

# Singh Song

Naljit Nagra

## OVERALL SUMMARY

"Singh Song" uses **witty word play** and manipulates **pre-established racist stereotypes** to create a **sentimental** (affectionate), funny poem about the **realities** of Indian families living in the UK. The speaker focuses on his wife and the love he has for her and making love to her while he should be on duty at his family's shop.

## STANZA SUMMARY

- The speaker says that he has been told to work a twelve-hour shift without breaks at his father's convince store, but when no one is around, he sneaks away.
- He creeps up the stairs to his new wife where the couple eat traditional Indian food and then make love.
- The speaker returns with his apron **dishevelled** hand his customers complain that the food is in **disarray** (not in order) and the floor is dirty and that his is the worst of all the Indian shops on the street.
- His wife is upstairs doing **ambiguous** things but from the information we can deduce she is on a Sikh dating website.
- He describes his wife arguing with his parents
- He recounts that his wife has small eyes and a large teddy bear like tummy.
- His wife sports short red hair and a tartan sari, with a fur jacket and tight-fitting pumps.
- Again, the speaker returns from making love with his wife and the customers, as before, complain about the food and the shop, again, calling it the worst Indian on the street.
- The speaker speaks of sneaking down to the shop at midnight with his lover.
- His lover asks him to joke questions about how much items cost, and he responds with **loving, humorous** remarks.

## CONTEXT

- Nagra's parents were part of many Punjabi Sikh-Indian's who moved to the UK in the 1950s to work in factories, but decided that opening shops gave them more liberty to work on their own terms and escape the **gruellingly** long shifts in the factories.
- Nagra wanted to write a poem that combatted the **ridiculing** (making fun of) of Indian accents that can still to this day be seen in the media. He wanted to emphasise that to have an Indian accent is not something to be ashamed of, nor is it worthy of **ridicule**, rather it is a reality for many Indian British families.
- The **pun** in the poem's title plays on the stereotypical Indian name Singh and the rising and falling inflection associated with the Indian accent.

# Key Themes & Analysis

## RACISM / RACIAL STEREOTYPES

- Unlike some activist poems, **"Sing Song"** doesn't try to **dismantle** (tear down) stereotypes associated with British Indians, rather it attempts to **normalise** them. The speaker recounts **"vee share in chapatti"**, referencing a traditional Indian dish in a language that reflects an Indian accent. He uses **phonetic transcription** (writing in a way that reflects an accent), replacing **"we"** with **"vee"**, he forces the reader to use the accent as well, **demanding** that they speak in the accent that they have mocked and thus **normalising** it.
- He laments that his father **"vunt[s].[him] not to have a break"**. He **humanises** himself by complaining about his lack of breaks, once again reminding us that these **stereotypes stem** (originate) from real people.
- The customers in the poem call the shop **"di worst Indian"**, the **hyperbole** used here sounds **endearing** (loveable) rather than **critical**, creating a **sense of community**. This **refrains** later in the poem which reinforces this sense of community
- **"Hey Singh ver yoo bin?"** he recites, again, creating a **sense of community**, showing he is a valued member, forcing the reader to think of Indian run corner shops they know and to reflect on how these service workers are a **vital** part of our community.
- Normalising racist stereotypes is the **crux** (quintessential meaning) of Nagra's poem, as he seeks to **humanise a community that has been ridiculed and taken advantage of** and in using **communal language** and **phonetic transcription**.

