

# AQA English GCSE

## Poetry: Worlds and Lives pot – *Shamshad Khan*

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## POT

Shamshad Khan

### Brief Summary

*pot* is a **reflective** poem in which the speaker addresses a ceramic pot displayed behind glass, imagining its **origins** and journey to England. The pot becomes a **symbol** of cultural objects taken during **colonialism** and **migration**, as well as a mirror for the speaker's own experience of **diaspora** (the movement of people, cultures, and objects away from their place of origin). Through questioning and **speculation**, the speaker explores ideas of belonging, ownership, and identity.



The poem suggests that objects, like people, carry histories of care, **displacement**, and love, and that being removed from one's place of origin can lead to complicated feelings of **exclusion**, even when return is possible.

### Synopsis

- The poem opens by **addressing** a pot that is large, fragile, and kept behind glass, suggesting it should not be moved.
- **Observations** are made about the pot's appearance, noting that its style could come from many places and could almost be English, though the voice insists it is not.
- Only part of its history is known, and the speaker asks the pot to reveal the rest.
- Possible journeys to England are imagined: sold, looted, or quietly removed.
- **Attention shifts** to those who made and cared for the pot, describing shaping, washing, and using it.
- Someone must have noticed the pot missing, and the speaker wishes they could return it themselves.
- Doubts about recognition link to ideas of **diaspora** as the speaker reflects on returning to their family homeland and being warmly welcomed.
- The pot is imagined back in its original setting, fulfilling its purpose.
- The poem ends with the speaker calling out to the pot and waiting for a response.

### Context

#### British Asian Identity

Shamshad Khan is a British poet of **Pakistani heritage**, born in Leeds and later based in Manchester. Her work frequently explores questions of belonging, **migration**, and cultural inheritance within Britain. Growing up between cultures informs *pot*'s focus on feeling connected to **origins** while living at a physical and emotional distance from them. This background helps explain why the speaker strongly identifies with the pot's **displacement** and incomplete history.





## Colonial Legacies and Cultural Removal

*pot* is shaped by ongoing debates about how objects from Africa and Asia arrived in Britain during and after the **British Empire**. Many artefacts were removed through unequal power relationships, conflict, or **colonial** administration, and later reframed as “collected” or “acquired.” Khan reflects this uncertainty by listing competing explanations for the pot’s journey – whether it was “bought,” “lost,” or taken in a “looters’ deal” – highlighting how colonial histories are often **obscured** or **softened** in official narratives.

## Museums, Heritage and Ownership

The poem was written in response to a **museum artefact**, grounding it in real-world discussions about who owns **cultural heritage** and where it belongs. British museums have increasingly faced public pressure to acknowledge the **origins** of objects and the conditions under which they were removed– and to return them to where they came from. Khan’s poem reflects this climate by imagining the emotional and cultural cost of **displacement**, rather than focusing on legal ownership alone.

## The title “pot”

The title immediately focuses attention on a single object, making it personal and intimate, as though the poem is addressing a living being. This reflects the speaker’s emotional connection and concern for the artefact.

pot

The lowercase styling of “pot” suggests humility and fragility, emphasizing the object’s vulnerability and the power dynamics inherent in its displacement. It also mirrors the poet’s conversational tone throughout the poem.

“pot” carries multiple symbolic meanings: it represents heritage, identity, and cultural history, while also acting as a stand-in for displaced people or communities, linking the object’s journey to broader questions of belonging, ownership, and diaspora.



## Perspective and Tone

The poem is written in the **first person**, giving the speaker an **intimate** and **reflective voice**. By **addressing** the pot **directly**, the speaker creates a **one-sided conversation** which allows readers to see the speaker's emotional connection to **heritage** and **displacement** while also highlighting the object's silence and lack of **agency**. The **tone** fluctuates between tenderness, concern, and frustration. Early lines convey care for the pot's fragility ("**so fragile you might break**"), while the middle stanzas express **indignation** and helplessness regarding its journey and treatment ("**if I could shatter this glass / I would take you back myself pot**"). By the end, the tone is both reflective and unresolved, particularly in the **repeated questioning** ("**pot? / pot?**"), reinforcing the poem's focus on loss, belonging, and the impossibility of fully **reclaiming displaced histories**.



