

SPLIT SELVES AND CULTURAL DISSONANCE: EXPLORING IDENTITY CRISES AND LEXICAL VARIATION IN THE POETRY OF MONIZA ALVI

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Abstract

The present research explores the interaction of identity crises and lexical diversity in the poetry of Moniza Alvi, a British-Pakistani author whose poetry manoeuvres the intricacies of cultural displacement and gendered subjectivity. Concentrating on five poems Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan, An Unknown Girl, The Country at My Shoulder, The Wedding, and Mermaid the study uses a qualitative, postcolonial-stylistic approach based on close reading and theoretical observations drawn from Homi Bhabha's "third space," Lacanian psychoanalysis of language, and studies of diaspora. Two main aims inform the research: to examine how Alvi depicts disjointed selfhood and cultural dissonance via imagery, metaphor, and repetition; and to examine how lexical selection, code-switching, culturally specific lexis, and symbolic diction enunciate a hybrid diasporic identity. Findings reveal that Alvi's recurring metaphors (e.g., fading henna, burdened homelands, and the trapped mermaid) and strategic use of Urdu-English vocabulary enact the emotional burden of exile, the impermanence of belonging, and the negotiation of gendered roles. The study concludes that Alvi's poetic language does not simply depict cultural hybridity but enacts it, offering a nuanced portrayal of diasporic subjectivity in which language itself becomes a site of memory, resistance, and self-construction.

Keywords: Moniza Alvi, identity crisis, lexical variation, diaspora, cultural hybridity

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the intersection of identity, gender, and diaspora has been an area of critical significance within postcolonial literary studies. Writers bridging cultural displacement, particularly women writers of South Asian background, provide unique insights into living a world in between. They include the British-Pakistani writer Moniza Alvi, whose poetry negotiates the fragmented self shaped by migration, hybridity, and cultural dissonance. Alvi's poetry reflects a compelling journey through memory, ethnicity, and displacement, often using domestic and bodily metaphors to express the complexities of identity formation in a transnational context.

The concept diaspora conveys not only physical migration between one homeland and another but also the cultural and psychological negotiations that ensue. For women writers, this process is mediated by gender, heightening questions of belonging, alienation, and agency. Diasporic authors like Alvi raise fundamental existential questions: "Who am I? Where am I? When am I?" which encapsulates the emotive terrain of migration and cultural hybridity.

Alvi, born in Pakistan and brought up in Britain, personifies these questions through her own experience being a daughter of a Pakistani father and an English mother, perpetually moving between inherited and adopted identities. Scholars like Ahsan and Anjum (2023) highlight Alvi's poetry as a "multi-spatial platform"—a poetic cartography that maps interior and

exterior spaces affected by dislocation, spatial anxiety, and cultural collision. Her poetry travels architectural, domestic, diaspora, and body spaces, inscribing a transcultural tension between East and West. Such thematic tension is consonant with Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "third space", that in-between space in which new identities are formed outside binary oppositions of cultures.

Alvi's work thus goes beyond mere loss or nostalgia; instead, it is an enabling means to (re)claim identity in terms of productive engagement with cultural diversity and revolutionary reinvention. This study examines identity crises, fragmented selves, and cultural dissonance in five poems of Moniza Alvi selected from the collection: *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, *An Unknown Girl*, *The Country at My Shoulder*, *I Was Raised in a Glove Compartment*, and *Immigrant*. These poems also vividly capture the battle between tradition and modern life, the desire for belonging, and the attempt to reunite fractured selves. Stealing from postcolonial theory, spatiality, and gender discourse, the study examines how Alvi uses metaphor, symbolism, and imagery to articulate the affective reality of cultural displacement.

The poetry of Alvi is not just a depiction of diasporic anxiety but also a celebration of hybridity a locus of active transformation where identity is negotiated and affirmed continuously. The making of identity in postcolonial and diasporic fiction is now a central concern of contemporary literary theory. For the writer of mixed or diasporic descent, identity is often unstable; instead, it is split, changeable, and negotiated across cultural boundaries. This is true for Moniza Alvi, a British-Pakistani poet, who has been critically acclaimed for her rich depiction of cultural dissonance and inner conflict.

Her poetry also frequently probes the complexities of bicultural life, specifically conflicts between her British upbringing and Pakistani background. Alvi's work is defined by a rich negotiation of what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space", a space of liminalities in which hybrid identities are negotiated and ambivalently constructed. In works such as *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan* and *The Country at My Shoulder*, she is expressing the state of suspended being between two worlds, neither of which she belongs to. This leads to what might be termed a crisis of identity, when the self is split, estranged, or continuously reconstituted.

