



## **Echoes of Memory: Tracing Cultural Identity Through Moniza Alvi's Lens in 'Presents From My Aunts in Pakistan' and 'The Country at My Shoulder'**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates diasporic character from the perspective of poetry, focusing on works of Moniza Alvi, a British Pakistani writer. The study leads a textual and comparative examination of two of Alvi's poems, "Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan" and "The Country at My Shoulder," to uncover the complexities of diasporic encounters and cultural identity inside her poetry. According to Stuart Hall, the investigation enlightens how Alvi explores the complexities of belonging, social distance, and the longing for home inside the diasporic setting. Through clear symbolism, suggestive language, and topical investigation, Alvi's poetry mirrors the strain between numerous cultural affiliations, the effect of migration and the discussion of diasporic experience. By looking at the themes of these subjects in Alvi's poetry, this study adds to a more profound comprehension of diasporic experiences, featuring the cultural hybridity diasporic identities.

**Keywords:** Echoes of Memory, tracing, identity, cultural, Moniza Alvi, Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

In an increasingly interconnected world, the investigation of diasporic encounters and identities has turned into a focal subject in writing and social examinations. Diaspora, portrayed by the dispersal of a local area from its country to different regions of the planet, has provoked people to wrestle with inquiries of having a place, cultural hybridity, and the discussion of identity across geological and cultural lines. As per researcher Paul Gilroy, the diaspora can be seen as "a unit of transnational Consciousness, a consciousness that embraces more than one spot as 'home', and more than one identity as 'mine'" (Gilroy, 1993). Poetry, as a vehicle of imaginative articulation, gives a strong stage to inspecting the complexities of diasporic identity, offering bits of knowledge into the individual and collective encounters of movement, displacement, and cultural adaptation.

In this article, the researcher dive into the verse of Moniza Alvi, a British-Pakistani writer whose work investigates topics of cultural identity, belonging, and the complexities of diasporic experiences. Through a similar examination of two of her notable poems, "Presents from My Aunties in Pakistan" and "The Country at My Shoulder," the researcher plans to uncover the subtleties of diasporic way of life as portrayed in Alvi's poems. By intently analyzing the symbolism, language, and themes of these poems, it clarify the manners by which Alvi explores the complexities of cultural hybridity and the discussion of identity inside diasporic settings. Homi K. Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity features the cycles of social blending and discussion that happen in colonial and postcolonial settings,

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underlining the rise of new social structures and personalities that resist paired arrangements (Bhabha, 1994).

"Presents from My Aunties in Pakistan" offers a strong reflection on Alvi's undecided relationship with her Pakistani legacy, comparing the charm of traditional Pakistani dress and accessories with the feeling of displacement and alienation experienced by the writer in her adopted homeland. Through striking symbolism and reminiscent language, Alvi investigates the strain between social yearning and social estrangement, featuring the complexities of belonging with various cultural worlds. "The Country at My Shoulder" dives into the poet's feeling of longing and nostalgia for her ancestral country, Pakistan. Through symbolism that brings out the scenes and recollections of Pakistan, Alvi thinks about the complexities of diasporic yearning and the exchange of cultural identity notwithstanding geological and social distance.

By directing a comparative analysis of these two poems, researchers aim to reveal insight into the manners by which Alvi explores the intricacies of diasporic character, offering bits of knowledge into the individual and aggregate encounters of migration, dislodging, and social transformation. Through investigation of Alvi's poetry, a more profound comprehension of diasporic encounters and personalities is explored, featuring the rich tapestry of cultural hybridity and exchange that portrays the diasporic condition. Stuart Hall's bits of knowledge into Cultural identity inside diaspora highlight the contingent nature of personality development, proposing that cultural identities are continually arranged and rearticulated through cycles of representation (Hall, 1990).

### **Literature Review**

Studies on the diaspora cover the emotions, issues, problems, comforts, emotional stability or instability, and challenges experienced by those who leave their native country to settle in a new one (Tahir et al, 2021). Diaspora literature can be defined as, something is written by an author who lives in any other country. The phrase identifies the unique geographic origins of a work. Diasporic works are influenced by the migratory experiences of the displaced communities. This literature reflects a change in social, political, and cultural realities while maintaining a connection to common cultural heritage. The characters and themes are about issues in assimilation into a new land and new culture. (Solanki, 2020).

