



University
of Glasgow

Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5 English:

Nadine Aisha Jassat's 'Auntie'



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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

‘Auntie’ was written by Nadine Aisha Jassat. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of author and publisher. Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

Through the speaker's memories of their aunt, the poem explores the themes of family, home, and identity. The aunt is portrayed as a nurturing, spiritual figure who is a guiding presence in the speaker's life and embodies their sense of home and belonging. The aunt's rituals of cooking and prayer represent traditions and values that connect the speaker to their cultural heritage.

The poem is divided into three sections:

- Stanza 1 focuses on the aunt's hands and positions her in a nurturing role;
- In stanza 2, the memory of their aunt's skin embodies the speaker's longing for home, which suggests that their sense of identity is connected deeply to family heritage;
- Stanza 3 contrasts the speaker's morning, dominated by the sounds and pressures of contemporary life, with one that they 'would rather' wake to, where the aunt prays in early morning light.

Through the act of remembering, the speaker preserves their aunt's legacy and highlights the way that she has shaped their sense of personal and cultural identity.

Author background

Nadine Aisha Jassat is a poet, storyteller, and creative practitioner. She grew up in Yorkshire and now lives in Edinburgh. Her work has received accolades for its skill and its emphasis on social justice. In 2017 Jassat was named one of 30 Inspiring Women Under 30 by YWCA Scotland (the Young Women's Movement), and she was included in Jackie Kay's 2019 International Literature Showcase selection. Kay described Jassat as 'A fearless poet, who boldly takes on difficult themes, like gender-based violence, reasserting her right to speak out about those things that are often hidden from view.'

Her writing features in a number of celebrated publications including *Nasty Women* (404 Ink, 2017), and *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race*, ed. by Mariam Khan (Picador, 2019). Alongside her poetry collection *Let Me Tell You*

This, Jassat has published verse novels for younger readers. *The Hidden Story of Estie Noor* (2024) joins 12-year-old Estie when she is expelled from school without anyone hearing her side of the story and follows her when she is sent to stay with her aunt in Scotland for the summer. In *The Stories Grandma Forgot (And How I Found Them)* (2023), 12-year-old Nyla sets out to find her father for her forgetful grandmother, knowing that he passed away when she was four, in a journey through memory and identity.

Publication details

‘Auntie’ is published in *Let Me Tell You This*, Jassat’s debut collection of poetry which was shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award in 2018. It was published in 2019 by 404 Ink. The collection is divided into three parts: ‘Hands’, ‘Words’, and ‘Voice’. ‘Auntie’ is included in the ‘Words’ section.

Let Me Tell You This explores topics including racism, heritage, grief, gender-based violence, and the importance of women’s relationships with each other. It features a glossary to help all readers understand and explore her poems, including words such as ‘Voetsek’, which is an ‘Afrikaans term meaning “get lost”’, and ‘nowt’, a Yorkshire term for ‘nothing’.

The collection opens with an epigraph from feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa: ‘I will have my voice... I will overcome’ (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1987). Anzaldúa’s declaration speaks to the migrant experience and the struggle for linguistic and cultural assertion, resonating with Jassat’s exploration of heritage and self-definition in her work. The quote suggests triumph over erasure, aligning with Jassat’s collection which challenges dominant narratives to bring marginalised voices to the forefront. Both writers explore the idea of language as a site of power, particularly for those who straddle multiple cultural identities, as well as the importance of embracing one’s full, multi-faceted self.

Online resources

[Jassat’s website](#) offers a selection of YouTube interviews and readings that allow students to hear her perspectives and her poetry performed.

‘[Nadine Aisha Jassat](#)’ is a Scots Whay Hae! podcast from 2019. Jassat discusses her collection *Let Me Tell You This*, and speaks about narrative, family, the possibilities for

poetry, the importance of rhythm, voice and language, and what these poems mean to her and others.

The version of 'Auntie' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26. (The poem itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'Auntie'

by Nadine Aisha Jassat

My Aunt's hands are soft and brown
and they smell like cumin and coriander.
She is a gardener in the kitchen.

Auntie, I remember your skin
the way some people remember the bus route.
I know I need to trace it to go home.

The world of work, bus bells and sirens
are harsh alarm clocks.
I would rather wake gently,
in 5 am light,
to your softly whispered duas
welcoming the morning.

Family heritage and storytelling

In the poem, memories of their aunt connect the speaker to their cultural heritage and family roots, expressed through culinary and religious traditions that contribute to the speaker's sense of belonging.