## pot

Em dash shows pause, speaker reflecting; emphasises fragility and care needed.

“so fragile” highlights vulnerability, symbolic of cultural artefacts and heritage.

Speaker admits incomplete knowledge, shows curiosity and need for connection. Repetition of “pot” personifies the object, giving it agency.

Considers accidental displacement; irony in “finders are keepers” emphasises unfairness. Short lines slow pacing, reflecting speaker’s careful consideration.

england in lowercase emphasises the speaker’s sense of disconnection and minimises national authority, reflecting colonial critique, personal distance, and the poem’s intimate, reflective tone.

so big — they said you shouldn’t really be moved

so fragile you might break

you could be from anywhere pot

styles have travelled just like terracotta

you could almost be an english pot

but I know you’re not.

I know half of the story pot

of where you come from

of how you got here

but I need you to tell me the rest pot

tell me

did they say you were bought pot

a looters’ deal done

the whole lot

sold to the gentleman in the grey hat

or

did they say you were lost pot

finders are keepers you know pot

or

did they say they didn’t notice you pot

must have slipped onto the white sailing yacht

bound for england.

Someone

somewhere

will have missed you pot

gone out looking for you pot

because

Acknowledges mobility of culture; simile links styles to movement across borders.

Contrast between “almost be an english pot” and “I know you’re not” reinforces identity and origin.

Speculates on pot’s possible commercial or unethical sale.

Repetition of “did they say” creates questioning, highlights uncertainty. “looters’ deal” introduces critique of colonial practices.

Imagines unnoticed removal; enjambment mimics movement and uncertainty. “white sailing yacht” evokes historical colonial context and transport of artefacts.

Shift to human connection; repetition stresses care and concern for the pot. Speaker imagines a search, linking object to emotional investment.



Repetition and short, clipped phrases emphasise continuity, heritage, and the enduring human connection embedded in the pot, making it feel almost animate and alive.

Imagery of breaking glass symbolises frustration with barriers between the pot and its origins, emphasising separation and powerlessness.

Tone of frustration and exclusion highlights the difficulty of returning to a place of belonging once removed.

Personal reflection; contrasts speaker's confident acceptance with the pot's uncertain belonging.

Repetition of "pot?" reinforces unresolved questions and the ongoing search for belonging, linking the object's displacement to human experience of diaspora, loss, and the struggle to reclaim history.

someone  
somewhere  
made you  
finger nails  
pressed  
snake patterned you pot  
washed you pot  
used you pot  
loved you pot

if I could shatter this glass  
I would take you back myself pot.

you think they wouldn't recognise you pot

say diaspora  
you left now  
you're not really one of us.

pot I've been back to where my family's from

they were happy

to see me

laughed a lot

said I was more asian than the asian's pot

I was pot

imagine.

the hot sun on your back

feel flies settle on your skin

warm grain poured inside

empty pot

growl if you hear me

pot?

pot?

Focus on creation and use; detailed verbs ("pressed / snake patterned / washed / used / loved") highlight intimacy, care, and personal history.

Imperative tone and first-person agency convey the speaker's desire to act directly, highlighting emotional intensity and personal connection.

Addresses themes of alienation and displacement; "diaspora" explicitly links the pot's journey to the human experience of migration and cultural estrangement.

Use of family memory and warm interactions conveys emotional security, continuity of heritage, and reassurance in cultural identity.

Sensory imagery restores the pot to its original context, evoking physical use and daily life, emphasising cultural and ancestral identity.

Short, fragmented lines mimic the act of remembering and imagining, creating intimacy and immediacy.

"empty pot" and the command "growl if you hear me" personify the object, giving it agency and emotional presence.



