of this alienated body is depicted as she says "that body should speak / when silence is" (103-104). According to DeLoughrey, Philip creates a link between "word/presence" and "silence/absence" as well as "between text and body" (15). Philip considers silence as more than absence of voice, it is the absence of the physical body of the colonised that is deemed a belonging to the coloniser (DeLoughrey 15). When she says, "that body might become tongue / tempered to speech" (107-108), she expresses the wish of the colonised to retain the physical body and make it speak its own language.

Philip suggests that "there was a profound eruption of the body into the text of *She Tries Her Tongue*"; however, this is not just a body, but the "female African body" (*She Tries* 24). She believes that this body is a corporeal text that refuses to succumb to the "cultural deformation of the colonial process" (Carr). She says, "When the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and the memory and history which body could contain. The text of her history and memory were inscribed upon and within the body which would become the repository of all the tools necessary for spiritual and cultural survival" ("Managing" 298). In *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip makes "connections between patriarchy and oppression of women around the world" (53). She wants to show how the imperialist regime wanted to dominate the African slaves by negating their mother tongue.

All in all, it has become evident that Philip succeeds in writing a Caribbean mythology where mothers and daughters find their mother tongue in each other. In his comment on *She Tries Her Tongue*, critic Robert Budde says, "It is a meeting of languages that enacts exile—but also a new beginning, a return from exile" (291). Thus, the collection depicts Philip's quest for her homeland and identity characterised by grief, mourning, wounds, and silence, yet finally, they are recovered. Though Philip has described her people as being "kidnapped, enslaved and robbed of their tongue" she provokes the fact that they "must re-member themselves in order to conquer their victimisation" (Guttman 53).

Paul Naylor writes that each of the nine sections of *She Tries Her Tongue* "presents a dialogic confrontation between traditional Western and emergent Caribbean values and forms" (180). He adds that in the first sections those negotiations are "dominated by Western terms of engagement, but the 'voice' of the Caribbean soon takes over and the relation of domination is almost completely reversed by the end of the book" (180).

However, Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* "does not violate the historical realities of the situation in the Caribbean by depicting a complete 'victory' over the oppressor culture; it does, however, articulate the increasing power of 'her tongue' to both speak and be silent by choice rather than compulsion" (Naylor 180). Finally, through this breaking of the coloniser's hegemony, the way is cleared for the language to become more rooted in the place of the Caribbean and as a consequence more expressive of the image of the Caribbean. In this way Philip gradually achieves the power of the title of her most acclaimed poetry collection: *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks.*

Conclusion

This paper discusses Marlene Nourbese Philip's (1947 -) feminism in a postcolonial context as evident in her work *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) in relation to the work of the postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft *et al*., Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Paul Gilroy.

Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* is a clear protest against the gendered, racist and sexist silencing practiced by the colonisers against the colonised. In it, Philip strives to break the silence and to re-obtain the language that has been inhibited inside the African female slave. Philip shows the coloniser's attempt to destroy the colonised's language or to deprive her of her ability to think, imagine and express her feelings. Philip also illustrates that in learning the English language, the Caribbean female was learning of her non-being. However, by using both languages and cultures, Philip brings to mind Bhabha's "Hybridity" that makes two opposites meet and confronts the colonisers with their cruelties.

The tool the black female uses to protest against her master is her body, represented in her tongue that she uses to break the silence imposed on her. Philip highlights the important role of woman as the guardian of the mother tongue and culture in a postcolonial society.

In "And Over Every Land and Sea," Philip depicts the loss of land/mother incurred by the African Diaspora. She presents classical female mythological figures that endured injustice at the hands of male gods, yet survived to find their mother tongue and defy the white patriarchal oppression. In "The Cyclamen Girl," Philip portrays the female sexuality that has been repressed by Western Christianity and patriarchal authority. Though the girl is represented as the "Other," Philip proves that she is actually a "Self" projected as the "Other" and the attempt of the white coloniser to impose his culture on her is denied. Philip's poem "Transfiguration" shows her ability to defy patriarchal discourse by the act of naming she uses to free the little girl.

In "Meditations on the Declension of Beauty," Philip argues that the English language is insufficient for her to express what she feels. "Discourse on the Logic of Language" also stresses that the Black female is unable to locate herself within the father language described as "anguish." The poem concludes that since females are the guardians of traditions, history and culture, they are also the guardians of the mother tongue. Blowing words into the child's mouth is a form of resistance that the coloniser can neither control nor repress. In "She Tries Her Tongue," Philip uses the Greek mythology of Philomel which invokes that the female body is always threatened by rape and violation and subjected to violence.

