

Look We Have Coming to Dover! **by Daljit Nagra**



Deployer of more exclamation marks than any other contemporary poet currently at work, Daljit Nagra's exuberant approach is matched only by his intelligent perception of the realities of modern multicultural Britain. The London-born son of parents from the Punjab, he often fuses both the languages of home into his signature 'Punglish' to reflect on aspects of cultural and literary history – sometimes romantically, sometimes realistically but mostly with a squared-up humour. With the recent publication of his version of the ancient Asian epic *The Ramayana*, Nagra is currently turning his attention to long form poetry.

Our Town with the Whole of India!

Our town in England with the whole of India sundering
out of its temples, mandirs and mosques for the customised
streets. Our parade, clad in cloak-orange with banners
and tridents, chanting from station to station for Vaisakhi
over Easter. Our full-moon madness for Eidh with free
pavement tandooris and legless dancing to boosted
cars. Our Guy Fawkes' Diwali – a kingdom of rockets
for the Odysseus-trials of Rama who arrowed the jungle
foe to re-palace the Penelope-faith of his Sita.

Our Sunrise Radio with its lip sync of Bollywood lovers
pumping through the rows of emporium cubby holes
whilst bhangra beats slam where the hagglers roar
at the pulled-up back-of-the-lorry cut-price stalls.
Sitar shimmerings drip down the furbishly columned
gold store. Askance is the peaceful Pizza Hut...
A Somali cab joint, been there for ever, with smiley
guitar licks where reggae played before Caribbeans
disappeared, where years before Teddy Boys jived.

Our cafés with the brickwork trays of saffron sweets,
brass woks frying flamingo-pink syrup-tunnelled
jalebis networking crustily into their familied clumps.
Reveries of incense scent the beefless counter where
bloodied men sling out skinned legs and breasts
into thin bags topped with the proof of giblets.

Stepped road displays – chock-full of ripe karela,
okra, aubergine – sunshined with mango, pineapple,
lychee. Factory walkers prayer-toss the river of

sponging swans with chapattis. A posse brightens
on park-shots of Bacardi – waxing for the bronze
eyeful of girls. The girls slim their skirts after college
blowing dreams into pink bubble gums at neck-
descending and tight-neck sari-mannequins. Their grannies
point for poled yards of silk for own-made styles.
The mother of the runaway daughter, in the marriage
bureau, weeps over the plush-back catalogues glossed
with tuxedo-boys from the whole of our India!

The Man Who Would be English!

Just for kicks I was well in with the English race,
my skin matched the beef of their ruddy skin
as one by one a walk-in sing-along of familiar faces
from the lark-about days of school chucked back chunks
of smoke to reveal their manhood, I shouldered the bulk
as they broadened like brick houses to broadly take me in,
we plundered up gulps of golden rounds for the great game,
united at our local, we booed at the mounted screen –
at the face of the anthem'd foreigner when we were at home.
Then we chanted with heart and soul for God and Queen!

I was one of us, at ease, so long as I passed
my voice into theirs – I didn't *bud-bud ding-ding*
on myself for dropping the asylum side to sign up
for the bigger picture. I wasn't Black or Latin or managed
by a turbaned ghost. No distant land forever
with rights to my name... At an own goal, I pitched up,
caught my mother on the screen, as keeper, in our net
gloving the ball with lard, from the Mutiny, launching it
into my hands, ticking, at the end of the day, as I walked alone
to my wife – outside on a sideline of frost, kicking off:

D-d-doze err shrubby peeepall... !!!
D-d-deyy sprayyy all um ourrr valll...!!!
Venn hmmm veee g-gobbackkk...!!!
Lookk lookk ju nott British ju rrr blackkk...!!!

Look We Have Coming to Dover!

'So various, so beautiful, so new...'
- Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach'

Stowed in the sea to invade
the alfresco lash of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide, brunt with

gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go
tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the ministered waves.

Seagull and shoal life
vexing their blarnies upon our huddled
camouflage past the vast crumble of scummed
cliffs, scrambling on mulch as thunder unbladders
yobbish rain and wind on our escape hatched in a Bedford van.

Seasons or years we reap
inland, unclocked by the national eye
or stabs in the back, teemed for breathing
sweeps of grass through the whistling asthma of parks,
burdened, ennobled – poling sparks across pylon and pylon.

Swarms of us, grafting in
the black within shot of the moon's
spotlight, banking on the miracle of sun –
span its rainbow, passport us to life. Only then
can it be human to hoick ourselves, bare-faced for the clear.

Imagine my love and I,
our sundry others, Blair'd in the cash
of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free,
we raise our charged glasses over unparasol'd tables
East, babbling our lingoes, flecked by the chalk of Britannia!

Discussion Ideas

- The mothers, right at the end of 'Our Town with the Whole of India!', 'weep'. Why, after everything that has come before in the poem?
- 'The Man Who Would Be English' sites a discussion about what it means to be English, or British, in poetry, in the middle of a football pitch. Which is a more markedly English characteristic – the love of football or the love of poetry? Which of those two opposing sides wins in this poem? Are they in fact in opposition to each other?
- Google autocompletes 'The Man Who Would Be ...' to 'The Man Who Would Be King' – the Rudyard Kipling novella / John Huston film. What's the connection, do you think?
- The vocabulary of 'Look We Have Coming to Dover!' is pretty tough - 'invade', 'scummed', 'stabs', 'swarms'. Whose words are these? Where have they come from? Who controls their power?
- Here's Matthew Arnold's poem as quoted in the epigraph <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172844>. What are the two poems saying to each other?

Daljit Nagra was born and raised in West London, then Sheffield, and currently lives in London where he works as a teacher. His first collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, won the 2007 Forward Prize for Best First Collection and was shortlisted for the Costa Poetry Award. In 2008 he won the South Bank Show/Arts Council Decibel Award. His second collection, *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!*, was

shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize in 2011. His last collection is *Ramayana A Retelling*, a tale over two thousand years old, which will be touring during 2014 and 2015.

www.daljitnagra.com

Other books by Daljit Nagra

- [*Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!*](#) (Faber, 2011)
- [*Ramayana*](#) (Faber, 2013)

If you liked Daljit Nagra, try

- [Kathleen Jamie](#)
- [Henry Shukman](#)
- [Paul Muldoon](#)