

# Poems from other cultures and traditions



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Many of the poems in the Anthology are concerned with origins. The poets explore and consider these cultural identities in their poems. Write about their point of view. 1. Blessing<sup>2</sup>.

Presents from my aunt in Pakistan<sup>3</sup>. Ogun<sup>4</sup>. Hurricane hits England<sup>5</sup> These four poems are all concerned about the identity process and how people look to their past heritage for identity and for their sense of being. Blessing<sup>6</sup> Imtiaz Dharker lives in India, in the city of Bombay.

During the dry season, the temperature can reach 40 degrees. The poem is set in a vast area of temporary accommodation called Dharavi, on the outskirts of Bombay, where millions of migrants have gathered from other parts of India. Because it is not an official living area, there is always a shortage of water. The poem starts with a simple statement, there is never enough water, and shows what it is like to be without water. When the poet imagines water, it is so special it is compared to a god.

When a water pipe bursts, we are shown how the community responds: they collect as much water as possible. The children enjoy the water and play in it. The poem is structured in four stanzas of different lengths. The poet starts new paragraphs at lines 3, 7 and 18.

It is significant that short stanzas (with short, abrupt sentences) express what it is like to be without water, and longer stanzas (with flowing sentences) show what it is like suddenly to have water. The poet uses alliteration in this poem like pod/god and ground/found/around. The poem opens with a striking image of dryness: The skin cracks like a pod. When the water appears, the poet uses word like rush, burst, crash, flow and roar.

The sound of a drip of water is described in a metaphor as the voice of a kindly god, while water itself is referred to as fortune, as silver, and as the blessing. Other imagery that the poet uses are like the words echo, God, Huts, Brass, copper, plastic buckets and many more. The metaphors the poet uses are “ The liquid sun” and “ Silver crashes to the ground”. ‘Blessing’ is a religious word: blessings come from gods. A congregation can just mean ‘ a crowd of people’, but its main meaning is ‘ a crowd of worshippers’.

Stanza 3 refers to men, women and children, but stanza 4 focuses on the children alone, as the water pours over their small bones. The poem could be read in the following ways, in a pitiful voice, sympathising with the poor of India or excitedly, celebrating the blessing of the pipe bursting. Presents from my aunts in Pakistan Moniza Alvi was born in Lahore, in Pakistan, the daughter of a Pakistani father and an English mother. She moved to Hatfield in England when she was a few months old. She didn’t revisit Pakistan until after the publication of her first book of poems, *The Country over my Shoulder*, from which this poem comes. Throughout her poetry, she considers her cultural origins, and explores the tensions between her life in the west and her awareness of her ethnic routes.

Moniza is very skilled at creating snapshots of reality, small vignettes which gives the reader a sudden snapshot of a moment. We feel we are actually there as the young girl unwraps the presents from her aunts and when she tries on the Salwar Kameez. We feel that we are eves dropping as the teenager sits on the bed with her friend and discusses clothes. The speaker in the poem, who is of mixed race, describes the gifts of clothes and jewellery sent to her in England by her Pakistani relatives. She is drawn to

the loveliness of these things, but feels awkward wearing them. She feels more comfortable in English clothes – denim and corduroy.

She contrasts the beautiful clothes and jewellery of India with boring English cardigans/from Marks and Spencer. She tries to remember what it was like for her family to travel to England. Her knowledge of her birthplace, which she left as a baby, comes to her only through old photographs and newspaper reports. She tries to imagine what that world might be like.

The poem is written in free verse: the phrases are arranged loosely across the page. It is divided into stanzas of varying length. The poem is a sequence of personal memories. I is repeated a lot in the poem.

When we are remembering things, our minds often drift from one image to another, in the way that the poem does, and sometimes surprise us by fixing on odd details – like the tin boat, perhaps (line 54). The poem is full of associated, sometimes contrasting, images. The final image in a poem tends to carry a particular significance – it's the one our imagination is left with. The speaker imagines herself there in Lahore – somewhere she has been only in her thoughts. However, she is of no fixed nationality.

This sounds a slightly threatening phrase (there's a similar one – 'of no fixed abode' – which is used in law courts when the defendant is homeless). The speaker imagines herself staring through fretwork at the beautiful Shalimar Gardens. In a confused voice, as if the girl cannot decide whether she is more Pakistani or English, wistfully, as if she regrets having lost her original culture Gratefully, as she thinks about the beautiful, exotic gifts.

OgunBrathwaite was born in Barbados in the Caribbean.

