Singh Song
Daljit Nagra is a British poet born in 1966 to Sikh Punjabi parents who came to Britain from India in the late 1950’s. He grew up near Heathrow Airport in West London. His parents were shopkeepers.

His poetry explores the experience of ‘first generation’ immigrants to Britain. This poem and its use of English pokes fun at his own culture at Indian stereotypes.

As you watch this interview, consider:

- What is his opinion on his culture/cultural identity?
- How does his opinions/experience of culture influence his poetry?
- Based on this interview and the first stanza of the poem- why do you think Nagra wrote ‘Singh Song’?
Interpretations

As you listen to Nagra’s reading, annotate your poem with any relevant information and interpretations.

Annotate your poem considering the following:

- How is culture portrayed in the poem?
- How is language used to convey this?
- How are stereotypes expressed in the poem?
- What is the writer's message?
- How are different types of love portrayed?
  - Father
  - Culture
  - Work
  - Wife/Bride
What is the poem about?

The narrator is a British Indian. He talks about his life working in his father’s corner shop.

He’s just got married and keeps sneaking out of the shop to spend time with his new wife. She’s Indian too but dresses in British clothes and acts in a modern, Western way.

The narrator neglects his shop duties – customers complain that he’s bad at running the shop.

When the shop’s shut, the couple sit and talk. He tells his wife how much she means to him.
Feelings and Attitudes in the poem

The narrator is in love and proud of his new bride – he enjoys spending time with her. His wife’s online dating agency could emphasise the new generation’s modern attitude to love.

The narrator’s wife makes fun of his parents. He seems to find her lack of respect amusing, so her impressions are presented as acceptable and even endearing. The narrator also rebels against his father’s strict rules about working hours by sneaking off all the time.
I run just one of my daddy's shops from 9 o'clock to 9 o'clock and he vunt me not to hav a break but ven nobody in, I do di lock.

Childish language suggests his father still has control over his life.

Suggests long, mundane life.

Rebels against his father's rules — takes control of his own life.
cos up di stairs is my newly bride
vee share in chapatti
vee share in di chutney
after vee hav made luv
like vee rowing through Putney -

Non-standard use of word suggests the narrator is still getting used to the English language.

Repetition emphasises the couple’s unity

Unusual simile to describe love-making creates humour
Sounds like a chorus of voices, emphasised by phonetic spellings.

Disregards the rules of the shop – distracted by love. A comical image of rebellion.

Ven I return vid my **pinnie untied**
di shoppers always point and cry:

*Hey Singh, ver yoo bin?*

Yor lemons are limes
yor bananas are plantain,
dis dirty little floor need a little bit of mop

**in di worst Indian shop**
**on di whole Indian road** -

Exaggeration creates humour and highlights the contrast between the unreliable narrator and his careful father.
His new bride is glamorous, linked to a new generation that's embracing Western culture. Succession of monosyllabic words imitates her heel tapping the ceiling.

Above my head *high heel tap di ground* as my vife on di web is playing wid di mouse ven she netting two cat on *her Sikh lover site* she book dem for di meat at di cheese ov her price -

Suggests that his wife runs a dating agency – modern approach to relationships contrasts with idea of arranged marriage, a stereotypical part of Indian culture.
Repetition suggests he’s proud of her and can’t stop thinking about her. The fact that he says “bride” instead of ‘wife’ hints that the marriage is still new and exciting.

Lively language suggests he finds his wife’s swearing funny.

She effing at my mum in all di colours of Punjabi den stumble like a drunk making fun at my daddy

Shows that they both have a sense of humour – he doesn’t mind her poking fun at his parents.
Repetition suggests he’s proud of her and can’t stop thinking about her. The fact that he says “bride” instead of ‘wife’ hints that the marriage is still new and exciting.

Metaphors describe the wife as both dangerous and cute – she’s a combination of lots of different things.

my bride
tiny eyes ov a gun
and di tummy ov a teddy
Repetition suggests he’s proud of her and can’t stop thinking about her. The fact that he says “bride” instead of ‘wife’ hints that the marriage is still new and exciting. Her clothes are a mixture of British and Indian culture – she embodies both.

**my bride**
she hav a red crew cut
and she wear a **Tartan sari**
a **donkey jacket** and some **pumps**
on di squeak ov di girls dat are pinching my sweeties -
Ven I return from di *tickle* ov my bride
di shoppers always point and cry:
*Hey Singh, ver yoo bin?*
*Di milk is out ov date*
*and di bread is alwayz stale,*
**di tings yoo hav on offer yoo hav never got in stock**
in di worst Indian shop
on di whole Indian road -

He’s a terrible shopkeeper but the complaints sound quite playful because they’re written phonetically.
Sudden moment of calm shows the couple are alone – this contrasts with all the voices of the chorus. It’s ironic that he wants the shoppers to be in bed, because his shop would fail without them – this emphasises how he’s more concerned with his new wife.

Late in **di midnight hour**
ven **yoo shoppers** are **wrap up quiet**
ven di precinct is **concrete-cool**
vee cum down whispering stairs
and sit on my **silver stool**,
from behind di chocolate bars
vee stare past di **half-price** window signs
at di beaches ov di UK in di **brightey moon** -

Money imagery contrasts with romantic descriptions of beaches in the moonlight.

Makes up English words – shows that two cultures are merging through language.
Repetition makes the couple’s conversation sound rhythmic and song like. It highlights the closeness between them.

from di stool each night she say,  
How much do yoo charge for dat moon baby?  
from di stool each night I say,  
Is half di cost ov yoo baby,
from di stool each night she say,
  How much does dat come to baby?  
from di stool each night I say,
  Is priceless baby -

Suggests their love is more important than money.

Poem left hanging after final word – looks to the future.
Poem Dictionary

Singh – a name taken by all Sikh men
Chapatti – an Indian flatbread
Plantain – a kind of banana
Sari – an Indian dress made up of a long length of material wrapped round the body
Donkey jacket – a type of short coat, often worn by workmen
Your personal response to the poem

1. Do you think the title of the poem is effective? Explain your answer.

2. What does the poem suggest about modern marriage?

3. What is the narrator’s attitude towards balancing his marriage and his work?

Key Themes:

Family relationships, fulfilment...
The speaker here has a different attitude towards his parents than the speakers in ‘Mother Any Distance’ and ‘Follower’ have. You could compare the fulfilling romantic relationships in this poem and ‘Sonnet 29’. 