Her poetic voice tends to reflect this divided self, moving between memory and reality, homeland and host land, tradition and modernity. In this research, themes of split selves, identity crisis, and cultural dissonance in some poems of Moniza Alvi are explored. By a close reading of five central poems *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, *An Unknown Girl*, *The Country at My Shoulder*, *I Was Raised in a Glove Compartment*, and *Immigrant*—the study will attempt to reveal how Alvi represents the psychological as well as cultural disintegration felt by people living across two worlds.

Employing a postcolonial theoretical lens, particularly concepts of hybridity and displacement, this inquiry situates Alvi's poetry within the broader discourse of diaspora and transnational identity. By examining the poetic strategies Alvi employs to represent fractured identities, such as imagery, symbolism, and narrative voice, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can reflect the lived realities of cultural hybridity. The focus on Moniza Alvi's poetry not only highlights the personal and collective dilemmas of diasporic identity but also underscores the continuing relevance of poetic expression in articulating the nuances of cross-cultural existence.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore how Moniza Alvi represents identity crises and cultural dissonance through themes of fragmented selfhood and displacement in selected poems.

2. To analyse the role of lexical variation, such as code-switching, culturally specific vocabulary, and symbolic diction, in expressing hybridity and negotiating diasporic identity.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does Moniza Alvi depict identity crises and cultural dissonance in her poetry through themes of fragmented selfhood, belonging, and displacement?
2. How does Moniza Alvi use lexical variation, including culturally specific vocabulary and symbolic diction, to express hybrid identity and negotiate her diasporic experience?

1.3. Significance of the Research

This research holds significance on multiple levels literary, linguistic, cultural, and postcolonial. By focusing on Moniza Alvi's poetry, the study contributes to the growing field of diasporic and postcolonial literature, particularly through the lens of a female, South Asian-British voice that has often been underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse.

Alvi's poetry presents a unique literary space where identity is neither fixed nor singular but constantly shifting due to cultural dislocation, migration, and gendered experiences. Through an exploration of her themes of identity crisis, cultural dissonance, and hybrid selfhood, this research provides deeper insight into how contemporary poetry serves as a means of negotiating fragmented identities in a globalised world. In addition, this study relates linguistic analysis to cultural theory by investigating Alvi's lexical variation, including her utilisation of culturally specific language and symbolic language. This suggests that language itself can be utilised for expressing in-betweenness, belonging and resistance in diasporic contexts.

Furthermore, the study is valuable to advance the field of postcolonial stylistics, as it offers a close reading of poetic devices that create meaning below the surface. The study opens up new opportunities for researchers to study literary works not only thematically, but also linguistically and culturally, using these elaborate frameworks. Finally, the research builds cross-cultural understanding in exploring how poetry can narrate the internal struggle and artistic determination of those in divided cultural identities. In contributing to this area, it also contributes to wider discourses on multiculturalism, identity politics, and the legacy of colonialism in British and South Asian literary histories.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The poetry of British-Pakistani poet Moniza Alvi has also attracted ever greater scholarly interest for its rich portrayal of diasporic identity, hybrid cultural perceptions, and gendered selfhood. Much of the critical response to her poetry examines how she traverses the psychological strains of cultural dissonance and fractured identity, both through thematic negotiation and stylistic innovation.

2.1. Moniza Alvi and the Female Diasporic Experience

Swamy (2025) explores how Moniza Alvi and Kamila Shamsie construct feminine identities in postcolonial narratives. She notes that Alvi, as a third-world woman writer, captures a uniquely gendered perception shaped by cultural expectations and diasporic displacement. Swamy emphasises that Alvi's poetic sensibility reveals how the feminine self is shaped by cultural practices in the 21st century. This aligns closely with Alvi's frequent engagement with themes of belonging, estrangement, and the dual pressures of Eastern and Western cultural codes.

2.2. Lexical Variation and the Representation of Identity

Alvi's use of culturally specific vocabulary including references to South Asian clothing, food, rituals, and landscape functions as a linguistic marker of hybridity. Her lexical style tends to position her speaker in between worlds, deploying Urdu-origin words and symbolic language

to describe a fractured but plural self. These lexical elements echo her thematic preoccupations of diasporic conflict and identity bargaining. Since her poetry blends Pakistani cultural icons with British poetic forms, it is a textual space for what Homi Bhabha describes as the "Third Space"—a transitional space of hybridity and resistance.