## LOVE / ROMANCE

- The poem's **central focus** is on the love the speaker has for his wife. He calls her **"my newly bride"**, using a personal pronoun **"my"** **connoting endearment and possession** and reminding us that they are newly married, a time of marriage associated with intense passion.
- He recounts how his wife is **"making fun at [his] daddy"**, but suggests he finds funny rather than insulting. Marriage and love are shown to involve a lot of **conflict** and **compromise**, yet the poem does not eradicate these stereotypes, instead encourages the reader to see that marriages are not defined by their faults.
- He says that his wife has the **"tummy ov a teddybear"**, juxtaposing his love for her against her less **conventionally** (socially normal) beautiful standards. Again, showing love to be **complex**, to involve **resentment** (dissatisfaction) but also **passion**.
- Comparing her to a child's toy further **evokes** a sense of **endearment**, **juxtaposing** against her **"eyes ov a gun"**.
- As they enter the shop late at night they look past **"di half price window signs"**, which is symbolic of him seeing past material gains and only valuing his love for his wife.
- The poem's final line, addressed to his wife: **"is priceless baby"**, is romantic. The term **"baby"** is the final addition to **the semantic field of love** created in the poem. The line shows him renouncing the **financially, capitalistically motivated** world of his father's shop and embracing love which is **"priceless"**.
- There is a lot of **enjambement** in the poem and for a poem about love it makes love seem **everlasting** and **resilient**, able to overcome potentially **hindrances** (obstacles).
- Love is shown by the poet to be multifaceted (contain many complexities), and to contain an **element** of sacrifice. The poet shows that love is not perfect, but to love someone despite their flaws is a **"priceless"** experience, worth more than any material gain.
- It's worth noting that the poem is a love poem, not just for his wife but for his culture as well, it is an **ode** (love poem) to his Indian **heritage**.

# Form

## FREE VERSE

- The poem is written in **free verse**, which means it lacks a rhyme scheme giving it an element of **spontaneity**, as though it is **improvised**.
- It makes the poem seem more **informal** which is enhanced by the **dialect** style language, and it also makes the speaker sound **scattered** in their thoughts, as though the **influence of love** has made him **whimsically skittish**.

## STANZAS

- The poem is broken into **irregular stanzas** of **unequal length** which adds to the poems chaotic nature. It makes the speaker seem **unfocused** on being **grammatically correct** and more on expressing his feelings.
- It makes the poem seem like **a passionate expression of love for his wife and his culture**.

# Structure

## ENJAMBEMENT

- As mentioned above the **enjambement** in the poem characterises love to be everlasting but also it adds to the poems spontaneity. In fact, the poem lacks most forms of punctuation, only using question marks and dashes when necessary and this gives the impression that the speaker is **unfiltered** and cares more about speaking their thoughts than being **grammatically** correct.
- It also **reinforces** the **stereotype** that comes with **dialect**, that stereotype being that the speakers English skills are not always entirely accurate.

## REFRAIN

- Definition: a line or phrase repeated throughout
- The stanza where the customers cry out in complaint has a **refrain** of the second and third and seventh and eighth lines.
- This **reinforces a sense of community** that the poem creates, making the reader think specifically about those lines and the meaning behind them, **accentuating** the communal nature of them.

# Comparisons

The Farmer's Bride	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
<b>Similar</b>	<p><b>An insight into the speaker's head</b></p> <p>Both poems allow give us a direct account of the speakers feelings about love, however different they might be. They both look at women through a <b>primarily male lens</b>.</p> <p><b>Cultural language</b></p> <p>Both speakers in the two poems are fond of their surroundings, with Singh recounts <b>fondly</b> aspects of his culture in his everyday life and the Farmer is focused on the harvest and the nature that surrounds him</p>	<p><b>Monologue</b></p> <p>Both poems take the form of a monologue giving us <b>unfiltered</b> access into the speakers' innermost thought and feelings</p>	<p><b>Enjambement</b></p> <p>Both poems use enjambement but in Nagra's poem it gives the effect of creating a <b>rambling incoherent monologue</b>, whereas in Mew's it creates complex sentences making the poem sounds almost <b>prose</b> like.</p>	<p><b>Key issues</b></p> <p>Both poets attempt to tackle key issues of society, Nagra attempting to dispel the stigma associated with <b>racial stereotypes</b> and Mew highlighting the <b>subjugation of women</b> throughout history.</p>
<b>Different</b>	<p><b>Love</b></p> <p>While the speaker in Singh song is more focused on love than his responsibilities, the farmer sees his wife as a second priority.</p> <p><b>Respect</b></p> <p>The speaker in Singh... tolerates his wife's bad behaviour (getting drunk, being rude to his parents) whereas the farmer dominates his wife in every aspect of her life, making it so she does not even have the freedom to leave him. He does not respect her as an individual and <b>objectifies</b> her</p>	<p><b>Metre</b></p> <p>Nagra uses free verse making his poem sound spontaneous and <b>like a stream of consciousness</b> while Mew uses iambic pentameter, making the poem sound <b>rhythmically even</b> and creates a sense of regularity- this representing the startling regularity of his oppression to his wife</p>	<p><b>Stanzas</b></p> <p>Nagra's poem is far more <b>disjointed</b> making the poem seem, again, like a stream of consciousness whereas Mew's is split into far more equal stanzas. The farmer seems more organised with his thoughts. Alternatively showing his strict control of his wife.</p>	<p><b>As above</b></p> <p>Positive vs negative Nagra tackles the issues in his poem (racism) by taking a positive approach, attempting to highlight his <b>fondness</b> for his culture and in turn overshadow the negative stereotypes associated with that culture. Mew however, writes a far more depressing account of <b>the realities of gender based subjugation and forced marriages</b>.</p>