Moniza Alvi is a British-Pakistani poet and author. Her mother is British, and her father is Pakistani. When she was ten years old, she departed from Pakistan; nevertheless, she returned there following the release of her debut novel, *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993). Although her motivations for going back to Pakistan may be political, it is clear from reading her poetry that she has a strong bond with her own country (Tahir et al, 2021). The expectations and demands of two distinct cultures put her fixed identity in society to the test. Her ties to many cultures cause her to feel divided in her identity, and she is unable to fully conform to one community. She resides in England, but her memories of Pakistan and her status as an immigrant in English society prevent her from having a consistent, stable identity (Saeed et al 2021).

In a BBC interview she says that:

"Because there weren't many individuals in Hatfield at the time who could relate to someone of a mixed racial heritage or really from any other race, I felt as a child that my origins were invisible. I had never felt more English, and I definitely didn't feel at home when I finally travelled to Pakistan. However, I never feel quite

at home in England, and I'm obviously not an Asian person" (Swamy, 2018). Diaspora suggests that some cultures continue to "survive, transform and remain relevant" even when the culture's creators are physically removed from their own country (Nimavat, 2011). Bhabha pens in *The Location of Culture*, a female has this affinity to establish a relativeness with two homes at a time (Swamy, 2018). William Ghosh comments that the word, 'split', is written on the title of her poetic work, *Split World Poems*, so it is certainly a word that interested her. Alvi says, she sees there is a theme of split she tries to mend among England and Pakistan body and soul, husband and wife. In Alvi's poetic works, split is appreciated as a painful fracture, a range or a partition to enable duality (Ashfaq, 2022). In her early poems, including "The Country at My Shoulder" and "A Bowl of Warm Air," Alvi confronts the sense of displacement and longing for a place that exists in both memory and imagination. Her poem "Presents from My Aunt in Pakistan" is fairly autobiographical. The poet shows herself in the poem as a girl who is thirteen years old. The girl is saying that she is having dual cultural identity. The girl gets some gifts from her aunts who are from Pakistan and now the girl is trying to connect with her original roots but she fails in this (Nimavat, 2011). "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" reveals the tension of dual identity which is marked by "uncanny moments" that is not allowing the poet to get attached to any one side of her identity (Tahir et al, 2021). Alvi's poetry is filled with themes of hybridity, cultural duality, partition, identity and transformation. Her early work was about the concept of homeland in realm- in poems which are "vivid, witty and imbued with unexpected and delicious indications of the surreal - this poet's third country" (Swamy, 2018).

Some critics have questioned the boundaries of Alvi's viewpoint as a poet of mixed heritage. In "Postcolonial Poetry in English," Rajeev S. Patke makes the argument that her poetry might not adequately capture the variety of experiences faced by immigrants, while Peter Childs criticizes her in "Contemporary Novelists," saying that she might be essentializing cultural identities or relying too much on conventional poetic forms (Childs, 2006). In spite of these critiques, readers all around the world are still drawn to Alvi's poetry because it provides a potent reflection on identity, memory, and belonging.

### **Problem Statement**

By closely examining Moniza Alvi's poems, it becomes clear that her representation of the Pakistani countryside is a moving reflection of her experiences as a diaspora member living abroad. With a particular focus on Moniza Alvi's poems "Country at my Shoulder" and "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan," this study attempts to investigate how people manage their ties to both their ancestral heritage and their current settings. The objective of this research is to encounter the difficulty of interpreting diaspora in Alvi's poetry. Through a detailed analysis of these poems, the study aims to explore themes of cultural duality, longing, and displacement in order to uncover the complexities of diasporic identity and hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of the intricacies of cultural belonging and displacement.

### **Research Questions**

1. What role do nostalgia and longing play in shaping the cultural identities of individuals living in the diaspora, as portrayed in "Country at my Shoulder" and "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan"?
2. How Moniza Alvi explore the tension between cultural heritage and present surroundings in her poetry?
3. How does Moniza Alvi's poetry explore feelings of belonging and cultural identity? How does she use imagery and symbolism to show the universal experience of feeling disconnected from one's heritage and finding one's place in new environments?

### **Methodology**

In order to find answers to the posed research questions, a textual analysis approach has been utilized. Literary analysis is not only concerned to extract the real meaning of the text which the author intended to write, rather it is also concerned to explore some unintended reaction of a text with another text. It asks what a text reveals about the context in which it was written, or reveals the other hidden meanings of a literary text (Web). When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text (McKee, 2001). This study delves into the thematic richness and cultural representation found in Moniza Alvi's poetry through textual analysis. Textual analysis is a term familiar to every researcher related to qualitative research. It is a fundamental research approach technique in the field of cultural studies. It depends on elements such as creativity, originality, inspiration, history, and the cultures we either study or live in (McKee, 2003). The study takes a particular emphasis on the poems "Country at my Shoulder" and "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan".

