

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives
Name Journeys – *Raman Mundair*

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NAME JOURNEYS

Raman Mundair

Brief Summary

Name Journeys explores the poet's experience of **cultural displacement** and the negotiation of identity in England. The speaker reflects on the loss and **adaptation** involved in moving from South Asia to England, **contrasting** the spiritual and familial connections of their heritage with the challenges of fitting into English society. The poem conveys how language, accent, and even one's own name become sites of struggle, memory, and transformation, portraying both the personal and emotional costs of **migration**.



Synopsis

- The speaker recalls a close, spiritual bond with Sita (a central figure in **Hindu mythology**, known for her loyalty and moral strength) likened to sisters entwined in a “**spiritual sari**.”
- They describe experiences of trial and growth, using Sita as a **metaphor** for loyalty, resilience, and heritage.
- Mundair presents the journey of the speaker's name and voice, tracing **cultural** and **linguistic displacement** from South Asia to North England.
- The speaker describes the transformation of their accent and the effort required to adapt to English language **norms**.
- Their name becomes a source of **alienation**, representing the clash between **personal heritage** and societal expectations.
- The poem ends reflecting on the loss of cultural context and historical memory, captured in the phrase “**Anglo Echo chamber - void of history and memory**.”

Context

Cultural Heritage and Mythology

Raman Mundair draws heavily on South Asian cultural and religious references. Figures like **Rama**, **Sita** and **Draupadi** connect the speaker to **Indian mythology** and heritage, providing a sense of moral grounding and spiritual continuity. These references emphasise the importance of ancestry, tradition, and family bonds.

Migration and Displacement

The poem reflects the experience of growing up between two cultures, moving from South Asia to North England. Mundair illustrates the emotional, linguistic, and cultural challenges faced by immigrants. References to “**infertile English soil**” highlight the difficulties of finding cultural and personal belonging in a society that is unfamiliar or unaccommodating.



Language and Identity

Names, accents, and speech patterns are central to identity in the poem. The speaker describes their own name as **“a stumble that filled English mouths”**, showing how language becomes a site of both misunderstanding and **self-definition**. Mundair highlights the labor involved in **adapting linguistically** while preserving one’s heritage, reflecting broader societal pressures to **assimilate**.



Social and Historical Context

Mundair’s work engages with **postcolonial** England, where **second-generation immigrants** often faced **systemic marginalisation** and invisibility. The poem critiques the dominant culture as **“void of history and memory”**, signalling the neglect of **minority** experiences and histories within mainstream English society. This situates the speaker’s personal journey within wider societal issues of migration, race, and cultural recognition.

The title “Name Journeys”

The title *Name Journeys* signals that the poem will explore identity through language and names.

Name Journeys

Indicates movement, transformation, and the layered experiences associated with heritage and assimilation.

“Journeys” evokes both physical migration and the emotional and linguistic passage of growing up in a different cultural environment.

Perspective and Tone

The poem is written in the **first person**, giving a personal **female perspective** on identity within a multicultural society. By addressing Rama, a male **mythological figure**, the speaker explores her heritage through comparison with female figures such as Sita, linking **mythology** to her own lived experience.

The tone is thoughtful, combining pride in cultural **heritage** with frustration about **displacement** in England. Mundair balances respect for tradition with a quiet critique of **alienation**, creating a controlled, measured voice that reflects the careful negotiation of language and identity.



Name Journeys

The poem opens with spiritual and mythological resonance. Sita is a female figure who embodies loyalty, resilience, and purity.

Emotive description of Sita emphasises loyalty and purity, showing the importance of guidance and companionship in the speaker's life.

"Trial by fire" shows challenges that shape identity, evoking resilience.

Reference to Draupadi and Hindu epic allusions reinforces shared ancestry and spiritual strength.

Extended metaphor of "tapestries" suggests layered cultural experiences.

Geographic imagery emphasises physical and emotional journey from homeland to England.

Line break rhythm mirrors progression of movement and adaptation.

Personification of the mouth conveys effort in adopting new accents and linguistic norms.

Contrasts familiar heritage with the foreign English environment.

Like Rama I have felt the Wilderness

but I have not been blessed

with a companion as sweet as she,

Sita; loyal pure and true of heart.

Like her, I have been chastened

through trial by fire. Sita and I,

spiritual sari - sisters entwined

in an infinite silk that would swathe

Draupadi's blush. My name

a journey between rough and smooth,
an interlacing of banyan leaves with sugar

cane. Woven tapestries of Journeys;

traveling from South

to North, where the Punjabi in my mouth

became dislodged as milk teeth fell

and hit infertile English soil.

My mouth toiled to accommodate

the rough musicality of Mancunian vows

Allusion to Hindu mythology ("Rama" and "Sita") situates the speaker in a spiritual and cultural framework.

"Felt the Wilderness" conveys isolation and struggle, setting a reflective, introspective tone.

The juxtaposition of "not been blessed" with Sita's virtues emphasises the speaker's longing for connection.

The metaphor "spiritual sari" interweaves identity, sisterhood, and tradition.

A name symbolises identity shaped by heritage and migration.