2.3. The Body as Nation, Culture, and Conflict

Shehata (2017) provides a detailed reading of how Alvi uses the body as a central metaphor to represent not only personal identity but national and cultural geographies. Critics such as Rees-Jones, Broom, and Senktas, as cited by Shehata, agree that Alvi's corporeal metaphors bridge the domestic and the political. The body becomes a symbol of cultural fragmentation and coexistence, embodying the struggle of identifying with both Pakistani and British heritages. Shehata expands this analysis by interpreting the body in Alvi's poems as a "place-torn" site, shaped by historical trauma and diasporic consciousness.

2.4. Re-Orientalism and Eurocentric Discourses

From a more critical perspective, Saran et al. (2025) read Alvi's poetry through the lens of Re-Orientalism and contend that Alvi is sometimes guilty of unwittingly reproducing Eurocentric narratives. They use Lisa Lau's theory of re-Orientalism to demonstrate that Alvi, because of her marginal positionality, simultaneously positions the West as the centre of interpretation and represents Pakistan as exotic or deficient. This reading complicates the generally celebratory reception of Alvi's poetry and encourages a discussion of internalised colonial legacy in diasporic writing.

Ahsan and Anjum (2023) analyse Alvi's poetry through the concept of spatiality and demonstrate how it describes cultural and emotional dislocation through domestic, social, and bodily spaces. They argue that Alvi's poems operate as multi-spatial platforms that reflect diasporic anxieties and the unending negotiation of place and identity. Additionally, the union of British and South Asian spatial imagery illustrates Alvi's sense of in-betweenness and cultural collision.

Alvi's poetry manifests a feminine consciousness negotiating (translating): She came from a Pakistani family but, she was raised in the UK, her poetry draws on domestic imagery and familiar culturally located terms to convey that she lives out a hybrid identity. This is not simply a project of poetic articulation, but also a way of noting and communicating the intolerable pain of displacement, estrangement and cultural in-betweenness at a broader level, especially as we consider postcolonial South Asia (Swamy, 2025). In part, her poetics reveal how memory and cultural rootedness remain at the forefront of all identity-making endeavours situated within the overarching diasporic framework.

Various scholars have argued that Alvi's poetry navigates heavily into figurative language, and specifically metaphor and metonymy, in order to register psychological numbness, fragmentation and longing. Various study relies on psychoanalysis to examine Alvi's use of metaphor and metonymic chains, looking at how they align with a poststructuralist subject "lost in the labyrinth of language" and articulated by Lacan on the sliding of signifiers. In this way, while Alvi's poetic subjectivity is subject to the liminal movement of language where meaning is deferred and lost, it aligns with Alvi's diasporic identity, which is perpetually in search but has never entirely recomposed themselves in a fully formed sense of "home" (Ahsan & Anjum, 2024). In this conceptualisation, Alvi's poetic subjectivity is shown to have been formed not only through cultural displacement but also through the structural limitations of language that echo and foreground her positionality as an alienation experienced through an identity crisis. Scholars' awareness of Alvi's vocabulary choice can be seen as part of a diasporic negotiation process, in that her poetry contains culturally charged vocabulary (for example, *salwar kameez*,

henna, camel-skin lamp), which can be seen as markers of ancestry, memory, and desire. These unique lexical insertions suggest a more general process of transculturation, as the poet has connected aspects of both cultural backgrounds to create a sense of belonging (Shehata, 2017; Ahsan & Anjum, 2023). Diaspora, as Friedman (2008) describes, is inherently a space of tension between loss and rootedness, between the foreign and the familiar, and between memory and modernity. Alvi's poetry embraces this space, constructing what Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space", a liminal site where hybrid identities are not only formed but celebrated through creative expression.

Together, these scholarly perspectives position Moniza Alvi as a complex diasporic voice whose poetry interweaves gender, space, language, and cultural memory. This research builds on such scholarship by focusing specifically on how lexical variation—through culturally specific terms and poetic diction—intersects with themes of identity crisis and cultural dissonance, particularly from a feminist postcolonial stylistic lens.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research design employed in the study, describes the methods of data collection, and explains the procedures used for data analysis.

