

# Poetry 2012: The Written World



## Resources for Teachers

### Fabric Poems:

- Pakistan, 'The Sari' by Moniza Alvi
- Hungary, 'Mother' by Attila József

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# About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in upper secondary school (S4–S6).

## **Developing global citizens within Curriculum for Excellence**

These resources, featuring poems from around the world, can help realise certain key principles within this document, including

- *enabling learners to appreciate the values and opinions of others with particular reference to environments and cultures*
- *motivating learners to engage in local, national and global issues*
- *promoting the concept of shared humanity*
- *actively engaging [learners] in exploring a variety of traditions and cultures from around the world*

## **This resource**

- *helps pupils to develop an understanding of the complexities of language through the study of a range of texts*
- *provides learners with the opportunity to analyse and evaluate texts*
- *provides learners with the opportunity to create and produce texts*

from SQA's 'Key points for English'

[www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45672.html](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45672.html)

(accessed 21 May 2012)

The 'Research Activity' topic below on Hungary and Budapest may also be relevant to History, in the context of "apply[ing] a detailed historical perspective in a range of contexts".

# The Sari

Inside my mother  
I peered through a glass porthole.  
The world beyond was hot and brown.

They were all looking in on me –  
Father, Grandmother,  
the cook's boy, the sweeper-girl,  
the bullock with the sharp  
shoulderblades,  
the local politicians.

My English grandmother  
took a telescope  
and gazed across continents.

All the people unravelled a sari.  
It stretched from Lahore to Hyderabad,  
wavered across the Arabian Sea,  
shot through with stars,  
fluttering with sparrows and quails.  
They threaded it with roads,  
undulations of land.

Eventually  
they wrapped and wrapped me in it  
whispering *Your body is your country*.

Moniza Alvi

from *Split World: Poems 1990 - 2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008)  
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Note: 'The Sari' is included in Moniza Alvi's first collection, *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993); the poem is a section of the book called 'Presents from Pakistan'.

# Mother

All this last week I have been thinking  
of my mother, thinking of her taking  
up in her arms the creaking basket  
of clothes, without pausing, up to the attic.

Oh, I was full of myself in those days –  
shouting and stamping, crying to her to leave  
her washing to others, to take me in place  
of the basket, play with me under the eaves –

But calmly she went on, lifting out the clothes,  
hanging them to dry, she had no time to scold  
or even to glance at me, and soon the line  
was flying in the wind, white and clean.

I cannot shout now – how could she hear?  
I see her, great, vast, yet somehow she is near.  
The wet sky shines washed with her blue,  
her grey hair streams where the clouds scud through.

Attila József (1905–1937)

from *Attila József: Sixty Poems*, translated by Edwin Morgan (Glasgow:  
Mariscat, 2001)

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Note: Attila József's mother was Borbála Pőcze. When Attila was just three, his father deserted the family, and his mother took in washing to try to earn a living. She died in 1919, aged 43. The poem is dated October 1934.

## *The Poets & Their Work (& a Translator)*

**Moniza Alvi** was born in 1954 in Lahore, Pakistan, and came to the UK when she was very young. She studied at the universities of York and London. Her honours include the Poetry Business Prize, shortlistings for the T. S. Eliot Prize and Whitbread Poetry Award, and the Cholmondeley Award. She worked for several years as a high school teacher. She now lives in Norfolk, working as a freelance writer and tutor.

**Attila József** was born in 1905 in a poor area of Budapest, the youngest of three children. His father soon deserted the family, and Attila and his two sisters were briefly fostered in the countryside, in such poor conditions they returned to their mother. She died in 1919. Three years later, and still at school, József published his first book of poems. Rejected by the University of Szeged because of a provocative poem he had written, he furthered his education in Vienna and Paris from 1925 to 1927. Returning to Hungary he briefly joined the Communist Party, and scraped a living from his writing, publishing seven volumes of poetry in his short life. He died aged 32, killed by a train.

**Edwin Morgan** (1920–2010) was a poet, playwright and translator. Born in Glasgow, he lived in the city throughout his life, other than six years of war service which took him to Africa and the Middle East. He translated from many languages, including Italian, German, Russian and Latin, as well as Hungarian. *Attila József: Sixty Poems* is dedicated “to Umberto Albini, whose Italian–Hungarian edition of 1952 lit the fuse”.

# Reading the Poems

## The Sari

- Make sure you know what a “sari” is, and how it is worn.
- What do we learn about the *speaker* of the poem?
- Look at the list of *people* (and an animal) in the second stanza. What sort of place, society and culture does this list suggest?
- Look at the *verbs* related to the sari in the fourth stanza. What sense of the sari do these create?
- The poem works at a range of *scales*, from the very small to the very large. Choose a line or an image from the poem which to you represents each of the following: small scale, middle scale and large scale.
- Do you think the speaker of the poem accepts or rejects the statement in the last line, “Your body is your country”? Why?