Winter Swans	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p><b>Miscommunication</b></p> <p>Both poems show a rift between the couples in them. They both seem to have a relationship lacking in communication and both resolve this by the end of the poem</p> <p><b>Fondness</b></p> <p>Both speakers have a deep <b>fondness</b> and love for their partner and use the poem to express that. They both spend the whole poem focusing solely on their partners, making both poems feel like an <b>Ode</b> (a love poem).</p>	<p><b>Rhyme</b></p> <p>Both poems lack a <b>discernible</b> rhyme scheme, making them sound irregular and disjointed. Both rhyme schemes communicate <b>tumultuous</b> relationships in their respective poems.</p> <p><b>Stanzas</b></p> <p>Both poems have irregular stanzas creating a sense of instability in the poem, making it so, alike to the speakers, we're as unaware of what the day brings for their relationship as they are.</p>	<p>The poems are very <b>dissimilar</b> in terms of structure.</p>	<p><b>Conflicts</b></p> <p>Both speaker show a conflict in their relationships which is resolved by the end of the poem, Nagra shows conflict through a cultural lens and Sheers through an <b>ecocritical</b> one (through nature)</p>
Different	<p><b>Optimism vs pessimism</b></p> <p>While Singh has an <b>optimistic</b> tone throughout the entire of his poem, the speaker in Winter Swans seems more mellow (sad) and subdued. They <b>respectively</b> demonstrate different approaches to love and relationships.</p> <p><b>Uncertainty</b></p> <p>Singh speaks of troubles he has with his wife, but in a self-assured manner that makes him sound secure in his relationship with her. In Winter Swans, however, the speaker seems insecure in his relationship and spends the poem attempting to fix a problem they are clearly having and were not always entirely certain it will be fixed.</p>	<p><b>Refrain</b></p> <p>Singh Song has refrains of certain lines while Winter swans does not. The refrain in Nagra's poem creates a sense of fondness and community but the lone, unrepeatd simple sentences in Sheers' poem creates a sense of <b>melancholy</b>.</p>	<p><b>Enjambement</b></p> <p>Winter swans has a mix of <b>end-stopped lines</b> and <b>enjambement</b> whilst Singh... lacks full stops altogether. This has the effect of making the speaker in Winter swans sound far more organised with their thoughts and Singh, sounding much more excited spontaneous.</p> <p><b>Couplets</b></p> <p>Sheers uses one <b>rhyming couplet</b> at the end of his poem creating a sense of finality and resolution, Nagra creates that sense by using a question and answer in his final lines.</p>	<p><b>Personal vs worldly issues</b></p> <p>Nagra seems to desire to focus on inherent issues within society regarding racism whereas Sheers focuses rather on issues within relationships and is more focused on the couple rather than the world as a whole.</p>