

Multilingualism and Literature in the Classroom

**A Selection of Poems and Creative Writing by
Secondary School Students in Tower Hamlets**

With an Introduction by Daljit Nagra

**Produced as part of a series of workshops run by Dr Rachael Gilmour,
School of English and Drama, Queen Mary University of London
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Introduction – by Daljit Nagra

I worked with the lovely students from Morpeth School and St Paul's Way for a morning session on a Saturday in November 2013. I was already impressed that students were voluntarily giving up their free time to be seated in a classroom and to work with, of all people, a poet. Yet our young students showed a maturity beyond their years because they saw the importance of engaging with literature and appreciated its maturing and sustaining power as well as its sense of fun. Oh, and I am also sure they attended so they could enjoy Rachael Gilmour's generous spread of drinks, biscuits and endless spread of cheese sandwiches.

In the session, I read some poems from my three poetry collections and then I took some very insightful questions from the students. After this, I set a very simple writing activity which was designed to allow students as much free expression as possible. I strongly encouraged the students to use the language of their own personal world in their creative piece. I was keen they should connect this intimate language of their home, their ancestors, their 'other' non-English language with the public world of a creative experience in a classroom.

To my great surprise, the students did not feel threatened but encouraged. They sought to include details of their domestic engagement with home-life and the issues facing teenagers into a mix of English and their native tongue.

The reader coming to these poems will hopefully feel a sense of students at many cross-roads which are being dramatized, in many cases, through a polyglot language which seeks to reinforce the complexities of their young lives. The poems included are thoughtful and wise, and include discussions with parents, questions about minority languages, love poems, poems about friendship, and a poem about wearing the hijab. I hope you will enjoy these poems as much as I have!

So I said to my mum
Kita asen kaybar
But I said to my dad
What's there to eat?

My brother was watching TV
SpongeBob SquarePants to be exact
I punched him on the arm
Demanded, where the fuck is the remote?

He got up and left, looking for mum,
Threatening me,
As if I was going to get in trouble.
Was I scared? No.
Dad wasn't home, mum doesn't understand.

Julekha Begum
St Paul's Way Trust School

Words

So she called
And I was with my friends
I walked far away
To save embarrassment.

'Kumbala aiben?'
Her voice projected out like a tannoy
My friends looked back
But kept silent
As I interpreted their parents were the same
Yet why this embarrassment?
A question I may never be able to explain.

Julekha Begum
St Paul's Way Trust School

Tongue within my mother tongue

I speak Bengali and so do you.
Yet you sit there laughing at me.
You say 'lef' and I say 'razai'.
You say 'Salon' and I say 'Salom'.

They both mean the same thing –
Yet you sit there judging me
And I'm judging you.

Lef/ razai = Duvet
Salon/ Salom = Curry

Farhana Akthar
St Paul's Way Trust School

I am 50 pieces of the puzzle to your heart,
2 sides that do not match.
Half a century of feelings I didn't have lost in half a year to someone I didn't love.
I am one side of the reaction to your actions,
The debris of our collisions in a fraction
Of the time you took to say...
"I don't love you any more."

Adeeb Razak
Morpeth School

My Dear Friend

My dear friend,
Why so slow?
I've been waiting, waiting,
More than you could know

Fold me in your womb,
As you do every night,
But do not let go,
When you see Her light

My dear friend,
Here is my gift,
Inherit my last breath,
To finish your shift

You accept me as I am,
No longer keep me a burden to them,
Take me to your Motherland,
You are the Only Friend

My dear friend,
Time passes by,
Your presence hovers,
No need to be shy,

Crying I've made my way to this earth,
They laugh,
For my Mother has given birth,

Now allow me to laugh,
For you have granted me leave,
They now cry,
Because I sleep

Fold me in your womb,
You have done that so,
You have seen Her light,
Yet you have not let go

Faiza Nourita
Morpeth School

Spirit of You

You look at me,
Your smile fades,
Darker grow your eyes

You hear me,
Your silence echoes,
As I watch your spirit fly

I count away the ticks of time,
Waiting for tomorrow,
Waiting just to see your face,
To end my bittersweet sorrow

I heard you ask about me so,
You ask,
What does she say?
She says she holds you in her heart,
Scared you'll fly away

But the spirit of you has already set sail,
Increasing distance between us,
Increasing the destruction you've made in my heart,
Increasing my love to dust

I apologise that everything has changed,
I apologise our eyes can't even meet,
I apologise for the fact I push your smile away,
I apologise you have to look down at your feet

But mostly I'm sorry I let my love show,
I'm sorry I let the spirit of you go

Faiza Nourita
Morpeth School

Behind The Hijaab

I was asked to write a poem about my identity,
I said: 'Look at me, what do you see? Religion, gender, and ethnicity... a "young,
oppressed" hijaabi.
And then I gave up. My imagination was shut. I was tired, angry, frustrated, and hurt.
I started to remember everything I heard; about myself, about Islam in this world.
Politicians, prime ministers, world leader and such,
With their speeches about peace whilst humiliating us,
Claiming they treat us equal, what bull; hypocritical,
Their minds closed up like a box, not spherical.