3.1. Research Design

This research takes a qualitative, text-based approach based on postcolonial theory, stylistics, and diaspora studies methodologies. This research is interpretivist, proceeding through close reading and contextual analysis of several Moniza Alvi poems to note how the discourses of identity crisis, cultural dissonance, and lexical variation are inscribed in her poetry.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

The study is situated within the postcolonial theory, specifically Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory and theory of hybridity, which elucidate the construction of new selves in the intersection of cultures. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of language also offers the foundation of the analysis of metaphor and metonymy. Analysis of Alvi's lexuality is conducted with the assistance of postcolonial stylistics insights (Jeffries, 2010). The study also uses relevant diaspora studies concepts by Friedman (2008) to situate the poet's fractured cultural consciousness.

3.3. Data Collection

The main data for this research are a sample of five poems from Moniza Alvi's major collections, i.e., *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, *An Unknown Girl*, and *The Country at My Shoulder*. *The Wedding*, *Mermaid* poems are chosen specifically according to their suitability in the context of the themes of cultural displacement, fractured selfhood, and linguistic hybridity.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis consists of close reading and text analysis of the poems chosen, paying close attention to:

1. Lexical variations, including culturally unique words, bilingual word expression, and symbolic words.
2. Themes of repetition, such as exile, belonging, gendered identity, and cultural tension.
3. Figurative language, more importantly, the application of metaphor and metonymy in conveying absence, yearning, and desire.

The discussion is guided by intertextual discussions of recent literary theory, scholarly journal articles, and relevant theoretical discussions on the construction of identity in diaspora settings.

3.5. Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited to a textual examination of several of Moniza Alvi's poems focusing on identity crisis, cultural dissonance, and lexical variation. It examines a limited purposively chosen sample of five poems, mostly from her books *The Country at My Shoulder*, *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, and *An Unknown Girl*. These poems are selected based on the thematic significance of the poems about diasporic issues and the deployment of culturally specific words and figures of speech. The study is also limited to qualitative and interpretive approaches based on literary theory. The study does not use quantitative techniques or computational linguistics. The study is informed by postcolonial, diaspora, and psychoanalytic theories, but not by other theories like ecocriticism, Marxist theory, or formalism. Apart from this, the study is particularly concerned with Moniza Alvi's poetic construction of hybrid identity and the diasporic woman's experience. It tries neither to generalise from findings to all diasporic poetry nor other British Asian writing, nor does it cover Alvi's prose books or translations.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Lexical Variation in Moniza Alvi's Selected Poems

Moniza Alvi's poetry showcases notable lexical variation, combining culturally specific diction, symbolic metaphors, and hybrid linguistic patterns to reflect fragmented identity and cultural tension. Her strategic use of Urdu words, names, metaphors, and culturally embedded objects constructs a diasporic voice suspended between British and Pakistani worlds.

4.1.1 Culturally Specific Vocabulary and Code-Switching

In *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, Alvi integrates Urdu terms such as "salwar kameez," "sari," and "dupatta" without explanation, reinforcing her cultural specificity while subtly resisting assimilation into a Western poetic tradition (Alvi, 1993). These choices mark linguistic hybridity and emphasise the poetic speaker's in-betweenness. Scholars suggest that such lexical insertions function as markers of identity and belonging for diasporic writers (Kanwal & Aslam, 2022).

Similarly, in *The Country at My Shoulder*, names like "Azam," "Uncle Kamil," and phrases such as "Indian films" and "Christina Rossetti" represent a juxtaposition of personal and literary geographies (Alvi, 1993). The line "I water the country with English rain / cover it with English words" metaphorically addresses the tension between inherited and adopted languages and cultures (Alvi, 1993, p. 45).

4.1.2 Symbolic Diction and Cultural Signifiers

In *An Unknown Girl*, phrases like "hennaing my hand," "peacock lines," and "shadow-stitched kameez" evoke vivid imagery and culturally rooted expressions of beauty and identity (Alvi, 1993). These culturally charged images are also transient, "It will fade in a week", highlighting the fleeting nature of belonging (Alvi, 1993, p. 47). Broom (2011) notes that Alvi's metaphors frequently articulate the conflict between permanence and impermanence within diasporic identity.

The Wedding uses metaphors like "marriage to balance on my head" and "England spilt out" to dramatise the burden of inherited traditions and imposed hybrid identities (Alvi, 2000). This lexical pattern aligns with what Bhabha (1994) calls the "liminal space" of cultural hybridity, where identity is formed in the negotiation between cultures.