Juxtaposition of "banyan leaves" and "sugar cane" with earlier "rough and smooth" conveys cultural richness and complexity. Metaphorical language shows how personal and ancestral history intertwines.

Language and pronunciation as symbols of cultural assimilation and struggle. "Dislodged" conveys forced adaptation, loss of linguistic fluidity.

"Infertile English soil" highlights alienation and cultural displacement, contrasting with fertile imagery of heritage.



The metaphor of “stumbling” emphasises the difficulty of integration.

“Discordant rhyme” and “exotic rhythm dulled” reflect marginalisation and misunderstanding of minority culture. Natural musicality of the speaker’s language and name is flattened and weakened in an English context

and my name became a stumble
that filled English mouths
with a discordant rhyme, an exotic
rhythm dulled, my voice a mystery
in the Anglo Echo chamber -
void of history and memory.

Symbolism of “Anglo Echo chamber” conveys societal ignorance and erasure of cultural identity.

“Void of history and memory” highlights isolation and loss of heritage recognition.

Reflects alienation and emotional distance experienced in migration.

Structure

Form

- The poem is written in **free verse**, reflecting the natural rhythm of memory, thought, and personal reflection.
- The lack of a formal rhyme scheme or consistent line length mirrors the speaker’s journey through migration, creating a sense of **fluidity** that mirrors the movement from one culture to another.
- The **continuous stanza** structure allows the poem to flow like a single **reflective monologue**, emphasising the intertwined nature of heritage, language, and personal experience.

Enjambment and caesura

- Mundair uses **enjambment** extensively to convey the ongoing, overlapping nature of memory and linguistic adaptation. For example, **“Woven tapestries of Journeys; / traveling from South / to North”** flows across multiple lines, visually **representing** the physical and cultural journey while maintaining the sense of an **uninterrupted** stream of thought.
- The mid-line breaks (**caesura**) also draw attention to key phrases and create moments of pause for emphasis, particularly when reflecting on the challenges of adapting to a new environment.

Rhythm and pacing

- The poem **shifts** between long, flowing lines and shorter, broken phrases to reflect changes in the speaker’s confidence.
- Longer lines create a smooth, **lyrical rhythm**, suggesting cultural richness and continuity. Shorter lines slow the pace and feel awkward, mirroring moments of disruption and misunderstanding.
- This contrast in pacing highlights the **tension** between expressing identity and adapting to external pressure.



Language and Imagery

Cultural and natural imagery

Mundair contrasts lush, **fertile imagery** from her heritage (“*banyan leaves with sugar cane*”) with the **alien, infertile landscape** of England (“*hit infertile English soil*”), highlighting the **displacement** and adaptation inherent in migration. The **imagery** evokes both **nostalgia** for their homeland and frustration at the challenges of fitting into a new **cultural context**.



Musicality and sound

The poem draws sustained attention to the sounds of language to show how identity is shaped and challenged through speech. Phrases such as “*rough musicality of Mancunian vows*” highlight the harsh, unfamiliar sounds the speaker must adapt to, while “*discordant rhyme, an exotic rhythm dulled*” suggests that her own culturally expressive voice is flattened and misunderstood. Subtle **alliteration** and internal sound patterns reinforce the idea that language is not neutral: pronunciation becomes a site of negotiation, where identity is altered in order to be accepted.

Mythological and spiritual references

References to Sita, Draupadi, and spiritual connections between sisters evoke shared cultural memory and identity, linking personal experience to a broader **ancestral** and **mythological tradition**. This positions **heritage** as both a source of strength and a framework for navigating the alien environment of England.

Themes

Migration and displacement

Mundair presents migration as a layered experience involving emotional, cultural, and **linguistic adaptation**. The speaker reflects on moving from South to North and the challenge of maintaining heritage in England. The journey of the name – “*my name / a journey between rough and smooth*” – symbolises both physical relocation and the internal negotiation of identity.



Identity and language

Language is central to selfhood in the poem. The difficulty of pronouncing the speaker’s name in English – “*my name became a stumble / that filled English mouths*” – illustrates the pressures of adaptation and the subtle erasure of identity. The “*discordant rhyme, an exotic rhythm dulled*” highlights how linguistic difference can **alienate**, while also marking cultural distinctiveness.



Heritage and memory

Imagery of ancestry, myth, and landscape – **“an interlacing of banyan leaves with sugar cane”** and references to Sita and Draupadi – root the speaker in cultural memory.

References to South Asian **heritage** and **mythology** are woven throughout the poem. Figures such as Sita and Draupadi evoke cultural memory and **ancestral lineage**, linking personal experience to broader narratives of virtue and spiritual connection. These references emphasise that **heritage** is not only remembered but actively guides the speaker’s negotiation of identity within an unfamiliar cultural landscape.



Exclusion and misunderstanding

The **“Anglo Echo chamber – / void of history and memory”** exposes the failure of dominant culture to recognise minority histories. Mispronunciation and misunderstanding operate as subtle mechanisms of **marginalisation**, emphasising the speaker’s sense of **exclusion** and the wider societal pressures on migrants to **conform**.