When we take a stand, they tag us from a different land,
Our Motherland,
At least we hold each other by the hands.

These Westerns say they love each other but it's just a sham,
In France they created a niqaab ban, screw that.

My father can barely pay the rent and,
My mother constantly shouted at,
But...what about me as a daughter?
A daughter who disobeys her own father,
Just so I can listen to my heart to go further.

All I'm saying is practice what you preach,
With a world so indulged in evil,
Recognise the fact that we're all the same people.

Faiza Nourita
Morpeth School

She Will

She will draw a thin red line through her skin,
To dim the pain she holds within,
Her mind is messed,
Desperate for help,
For help, she cries out, as she's trapped in a shell,
A shell that's captured her well,
The hell!
The way she wants her mother to notice,
To notice how bad she'd like a small blow kiss,
When she's travelling to her classes,
What a mess her life is,
Her mother doesn't notice,
The hell!
She shrinks in her shell,
A shell that's captured her well,
She's desperate for help,
So to dim the pain she hold within,
She Will Draw A Thin Red Line Through Her Skin.

Faiza Nourita
Morpeth School

The language of my heart

I'd only seen funerals on television before,
In movies, documentaries and the odd drama.
Prayers in fluent Arabic wisped across the air,
But I was somewhere else, a world of memories and plunged into an abyss of pain.
"She's in eternal peace now. Leave her in God's hands" is what they said to me, but it
didn't stop the tears from flowing.

I prayed, just as they did, monotonous in
Attempts to block out my emotions.
The water splashed, we washed her, she felt
Cold. Dead. Dead. Dead.

They placed her in the wide white coffin, and
Wrapped her in clean linen cloth as I looked on;
Tears dried and prayers left my lips, finally
Feeling like the language of my heart.

Face to face, I felt emotion with utmost
Intensity, and I whispered to her: "Don't worry Nani, everything will be okay."

Glossary:

Nani = grandmother

Medinah Ibne-Habib
Morpeth School

The bond between you and I

We walked together every Friday night, making a circle around Kremlin, sometimes even two. Her cold skin, so pale it almost made her fade away, but not in my eyes. In my eyes she had rose cheeks and a warm smile. We never used to talk at first; maybe because we were foreigners to each other. I was a visitor and I did not know where to take her, so we went to a library. I didn't know any Russian and the library had no English books. But there I had a chance to admire her simplicity. Her hair was left messy on her small back and her lips were bitten and had a red colour. I could look at her for hours but that was impossible because she would turn her head back to me and blink then smile with the corner of her mouth. When we left she tried to say in English that she was going home and that we would meet the next Friday at the usual place. That was what I was waiting for, for her to talk to me so I can hear her trembling voice and her accent. I cannot say it amused me; on the contrary it made me come for her tomorrow, not the next Friday.

I never understood why she only wanted to see me on Fridays; she knew I wanted to see her more often. However I did not oppose or force her to do how I wished. A year passed and during this time we got quite close. I learnt some Russian words, I taught her English. I went through an intense winter and I got used to the snow whistling through the crispy branches. I was really fascinated by the things she would tell me. I told her that one of my favourite Russian poets is Pushkin and then she used to recite me poems. Many times I found it really embarrassing because I was the man, I should read her poetry, but her voice just hugged the ear and I did not say stop.

She never asked me when I would return back to London; she didn't want to know when. Perhaps after all I will not see the way back to the British world in the next decade or so because I wanted to stay. Here with her. At first she was shy, but I am not surprised because I was a shy mortal too. Every single conversation with her I would learn something new and captivating. We would talk about traditions and how she celebrated Christmas on seventh of January. I did not find it weird. The feeling, emotions and two languages discovered such a bond between us two.

When I visited her at home, she poured me some tea from her old samovar and added two big cubes of crystal sugar. I was looking through her huge book library and then I saw a section of English books. She wanted me to see that. She knew English perfectly.

Nina Harea
St Paul's Way Trust School