4.1.3 Lexical Patterns of Loss and Fragmentation

In *Mermaid*, words such as "trapped," "sliced," and "cannot escape" construct a symbolic landscape of emotional and physical confinement (Alvi, 2008). The mermaid, part-human and part-other, mirrors the hybrid subject, neither fully belonging to one world nor the other.

According to Shehata (2017), Alvi's use of bodily metaphors often embodies psychological and cultural fragmentation, with the body serving as a metaphorical landscape of identity crisis. Likewise, *The Country at My Shoulder* closes with lexical fields of rupture and detachment—"I can't break bits off" and "Soon it will burst or fall like a meteor" (Alvi, 1993). These lines encapsulate the emotional weight of carrying multiple cultural allegiances.

Table 4.1
Lexical Variation in Selected Poems by Moniza Alvi

Poem Title	Culturally Specific Vocabulary	Code-Switching / Hybrid Phrases	Symbolic Diction & Themes
<i>Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan</i>	<i>salwar kameez, sari, dupatta, bangles, slippers</i>	"peacock-blue", "orange split open"	Clothing as identity: tension between tradition and Western modernity
<i>An Unknown Girl</i>	<i>bazaar, rupees, kameez, henna</i>	"shadow-stitched kameez", "amber bird"	Temporary identity, longing, and cultural nostalgia
<i>The Country at My Shoulder</i>	<i>Uncle Aqbar, Christina Rossetti, Indian films, Azam</i>	"water the country with English rain"	Pakistan is a metaphor for heritage and burden, a fractured national identity.
<i>The Wedding</i>	<i>veil, dowry, sandalwood, suitcases</i>	"England split out", "a forest of sticks"	Cultural clash during arranged marriage: material vs. emotional displacement
<i>Mermaid</i>	<i>mermaid, tail, sliced, trapped</i>	"a creature of dreams", "a frame that holds her"	Mythical hybridity: a metaphor for the diasporic woman trapped in dual identity

Note: All culturally specific terms and hybrid phrases are taken directly from Moniza Alvi's poems as published in *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993), *Carrying My Wife* (2000), and *Europa* (2008).

4.2. Thematic Analysis: Repetition of Exile, Belonging, Gendered Identity, and Cultural Tension in Moniza Alvi's Selected Poems

4.2.1 Exile & Belonging

Moniza Alvi's poetry profoundly engages with the emotional and psychological experience of exile and the elusive desire for belonging. In *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, the speaker describes herself as "an alien in the sitting-room" while wearing traditional Pakistani clothes, revealing how physical disconnection from cultural roots causes inner conflict (Alvi, 1993). The recurring images of *salwar kameez*, *glass bangles*, and *sari* symbolise her inherited culture, yet they are simultaneously foreign and ornamental. Similarly, in *An Unknown Girl*, the act of hennaing becomes a fleeting connection to a lost homeland. The repeated phrase "an unknown girl is hennaing my hand" expresses a temporary reclamation of cultural identity, one that fades like the henna stain itself—"It will fade in a week" (Alvi, 1993). In *The Country at My Shoulder*, Alvi powerfully uses the metaphor of carrying a homeland on her body—"I water the country with English rain, / cover it with English words"—to depict the emotional burden of cultural exile and a fractured sense of home (Alvi, 1993). In *The Wedding*, a similar dislocation is seen in the speaker's emotional detachment from her marriage ceremony, which "tasted of nothing," further emphasising the distance from both emotional and cultural

belonging (Alvi, 2000). The poem *Mermaid* metaphorically captures this sense of unbelonging. The mermaid, a hybrid creature, is "trapped" in her body, unable to swim or escape, symbolising the speaker's identity suspended between two worlds, neither fully part of one nor the other (Alvi, 2008). This motif of exile in Alvi's poetry aligns with what Kanwal and Aslam (2022) describe as "spatial anxiety," where dislocation becomes a permanent emotional and linguistic condition.