## Structure

### Free verse and fragmented form

- The poem is written in **free verse**, with no regular rhyme scheme or metre. Lines are often short and broken, sometimes consisting of single words or phrases.
- This **fragmented** structure mirrors the disrupted history of the pot itself and reflects themes of dislocation, loss, and **incomplete narratives**.
- The lack of formal structure **resists neat resolution**, reinforcing the idea that the pot's story – and wider histories of **displacement** – cannot be easily ordered or contained.

### Direct address and repetition

- The repeated **direct address** to “**pot**” creates the sense of a **one-sided** conversation which gives the poem a questioning, **interrogative rhythm**, emphasising the speaker's need for answers and the pot's silence.
- The frequent return to the word “**pot**” also slows the pace, forcing attention back onto the object and highlighting its symbolic weight.



### Speculation and listing

- The middle of the poem is structured around a series of imagined possibilities for how the pot arrived in England. These are presented through short, **list-like** sections, moving from one explanation to another.
- This **accumulation** reflects uncertainty and the absence of a single **authoritative** history, while also suggesting how official narratives often **obscure** uncomfortable truths.

### Shift towards personal reflection

- In the later stages, the poem moves from **speculation** about the pot's past to personal reflection on **diaspora** and belonging. This structural shift connects the object's journey to human experience, broadening the poem's focus.
- The imagined return of the pot to its original environment creates a brief sense of **restoration**, but this is left unresolved.



### Open ending

- The poem ends with **repeated questions** and no response. Structurally, this lack of closure reinforces the themes of **silenced** histories and unanswered questions.
- The **unresolved** ending reflects the speaker's **powerlessness** and leaves the reader confronting the ongoing consequences of **displacement** and loss.



## Language and Imagery

### Speculative questioning

The poem repeatedly uses questions to explore uncertainty around the pot's history and removal. Phrases such as **“did they say you were bought pot”** and **“or did they say you were lost pot”** present multiple possible narratives, none of which are confirmed. This mirrors how histories of **displacement** are often **fragmented** or rewritten, leaving the truth **unresolved**.



### Museum and containment imagery

The pot is presented as an object preserved but trapped. The reference to **“shatter this glass”** highlights the barrier between the pot and its original context. The glass **symbolises institutional control**: the pot is protected yet **silenced**, valued as an object rather than as part of a living culture.

### Domestic and sensory imagery

When the poem imagines the pot in use, **vivid sensory detail** restores its original purpose. Images such as **“finger nails / pressed / snake patterned you”** and **“warm grain poured inside”** emphasise touch, labour, and everyday usefulness. This **contrasts** strongly with its static display in England, reinforcing what has been lost through removal.

### Repetition and silence

The repeated address of **“pot”** throughout the poem creates intimacy, but the ending – **“pot? / pot?”**– receives no response. This unresolved silence reflects the inability of **displaced** objects or histories to speak for themselves, leaving questions of **ownership** and belonging unanswered.



## Themes

### Loss and damage that cannot be undone

The poem suggests that **displacement** causes harm that cannot simply be repaired. Even the desire to return the pot is uncertain, as shown by the question of whether it would still be recognised: **“you think they wouldn’t recognise you pot”**. Loss is presented as ongoing rather than resolved.

### Belonging and displacement

By linking the pot’s journey to the idea of **diaspora** – **“say diaspora / you left now / you’re not really one of us”** – the poem explores how belonging becomes unstable once separation occurs. Movement across borders creates distance from **origin**, even when return is possible.

### Power over history and ownership

The imagined explanations for how the pot arrived in England – being bought, taken, or unnoticed – expose how **authority** shapes official narratives. These versions **minimise** responsibility, while the speaker’s questioning challenges who has the right to own, display, and explain cultural objects.