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After attending Cambridge University, he taught for seven years in West Africa, where the 18th-century slave-traders had operated, and where the ancestors of so many modern-day West Indians originated, before returning to Barbados. A sense of African culture as part of West Indian identity has remained important to Brathwaite, as to many West Indians. He adopted the African name 'Kamau' in place of the English name 'Edward' with which he had been baptised. Ogun is based on the poet's personal memories of his great uncle, Robert O'Neill, a carpenter and wood-carver. The poem describes the workshop and daily life of a highly skilled West Indian carpenter (lines 1-20). His livelihood is threatened by imported steel and formica furniture (lines 21-26).

On Sundays, the carpenter becomes a sculptor; carving out of his imagination wooden figures which resemble the effigies of old African gods (lines 27-47). He is reminded of Africa and feels anger. The poem is arranged in couplets (pairs of lines), but there isn't a regular pattern to these couplets. The line endings don't always come where we would expect them. The sense seems to 'cut' suddenly from one line to the next: The knuckles of his hands were sil-/ vered knobs of nails hit, hurt and flat-/ tened out with blast of heavy hammer. This creates a kind of unpredictability in the movement of the lines.

It makes us read them more tentatively. We have to find our way through the poem. The poem is full of sounds: 'it shone like his short-sighted glasses', 'nails hit, hurt'. The poem seems to be divided into three sections: A detailed description of the workshop and the carpenter's daily life (lines 1-20) A statement – But he was poor and most days he was hungry – and an

explanation of why this is so: modern people don't want to buy the furniture he makes (lines 21-26) A description of how the carpenter carves the figure of the god and what it means to him (lines 27-47) The poet uses images to describe his uncle and his work. It shone like his short-sighted glasses (line 4) – a simile. The knuckles of his hands were sil-vered knobs of nails (lines 5-6) – a metaphor.

The poem can be read out in the following ways, fondly – the poet greatly admires his uncle and his work? Angrily – the poet feels the same anger as his uncle did when he remembers the suffering his people have endured? Hopefully – the process of carving is a positive way to cope with the past? Hurricane hits England Grace Nichols grew up in a small country village on the Atlantic coast of Guyana, in the Caribbean. Guyana used to be a British colony, so English literature has always been part of her personal background. In the 1970s she moved to England, and now lives on the coast of Sussex. In 1987, the southern coast of England was hit by what was known as The Great Storm. Hurricane-force winds are rarely experienced in England, and the effect on the landscape, particularly the trees, was devastating.

In the Caribbean, on the other hand, hurricanes are a regular occurrence, and had been a part of Grace Nichols' childhood. A woman, living in England, is woken by a hurricane. Addressing the wind as a god, she asks what it is doing creating such havoc in this part of the world (stanzas 2-5). She then speaks of the effect the storm has on her personally. She feels somehow unchained, and at one with the world.

She feels that the hurricane has come with a message to her, perhaps to tell her that the same forces are at work in England as in the Caribbean. The poem is written in eight stanzas of varying lengths. The lines themselves are of varying lengths too. Perhaps this helps us to see how unpredictable the hurricane is – and how unpredictable the woman's thoughts are. The first stanza of the poem is in the 3rd person; the reader is introduced to the woman. However, most of the poem is written in the 1st person – we hear the voice of the woman experiencing the hurricane.

There are a number of contradictions in the poem: For example, the poet says that the raging wind is Fearful and reassuring (line 7). At first sight, these two words do not seem to make sense together – it's what we might call a paradox. How can something be both fearful and reassuring? The speaker asks the gods she imagines in the hurricane a series of questions (line 13-27), but doesn't answer them directly. She asks: Why does the hurricane visit the English coast? Why do old tongues – the winds of the hurricane she remembers from her childhood – appear in new places? Why is there blinding illumination (lightning) when simultaneously the hurricane causes darkness by blowing down power lines? Is there anything that is also illuminated in herself? Why does the hurricane cause trees to be uprooted? Is there anything in her own life that becomes 'uprooted' as a result of the hurricane? In each of these four questions, she is trying to make sense of what is happening. The last question, which has a line to itself, appears to be the question to which the others lead up: O why is my heart unchained? The poem is full of natural imagery, mainly because it's about the effect of wind on landscape.

For example, trees / Falling heavy as whales (line 23-24) is effective because the huge trees become like whales when the torrential rain that accompanies a hurricane makes the land become almost like a sea. The poem can be read in the following ways: In an excited way, to show how thrilled the woman is by the hurricane and the effect it has on her? In a mournful way, to emphasise how much she misses the place of her birth? In a grateful way, because the storm has reminded her of where she came from and helps her to realise that the same forces are at work in England?