The study began by carefully submerging itself in the selected texts, "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" and "The Country at my Shoulder" by Moniza Alvi. This initial step aimed to establish a comprehensive understanding of the texts' structure, language use, and overarching themes. Then the research questions guiding the textual analysis process were identified. These questions were carefully crafted to focus on specific aspects of the text relevant to the study's objectives.

Once the study questions were established, the process of coding and annotating got started. The study topics guided the development of a precise coding strategy that made it possible to locate and classify relevant textual portions. Each piece was carefully examined through close reading, with linguistic strategies, imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure all receiving careful consideration. The study explores the linguistic strategies used by Alvi, such as metaphor, simile, and sensory imagery, and how they help to illustrate the complexity of cultural identity and diasporic experiences. In order to place the writings in their larger historical, cultural, and literary contexts, contextualization was essential. The author's history, the sociopolitical setting, and literary influences were taken into account. This contextual knowledge enhanced the analysis by revealing the themes and motifs found in the texts. A significant part of the approach involved thematic analysis, in which the lines were analyzed to find recurrent themes, motifs, and patterns. Both poems have had relevant lines and portions chosen with care according to their linguistic richness and thematic value for finding predominant themes. The context of the study questions and the larger theoretical framework remained crucial throughout this analysis, directing to how

the themes that were found in the text were interpreted. The analysis offers a deep knowledge of the complexity of diasporic experiences and cultural identity by looking at the ways in which the two poems connect and diverge. Issues like cultural conflict, memory, hybridity, and representation politics are explored in addition to themes like longing, displacement, and the search for belonging. Own biases and assumptions were reflected during the analysis which admit the subjective nature of interpretation.

The combination of data produced a coherent and well-organized presentation of the textual analysis. The interpretations and conclusions were supported by the textual evidence, and the analysis was organized in line with the study topics. Through textual analysis and interpretation, the research aimed to gain more knowledge of the themes, motifs, and meanings of the selected works.

### **Data Analysis**

“The country at my shoulder” by Moniza Alvi portrays the ideas of loss, identity and longing for homeland. There is extensive use of imagery and redolent language in the poem which portrays many themes like absence, longing and political and social disorder that have influences over personal and familial experiences.

The title itself depicts the sense of burden or responsibility linked with the homeland, it is the central motif around which the whole poem revolves. The writer has also referred to the loss of his father through which not only it refers to personal loss but also symbolizing being distant from roots and heritage. This absence creates a palpable silence, permeating every encounter and interaction in the life of speaker. The landscape being described in the poem is stark and desolate lacking natural beauty all left with the remnants of war and conflict. The toll of violence and displacement on the homeland is described through the imagery of soldier graves, white chalk lines and absence of trees or fields.

The poem “Country at my shoulder” captures the complex emotions and contradiction inherent with the speaker relationship with their homeland offering a powerful meditation on memory, heritage and sense of belonging.

The woman’s dupattas are wet with tears.

The offices have closed  
for the white-hot afternoon (Alvi 1993)

This implies suffering and pains which people are going through. Where they have no help nor guide, nobody is listening to their sufferings, the burden of suffering is getting heavier and heavier.

I hear of bribery, family quarrels,  
travellers’ tales - the stars  
are so low you think you can touch them (Alvi 1993)

The curse of bribery and chaos within the country is haunting the existence of newly born country, it feels like being the part of the system like stars embedded with face of sky.

I water the country with English rain,  
cover it with English words.  
Soon it will burst, or fall like a meteor (Alvi 1993)

This stanza is symbolizing hope the rain symbolizing revival and freedom from tribulations hope to flourish and get going with the flow of success and advancement when the downtrodden is overpowered by prosperity and satisfaction.

By applying Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora to "The Country at My Shoulder," one can analyze how Alvi grapples with questions of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage in the context of migration and diaspora. The poem becomes a poignant exploration of the complexities of cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world. Poem "The Country at My Shoulder" discusses the weight of one's upbringing and culture. It makes reference to Pakistan, her birthplace, without giving its name, where public executions occurred in public squares during military rule. Women cry when they see it. The women labor, smashing stones with tears streaming down their damp dupattas.

Through the claim of Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora, we can better understand how "The Country at My Shoulder" addresses the complexities of cultural identity, memory, and representation within the framework of migration and diaspora.