Comparisons

Homing – Liz Berry

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore how language shapes identity and belonging. In <i>Name Journeys</i>, the speaker's name becomes a "stumble that filled English mouths," showing how the dominant culture shapes and even distorts identity through language. <i>Homing</i> also considers language as identity – through dialect and suppressed accent – and how losing or regaining one's voice connects to belonging. Both poets use contrasting imagery to show cultural tension and adaptation. Mundair contrasts cultural richness with "infertile English soil," while Berry contrasts formal elocution lessons with the return of natural speech as resistance to conforming to social norms. Both poems show internal negotiation between heritage and external expectation. In <i>Name Journeys</i>, the speaker's struggle with linguistic adaptation highlights the emotional work of fitting into English society. Similarly, in <i>Homing</i>, the speaker's inner voice and accent become a way of reconnecting with heritage and personal identity.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Name Journeys</i> portrays identity negotiation as ongoing and reflective, emphasising the complexity of hybridity, cultural memory, and linguistic adaptation. <i>Homing</i>, however, more fully celebrates the reclamation of identity, focusing on the emotional release of regaining suppressed language and voice. Mundair's poem explores cultural misunderstanding and adaptation in a diasporic context, where identity is shaped by external perception and accommodation. Liz Berry's poem foregrounds self-affirmation, where reconnecting to an accent symbolises reclaiming lost parts of oneself. The tone in <i>Name Journeys</i> has a controlled, introspective intensity, showing both pride and tension. In <i>Homing</i>, although there is tension, the overall tone moves toward empowerment and reconnection with community and heritage.

Thirteen – Caleb Femi

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore the theme of identity imposed by others rather than freely expressed by the individual. In <i>Name Journeys</i>, the speaker's identity is repeatedly shaped by how her name and language are received in English contexts ("stumble...filled English mouths"), while in <i>Thirteen</i>, the young speaker is identified by law enforcement based on racial assumptions and suspicion. Both poems reveal the emotional impact of social exclusion and prejudice. Mundair's speaker reflects on linguistic alienation and
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	<p>misunderstanding, and Femi’s speaker experiences fear and vulnerability under systemic scrutiny, showing how identity can become a site of emotional conflict.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both use personal voice and free verse to make experiences feel immediate and authentic, letting the reader engage emotionally with narratives of marginalisation.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Name Journeys</i> focuses on cultural and linguistic displacement and the long-term negotiation of identity, blending heritage with adaptation. In contrast, <i>Thirteen</i> deals with systemic racial prejudice, presenting an encounter that feels immediate, urgent, and threatening. Femi’s poem emphasises power imbalances and vulnerability, showing how institutions can target individuals based on race. Mundair’s poem foregrounds negotiation and cultural memory, where pressure comes from misunderstanding and assimilation rather than direct threat. The emotional tone in <i>Name Journeys</i> is more reflective, exploring a rich inner landscape of heritage, whereas <i>Thirteen</i> uses tense and visceral imagery to convey the sense of danger and fear during racialised encounters.

With Birds You’re Never Lonely – Raymond Antrobus

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore human identity in relation to place and belonging. In <i>Name Journeys</i>, the speaker sees her name as shaped and sometimes distorted by English language and culture (“my name became a stumble / that filled English mouths”), showing how place affects identity. Similarly, Antrobus shows how the speaker’s sense of self is shaped by different settings – from a busy London café (where he “can’t hear the barista / over the coffee machine”) to a forest where silence becomes meaningful and connected. Both poets contrast differing worlds to highlight connection versus disconnection. Mundair contrasts fertile, ancestral imagery with “infertile English soil,” showing loss and adaptation. Antrobus contrasts the vibrant natural world of “sun-syrupped Kauri trees / and brazen Tui birds with white tufts and yellow and black beaks” with the grey, less vibrant urban environment, emphasising differences in belonging. Both use reflection triggered by sensory experience to probe deeper meaning. Mundair’s reflections on her name and cultural references shape her sense of self. In Antrobus’s poem, auditory experience becomes a key to emotional and philosophical reflection – the speaker even turns off his hearing aids to experience nature fully, and says he finds “a silence that was not an absence.”
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Antrobus explicitly uses nature as a space of comfort and connection, while Mundair uses nature imagery more symbolically to represent heritage and cultural rootedness. Antrobus's title line ("with birds you're never lonely") suggests direct companionship through nature, whereas Mundair's imagery (e.g., heritage symbols like "banyan leaves" and "sugar cane") reflects cultural memory and identity rather than immediate comfort.• The emotional tone differs significantly: Antrobus moves between sensory wonder, nostalgia, discomfort, and empathy – he feels "sorry for any grey tree in London, for the family they don't have, the Gods they can't hold," which shows empathy for how urban life damages natural connection. Mundair's tone is more controlled and reflective, focusing on negotiating identity rather than expressing overt emotional longing.• Antrobus combines cultural and environmental perspectives, even including an encounter with a Māori woman who knows bird calls through ancestral knowledge, suggesting that connection with place and culture can be passed through generations. Mundair's focus is more on linguistic and cultural negotiation within an individual's experience, rather than on intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge.
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