Jassat is a writer of mixed heritage, 'a heritage which can only be told in stories'. Her mother and father are, respectively, from Yorkshire and Zimbabwe, and her paternal line can be traced to South Africa. In her essay 'Daughter of Stories', Jassat writes:

I can see that the family I grew up in and was shaped by comprised not only the people around me – my parents and siblings in the UK and my close-knit, wider family in Zimbabwe whom we saw once a year – but also the ghost-like legacies of the previous generations of women in my family. [...] When my father told my brothers and me stories about Ma and Aunt, he was also telling us about Zimbabwe, about what it meant to be Muslim, about family, about a whole other life and way of being which existed across the gulf between the UK and Zimbabwe.

('Daughter of Stories', published in *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race*)

In the same essay, Jassat explains that storytelling enabled her family to lay claim to their heritage, with stories used as a vehicle to pass down knowledge and traditions.

Religion

Islam is the religion of Jassat's paternal family and she was raised to identify as a Muslim. She is no longer a practising Muslim, and describes her sense of spirituality as 'unique and personal to me'. However, Jassat considers the Islamic faith a fundamental part of her story and identity, connecting her to her familial roots. In 'Daughter of Stories', Jassat writes:

[Islam] was present in my family, in familiar and shared practices; it was at the heart of many of my key values and frames of reference. [...] Many of the connections to Islam which I hold most dear today – giving *zakat*, cherishing blessings and prayers on my tongue, *mashallah*, *inshallah*, *alhamdulillah* – are the ones I gained from family: an inheritance of whispered words held like muscle memory.

(‘Daughter of Stories’, published in *It’s Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race*)

This quote resonates deeply with ‘Auntie’ by highlighting the intimate, lived experience of faith and cultural inheritance – not just as doctrine, but as something woven into everyday life, relationships, and language. The idea of religious practices becoming ‘an inheritance ... held like muscle memory’ mirrors the way the speaker in ‘Auntie’ carries the presence of their aunt through remembrance, with inherited traditions felt rather than explicitly taught. Even if the speaker experiences some distance from their aunt’s way of life, the poem – like Jassat’s reflection on Islam – suggests that certain bonds remain unbroken, existing in small, everyday ways that can be carried forward.

Full Analysis

Form and structure

‘Auntie’ is written in free verse, allowing for a conversational and reflective tone. Short lines and stanzas create a sense of fragmentation, mirroring the way memories are recalled in pieces rather than in a linear narrative.

Lines 1–3

My Aunt’s hands are soft and brown
and they smell like cumin and coriander.
She is a gardener in the kitchen.

Hands carry a range of symbolic meanings across different cultures and contexts, representing connections and relationships, caregiving and nurture, and creation and skill.

Sensory imagery creates an intimate portrait of the speaker’s aunt. The tactile description ‘soft’ conveys warmth, gentleness and care, implying the aunt’s nurturing role. ‘Brown’ indicates skin tone. The aromatic scents of cumin and coriander – spices commonly associated with South Asian and African cuisines – connect the aunt to culinary traditions that reinforce the speaker’s sense of cultural heritage.

Stanza 1 presents an intimate bond between food, memory, and family. It suggests that cooking is not just a practical domestic act but an expression of love, and one which connects the speaker to their cultural roots. Line 3 characterises the aunt as one who nurtures, cultivates, and creates in the kitchen – as a gardener does in the natural world – to nourish and provide. The metaphor suggests that, like gardens, cultural traditions require care, patience, and continuity.

As sites of labour gardens reflect physical effort and care, but they are also places of beauty and abundance, evoking the idea of an earthly paradise. This duality is found in many traditions, including Islamic thought. In the Qur'an gardens hold deep symbolic significance, particularly in descriptions of Jannah (Paradise), and are regarded as rewards for righteous efforts.

Lines 4–5

Auntie, I remember your skin
the way some people remember the bus route.

The shift from the present tense in stanza 1 to remembrance in stanza 2 creates a sense of emotional and temporal distance. The auntie's presence, once tangible and immediate, becomes something that the speaker must recall rather than experience directly.

However, the act of remembering serves as a bridge between past and present. The speaker addresses the aunt directly as 'Auntie' (a more affectionate and familiar term compared to the 'Aunt' in line 1) and invokes sensory details to overcome that distance imaginatively. 'Your skin' evokes closeness, indicating the speaker's emotional bond with their aunt. This tension between absence and presence, or loss and connection, reflects the way memory allows us to hold onto relationships, even when time or circumstances have created space between us.

Comparing the memory of skin to 'the way some people remember the bus route' introduces an unexpected contrast between something deeply personal and something mundane and habitual. A bus route is something navigated daily, suggesting that the

speaker's memory of their aunt is instinctive, deeply ingrained, and vital for locating herself in the world.

Line 6

I know I need to trace it to go home.

Line 6 transforms the speaker's memory of their aunt into a metaphorical journey, guiding their sense of identity. 'I know' conveys certainty and deep understanding, implying the speaker's strong emotional awareness of the importance of their aunt's presence and memory. The verb 'need' implies dependence, suggesting that the aunt is essential to the speaker's sense of self and belonging.