In *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip discusses the patriarchy and the oppression of women. She emphasises how the imperialist regime dominates the African slaves by negating their mother tongue and keeping them silent. She also shows that the colonised is alienated from her body since it does not belong to her as a slave. For Philip silence is not the absence of voice, but the absence of the physical body of the colonised. Her poems depict the reclaiming of this alienated body. Finally, Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue* does not depict a complete victory of the female Caribbean over the oppressor's culture, however it embodies the increasing power of her tongue to speak and maintain her identity and image; thus, defying the coloniser's hegemony.

Works Cited

Anatol, Giselle Liza. "Speaking in (M)Other Tongues: The Role of Language in Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother." *Callaloo*. 25.3 (2002): 938-953. *Project Muse*. 21 Oct. 2006. Web. 22 Jan. 2014. < http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300126>

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1994. Print. Budde, Robert. "After Postcolonialism: Migrant Lines and the Politics of Form in Fred Wah, M. Nourbese Philip, and Roy Miki." *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Laura Moss. Water loo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003: 282-296. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII. 2nd ed. Princeton, N.J: Princeton UP, 1968. Print.

Carr, Brenda. "To 'Heal the Word Wounded': Agency and the Materiality of Language and Form in M. Nourbese Philp' *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks.*" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 19.1 (1994). Web 2 Jan. 2014. <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/scl/article/view/8195/9252>.

Chambers, Claire and Susan Watkins. "Postcolonial Feminism." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.3 297-301. Web. 12 Nov. 2013 < jcl.sagepub.com>.

Corrêa, Claudia Maria Fernandes. "Two-tongued Sphinx: deciphering the 'father tongue' in Marlene Nourbese Philip." Conference on "The Power of Caribbean Poetry–Word and Sound" University of Cambridge. 20-22 Sept., 2012: 1-10. Web. 15 Dec. 2013. <http://caribbeanpoetry.educ.cam.ac.uk/conference/Papers/CorreaClaudia_ConfPaper.pdf>.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "From Martin to the (Canadian) Frontier: 'The Wombs of Language' in M. Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.1 (1998): 121-44. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008. Print.

Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. "'The Smallest Cell Remembers:' *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* and Marlene Nourbese Philip's Journey Back to Africa" *Enter Text* 3.2: 162-79. Web. 15 Jan. 2014. <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/111010/MariaCristinaFumagalli-TheSmallestCellRemembers-SheTriesHerTongue,HerSilenceSoftlyBreaksandMarleneNourbesePhilipsJourneyBacktoAfricaAnEssay.pdf>.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* London: Verso, 1993. Print.

Guttman, Naomi. "Dream of the Mother Language: Myth and History in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks.*" *MELUS* 21.3 (1996): 53-68. Web. 3 Jan. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org.library.aucegypt.edu:2048/stable/467975>.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. 3rd edition. Essex: Longman, 1995. Print.

Mahlis, Kristen. "M. NourbeSe Philip: Language, Place, and Exile." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 14.1/2 (2005): 166-201. Web. 11 Dec. 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23020017>.

---. "A Poet of Place: An Interview with M. Nourbese Philip." *Callaloo* 27.3 (2004): 682-97. Web. 11 Dec. 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300838>.

McHugh, Nancy Arden. "Postcolonial Feminism." *Feminist Philosophies A-Z.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 11 Dec. 2013. <http://www.credoreference.com/entry/edinburghfem/postcolonial_feminism>.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." (1984): 333-58. Web. 12 Dec. 2103. <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/raim0007/RaeSpot/under%20wstrn%20eyes.pdf>.

Naylor, Paul. *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History.* Evanston, Illinois: North Western UP, 1999. Web. 23 Feb. 2014. <http://books.google.com.eg/books?id=2_ltgiUUH_0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

O' Callaghan, Evelyn. "Rev. of *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* by Marlene Nourbese Philip." *Caribbean Quarterly* 37. 2/3:116-120. Web. 9 Jan. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653780>.

Philip, Marlene Nourbese. "The Absence of Language or How I Almost became a Spy." *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Canada: Ragweed Press, 1989. 10-25. Print.

---. *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays***.** Toronto, Ontario: The Mercury Press, 1997. Print.

---. "Managing the Unmanageable." *Caribbean Woman Writers: Essays from the First International Conference.* Ed. Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe. Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990. 295-301. Print.

---. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Canada: Ragweed Press, 1989. Print.

Ramazani, Jahan. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English.* London: U of Chicago P, 2001. Print.

Sadoff, Dianne F. "Gender and African-American Narrative: Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative by Valerie Smith; Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition by Joanne M. Braxton; Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience by Susan Willis; Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist by Hazel V. Carby." *American Quarterly* 43.1 (1991): 119-127. Web. 19 Apr. 2104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712971>.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Schutte, Ofelia. "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts." *Hypatia* 13.2 (1998): 53-72. Web. 4 Apr. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810637>.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985): 235-61. Web. 18 Dec. 2013. <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/spivak.html>.