The poem "Presents from my aunt in Pakistan" highlight the theme of cultural identity Through gifts for the poet from her aunts who are in Pakistan. Through these traditional clothing, jewelry, and trinkets, the speaker explores her dual identity and shows how she is torn between her Pakistani heritage and her upbringing in the Western world. The poem delves into themes of cultural displacement, nostalgia, and the complexities of belonging in two different worlds. It reflects on the tension between embracing one's cultural roots and adapting to a new environment, highlighting the struggle to reconcile conflicting aspects of one's identity.

They sent me a salwar kameez  
peacock-blue,  
and another  
glistening like an orange split open,  
embossed slippers, gold and black  
points curling.  
Candy-striped glass bangles  
snapped, drew blood.  
Like at school, fashions changed  
in Pakistan (Alvi 2003)

As brought up in England she is describing the beauty of Pakistani culture engraved in the roots of heritage and beauty immersed in the bright colors of eastern outfits, The designs and colors stand apart from eastern outfits and jewelry is adding more beauty to eastern wearables.

My salwar kameez  
didn't impress the schoolfriend  
who sat on my bed, asked to see  
my weekend clothes (Alvi 2003)

While showing her clothes to school friends they could not found anything admiring and laudable, she like the mirror works on the shirt through which she tries to sail through the past picturing her sail to England where she ended up moving to England in this cottage where she is accompanied by loneliness and absence pf friends except a tiny boat with which she can rely on to play with.

I pictured my birthplace  
from fifties' photographs.  
When I was older  
there was conflict, a fractured land  
throbbing through newsprint (Alvi 2003)

She misses her home country so much that she recalls her country through photographs portraying divided countries now having a big chasm between them. Through pictures she is seeing her aunt house situated in Lahore where the eastern traditions are being followed male guests are separated through curtains. The poetess is also grieving over the confusion of her nationality whether she is eastern or western having love for eastern things deep in the heart. The poem presents a series of private recollections that confuse the voice, which is clearly Alvi's. She couldn't see the past, and the present became divided. She makes an effort to picture what may have happened and questions if she would have felt more at home in Lahore or in England if she had lived there instead.

Or there were beggars, sweeper girls  
and I was thereof  
no fixed nationality (Alvi 2003)

The poem's depiction of the speaker negotiating her identity in the context of migration and diaspora clearly demonstrates Stuart Hall's concept of "cultural identity." Her Pakistani relatives' presents to her are material reminders of her cultural background, but they also highlight how disconnected she feels from her native country. This conflict is a reflection of Hall's theory that identity is dynamic and always being renegotiated in various cultural situations.

Since the speaker struggles with the difficulties of belonging to several cultural worlds, the poem addresses Hall's concept of "diaspora."

Alvi addresses the issue of cultural hybridity, belonging towards homeland and diaspora through her poetry. They can be identified by applying Stuart Hall's theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora to "Presents from my Aunts." This poem is a reflection of difficulties faced by Diasporic. The themes of complexities of identity, cultural heritage and the sense of belonging, are presented in these poems from different angles. The tension between her Pakistani heritage and her British upbringing is explored by Alvi in "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan". By using literary devices such as vivid imagery and personal anecdotes, the poetess explores the polarity of belonging to two cultures which creates a feeling of an outsider in both. The poem depicts the yearning for connection to her Pakistani roots, as well as the disaffection caused by the cultural differences between her two worlds. In contrast, "The Country at my Shoulder" reflects on the theme of displacement and the yearning for a homeland left behind. Alvi uses the metaphor of carrying one's country on their shoulder to convey the weight of nostalgia and the enduring presence of the past. "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" focuses on the internal conflict due to dual identity. In "The Country at my Shoulder" there is a portrayal of the external demonstration of exile and longing. Despite their thematic differences, both poems echo with the universal human experience of wrestling with identity, belonging, and the longing for connection to one's roots. Exploration of these themes through personal narrative and redolent imagery by Alvi makes her poetry an emotive reflection of the complexities of cultural identity in a globalized world.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that, in Moniza Alvi's poetry, as represented by her poems "The Country at my Shoulder" and "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan," presents a detailed exploration of diasporic identity and cultural hybridity. Through

redolent imagery and lyrical language, Alvi presents the complexities of diasporic existence that illuminating the challenges of belonging and the pursuit for identity within diverse cultural landscapes. Her poems deeply explore diaspora theory that provide valuable insights into the intricacies of diasporic subjectivity. Diaspora literature creates concerns with identity and validity in the works of Moniza Alvi.

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