'Trace' has different meanings:

- physical touch, reinforcing the idea of deep familiarity and intimacy;
- memory and recollection, retracing thoughts and emotions to construct the past;
- navigation, representing how one follows a route on a map, highlighting the theme of guidance.

Defined by personal relationships, 'home' extends beyond a physical location. Line 6 implies that the speaker's sense of home and identity is deeply connected to their aunt, who represents comfort, belonging, and emotional refuge.

Lines 7–8

*The world of work, bus bells and sirens
are harsh alarm clocks.*

The multiple auditory images in lines 7–8 convey urgency, routine, and urban chaos to emphasise the overwhelming rhythms and soundscape of daily life. Alarm clocks represent schedules and obligation, while 'harsh' suggests a forced or unwanted awakening or disruption. In this world, external pressures dictate terms for the speaker.

Lines 9–12

I would rather wake gently,
in 5 am light,
to your softly whispered duas
welcoming the morning.

‘I would rather’ signals a personal preference, stating the speaker’s longing for an alternative to the noisy world of pressures and demands presented in lines 7–8.

The tone and language shift from urgent to soothing. ‘5 am light’ evokes a soft and natural setting, with the specific time suggesting a moment of stillness and solitude before the rush of daily life begins. It also suggests that the problem with the way of waking in lines 7–8 isn’t the earliness of the hour but rather the shock and disruption of it. The sibilance in ‘softly whispered duas’ helps to create a calming, quiet atmosphere, while ‘gently’ and ‘welcoming’ suggest a place or scene of peaceful sanctuary, which the speaker associates with their aunt.

Duas are prayers or supplications in Islam, where a person communicates directly with Allah in order to ask for help, guidance, forgiveness, or to express gratitude. They are deeply personal and reflect a believer’s faith, humility, and trust in God’s mercy. Jassat’s definition of ‘Dua’ in the glossary for *Let Me Tell You This* finishes with the line ‘Made by Auntie, every day.’ Praying is, therefore, a daily routine for the aunt. However, the nature of duas – which can be said at any time, in any language, and for any purpose – indicates this ritual is a choice, contrasting with the sense of obligation in lines 7–8.

‘Welcoming’ suggests that the morning is invited and sacred, rather than an intrusive force. The final stanza creates a contrast between two ways of experiencing life: one dictated by external pressures (work, alarms, sirens) and one guided by faith, love, and tranquillity.

The speaker’s preference for the latter highlights a longing for a more meaningful and spiritually fulfilling existence, as practiced by their aunt. This subtly conveys an implied distance between the speaker and aunt, both in terms of their relationship and their ways of life. The aunt represents a world that feels both familiar and slightly removed, while the speaker occupies a different space, possibly shaped by generational, cultural, or geographical differences.

However, this distance is not absolute – the act of remembrance becomes a form of connection, allowing the speaker to reach beyond the present and into a shared past. Recalling intimate details through sensory memory allows the speaker’s relationship with their aunt to endure beyond cultural or physical separations. This gesture of recollection and reflection hints that the gap between them might be closed further, whether through memory, action, or renewed closeness. The poem leaves space for the possibility that understanding and reconnection remain within reach, even if not fully realised in its lines.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What does a morning routine say about a person and their life?
- How does the poem depict the aunt as a nurturing figure?
- What role do the senses play in preserving the speaker's memories of their aunt?
- How would you describe the tone of the poem?
- How does the structure affect the flow and feel of the poem?
- If you were to write a poem about a family member, what small details would you include?

Techniques

- How does the contrast between different sounds in lines 7–12 shape the mood of the poem?
- The speaker describes the need to *trace* the aunt's skin to go home – what might *trace* represent beyond physical touch?
- What does the metaphor *She's a gardener in the kitchen* suggest about the aunt's character or role?
- What is the significance of the morning setting in stanza 3?
- Why does the speaker compare remembering their aunt's skin to remembering a bus route?

Themes

- How does the poem show the importance of family in shaping identity?
- What does *home* mean in this poem? What does home mean to you?
- How does the poem's structure reflect the theme of memory?
- What do the rituals of cooking and prayer represent in the poem?
- How might our routines be understood as statements about our lives and how we choose to live them?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–3.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain what you learn about the character of the aunt. (4 marks)

Look at lines 4–6.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet makes clear the speaker's feelings about their aunt. (2 marks)

Look at lines 7–8.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet creates a sense of obligation. (2 marks)

Look at lines 9–12.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet creates a peaceful atmosphere. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the National 5 Scottish Poetry Collection, show how the poets explore important feelings. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Nadine Aisha Jassat's 'Auntie' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' (traditional ballad)
- 'The Twa Corbies' (traditional ballad)
- 'A Red, Red Rose' (Robert Burns)
- 'Lochinvar' (Sir Walter Scott)
- 'Little Girls' (Len Pennie)

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