## Mother

- What do we learn about the speaker of the poem – now, and in the past?
- What sort of person is the speaker’s mother – how would you describe her character? Choose three words from the poem to back up your description.
- How would you describe the relationship between the speaker and his mother? What emotional note does the poem end on?
- The poet’s mother works with a “line”; so too, in a different way, does the poet. How does the poem suggest these lines might be connected?
- Describe how the poem rhymes – look for full rhymes and near-rhymes. Where are the full rhymes? Why do you think the poet – that is to say, the translator – has placed them here, and not elsewhere in the poem? You could also look at how the original rhymes – it is widely available online, for example at [http://visegrad.tyotex.hu/index.php?page=work&auth\\_id=127&work\\_id=513&tran\\_id=1892](http://visegrad.tyotex.hu/index.php?page=work&auth_id=127&work_id=513&tran_id=1892)

**Compare** the way the two poems connect *fabrics* and *memories*. Think about the way the poems deal with topics such as

- place
- the mother, and the wider family
- work
- childhood
- identity and belonging
- past and present
- separation

# Discussion

On the cover of Moniza Alvi's book *The Country at My Shoulder*, it reads

"Many people in Britain today have a 'country at their shoulder', a homeland left behind, or a birthplace seldom, perhaps never, visited, but still a vital part of their imaginary and real lives".

Do you have a "country at your shoulder", somewhere you or your family has a connection with? It might be on another continent, or it could be a place within the British Isles.

- Have you lived there, visited it, heard tell about it from relatives?
- Do you speak the language spoken there, whether fluently or just a word or two? What key words come to mind?
- Are there any objects in your home that recall it?
- Do you know any poems or songs or sayings from there?
- What clothes or fabrics are typical of it?

# Research Activity

- What is a **sari**? How is it worn? (If possible, have someone bring in a sari so you can get a sense of its size, shape, feel, colours, and so on.)
- How far is it "**from Lahore to Hyderabad**"? What sort of cities are they? And what landscapes lie between them?
- Find out how **Hungary** changed over the course of Attila József's life. Which state did it belong to before and during the First World War? What happened there during the war? What changes occurred after the war?
- What sort of city was **Budapest** in the 1930s? What was happening politically in Hungary at the time, and in the neighbouring countries?

# Creative Activity

Write a poem about a piece of **fabric**, which plays with scale, and mixes realism and surrealism.

- choose a piece of fabric – such as a sheet, a sari, a shirt, a rug...
- choose something blank, perhaps patterned, but without text or a representational image
- it might be something you remember from the past, or have now; or it might be imagined

Think about the **realistic aspects** of your poem, and make some notes about:

- the fabric's colour, texture, scent (perhaps even sound)
- how and where it was cleaned, stored and used
- when it was in use, for how long, if it still exists
- which people use it, or are associated with it

Think about the **surrealistic or fantastical aspects** of your poem, and make some notes about what you would like to project onto the fabric:

- a still image, which you describe in some detail
- a sequence of images, like a film

Think about how you might play with **scale** in your poem, moving from small to large, far to near, past to present:

- your poem might begin with the fabric being opened out, and on it a story or a landscape unfolds
- your poem might begin elsewhere, or in the past, and shift to the here and now of the fabric

You could **borrow** from each of the poems above:

- your poem might begin, "All this last week I have been thinking / of"
- someone in your poem might take "a telescope / and [gaze] across continents".

Think about the **form** of your poem

- do you use a mix of short and long lines and verses, without rhymes, like "A Sari"?
- do you write a poem using more regular stanza lengths, metre and rhyme, like "Mother"?

Based on your notes, **write your poem**. After you've written it

- think about a title
- read it aloud, and see if it *sounds* right
- ask someone else to read it and comment on it

# Further Reading & Weblinks

The poems 'The Sari', representing Pakistan, and 'Mother', representing Hungary, are part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world)

All the poems selected for The Written World – to find those for Pakistan and Hungary, click on either on the map, or on the 'Asia' or 'Europe' icons below the map

<http://edwinmorgan.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/resources/together.html>

SPL teachers' resource based on another Attila József poem translated by Edwin Morgan, 'Lullaby'

[www.moniza.co.uk/](http://www.moniza.co.uk/)

Moniza Alvi's website

[www.mathstat.dal.ca/~lukacs/ja/poems2/jozsef-eng.htm](http://www.mathstat.dal.ca/~lukacs/ja/poems2/jozsef-eng.htm)

transcript of a 1966 edition of József's work in English, including a biographical statement by the poet

[www.edwinmorgan.com](http://www.edwinmorgan.com)

website dedicated to Edwin Morgan

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12965779](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12965779)

Pakistan country profile

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17380792](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17380792)

Hungary country profile

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/pakistan](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/pakistan)

Recent news articles about Pakistan

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/hungary](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/hungary)

Recent news articles about Hungary

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*This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's project The Written World, May 2012.*

[www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)