## Comparisons

### Homing – Liz Berry

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems explore how identity is shaped through separation from <b>origins</b>. In <i>pot</i>, <b>displacement</b> is symbolised by the artefact being <b>“bound for england,”</b> while in <i>Homing</i> identity is <b>disrupted</b> by enforced changes to speech, shown through <b>elocution</b> lessons and <b>“how now brown cow.”</b> In both cases, parts of identity are <b>altered</b> to fit dominant culture.</li> <li>Each poem presents cultural expression as something that has been <b>suppressed</b>. Khan’s speaker knows only <b>fragments</b> (<b>“I know half of the story pot”</b>) while Berry describes accent being hidden <b>“in a box beneath the bed,”</b> suggesting cultural loss through silence.</li> <li>Both poets ultimately link belonging to <b>emotional and sensory connection</b>. Khan imagines <b>“the hot sun on your back”</b> and <b>“warm grain poured inside,”</b> while Berry reconnects identity to voice and sound, showing heritage as something felt rather than officially defined.</li> </ul>
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>pot</i> ends <b>unresolved</b>, with unanswered questions “<i>pot? / pot?</i>,” suggesting ongoing uncertainty about belonging, whereas Homing moves towards <b>reclamation</b>, encouraging identity to be released and celebrated.</li> <li>• Khan focuses on an object to explore <b>displacement</b> indirectly, while Berry centres the human voice, making the recovery of identity more active and <b>empowering</b>.</li> <li>• <i>pot</i> conveys frustration and limitation, while Homing presents cultural identity as something that can be restored through expression.</li> </ul>
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### Thirteen – Caleb Femi

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both poems examine how power structures <b>impose</b> identity. In <i>pot</i>, the artefact’s history is rewritten through <b>colonial</b> narratives such as “<i>finders are keepers</i>,” while in <i>Thirteen</i> the boy is defined by police suspicion when he “<i>fits the description</i>.”</li> <li>• Each poem highlights a lack of <b>agency</b>. The pot cannot speak, despite the speaker urging it to “<i>growl if you hear me</i>,” while Femi’s speaker must comply silently during the police stop.</li> <li>• Both poets show how everyday environments become sites of <b>control</b>. A museum display case and a city street are presented as places where <b>authority</b> defines who belongs and who does not.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>pot</i> is reflective and questioning, structured around <b>speculation</b> and imagined histories, whereas <i>Thirteen</i> is immediate and tense, capturing fear in the present moment.</li> <li>• Khan explores historical and cultural power over time, while Femi focuses on direct <b>institutional power</b> acting on a child’s body. <i>pot</i> ends quietly and unresolved, while <i>Thirteen</i> concludes with emotional collapse, making its impact more urgent and distressing.</li> </ul>



## A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems respond to cultural loss by valuing <b>heritage</b>. Khan imagines returning the pot to its origin, while Robinson preserves culture internally through memory and imagination, describing a private <b>refuge</b>.</li> <li>Each speaker critiques the pressures of British society. Khan refers to <b>exploitation</b> through phrases like “<b>looters’ deal done</b>,” while Robinson warns that others “<b>can’t steal it</b>,” suggesting threats to cultural identity.</li> </ul> <p>Both poems use sensory imagery to reconnect with origin and comfort. Khan’s “<b>hot sun</b>” and “<b>warm grain</b>” <b>parallel</b> Robinson’s natural and familial imagery, grounding identity in lived experience.</p>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>pot</i> focuses on loss and separation that cannot easily be repaired, ending with silence (“<b>pot? / pot?</b>”), whereas <i>A Portable Paradise</i> offers a <b>coping strategy</b>, showing how culture can be carried internally (“<b>concealed, so / no one else would know but me</b>”).</li> <li>Khan’s poem centres on frustration and <b>powerlessness</b>, emphasised by the speaker’s desire to intervene (“<b>if I could shatter this glass / I would take you back myself pot</b>”), while Robinson’s speaker provides reassurance and emotional survival, maintaining a sense of control over their <b>heritage</b>.</li> <li><i>pot</i> questions ownership, origin, and return (“<b>did they say you were bought pot / a looter’s deal done</b>”), highlighting ethical and emotional tensions, whereas <i>A Portable Paradise</i> accepts <b>displacement</b>, adapting to it and finding ways to <b>preserve</b> culture safely.</li> </ul>