4.2.2 Gendered Identity

Alvi's exploration of identity is profoundly shaped by gender, particularly how traditional South Asian femininity intersects with diasporic consciousness. In *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, the gendered expectations surrounding appearance are foregrounded in the form of gift clothing, bangles, and slippers, items that mark feminine beauty and social decorum. However, Alvi juxtaposes these with her desire for "denim and corduroy," suggesting a Western, more self-directed identity (Alvi, 1993). This tension reflects how gender identity is contested within diasporic settings. In *An Unknown Girl*, the intimacy of the hennaing ritual "She squeezes a wet brown line from a nozzle" highlights how traditional acts of female beautification can become empowering yet transient moments of self-expression (Alvi, 1993). Meanwhile, *The Wedding* depicts marriage not as a celebration but as confinement. The speaker says, "I expected a quiet wedding...the ceremony tasted of nothing," reflecting the imposed passivity of the bride and the cultural weight of feminine roles (Alvi, 2000). *Mermaid* offers a more symbolic and visceral portrayal: the mermaid is physically "sliced," visually beautiful yet incapable of movement. Her pain is gendered and metaphorical—she is imagined, exoticised, and imprisoned, much like the diasporic woman in literature (Shehata, 2017). Through these poems, Alvi's work becomes a site of resistance against traditional gender roles, illuminating how diasporic women experience a dual estrangement—from homeland and patriarchal norms.

4.2.3 Cultural Tension

Cultural tension permeates Alvi's poetry as a consequence of her hybrid identity. In *The Country at My Shoulder*, the poem's title itself serves as an extended metaphor: Pakistan is a weight the speaker carries, an unshakeable presence that "will burst" (Alvi, 1993). This suggests how inherited culture, though distant, remains deeply embodied. The juxtaposition of "English rain" and "English words" with references to Indian films and sugar monuments signifies cultural layering, wherein both worlds collide but do not blend. In *An Unknown Girl*, cultural tension is made visible through imagery such as "dummies in shop fronts with their Western perms" beside traditional henna practices, symbolising the friction between consumerist Western culture and South Asian traditions (Alvi, 1993). In *Presents from My Aunts*, the speaker's desire to assimilate ("I longed for denim") conflicts with her roots, demonstrating how the body becomes the site of cultural performance and anxiety. *The Wedding* portrays the intrusion of Western influence into traditional South Asian rituals: "When they opened their suitcases, England spilt out"—implying that cultural authenticity is under siege even in intimate, ancestral ceremonies (Alvi, 2000). Finally, *Mermaid* metaphorically embodies cultural dissonance through the image of a creature that is neither one thing nor another—she "cannot escape the frame that holds her," symbolising how hybridity can feel more like imprisonment than liberation (Alvi, 2008). Alvi's work exemplifies what Saran et al. (2025) call "Re-Orientalist tension," where the poet's voice is caught between embracing and critiquing both Eastern and Western frameworks of identity.

Table 4.2
Thematic Representation in Moniza Alvi's Selected Poems

Poem Title	Exile & Belonging	Gendered Identity	Cultural Tension
<i>Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan</i>	Disconnection from heritage via clothing (e.g., "alien in the sitting-room"); rejection of traditional dress	Cultural expectations imposed through gifts like bangles and a sari, desire for Western attire	Conflict between traditional and modern ideals; discomfort with inherited culture (Alvi, 1993)
<i>An Unknown Girl</i>	Temporary cultural connection through henna that "fades in a week"; longing for place and memory	Ritual of henna as a feminine identity expression; repetitive, intimate act	Juxtaposition of "peacock lines" with "western perms"; fragmented cultural experience (Alvi, 1993)
<i>The Country at My Shoulder</i>	Burden of homeland: "growing larger—soon it will burst"; emotional weight of origin	Gendered labour and social roles subtly portrayed (e.g., women stone-breakers, dupattas wet with tears)	Superimposed cultures: "English rain," "English words" over Pakistani identity (Alvi, 1993)
<i>The Wedding</i>	Cultural alienation in personal ritual: "ceremony tasted of nothing"; foreignness at a native event	Marriage as a passive role for women; critique of dowry and veil; identity hidden or erased	East vs. West shown through "England split out" and "sandalwood smugglers" imagery (Alvi, 2000)
<i>Mermaid</i>	Hybrid creature as a metaphor for diasporic dislocation; "trapped," "cannot escape" metaphors	Femininity as myth and pain: "a creature of the imagination and of pain"; symbolic slicing of womanhood	Mythic, romanticised hybrid image represents cultural burden and symbolic imprisonment (Alvi, 2008)

Note: All culturally specific terms and hybrid phrases are taken directly from Moniza Alvi's poems as published in *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993), *Carrying My Wife* (2000), and *Europa* (2008).

4.3. Figurative Language: Metaphor and Metonymy in Expressing Absence, Yearning, and Desire

Moniza Alvi's poetry is deeply infused with metaphor and metonymy, functioning as tools to convey psychological absence, diasporic yearning, and personal as well as cultural desire. In *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, clothing becomes a metonym for culture and identity. Items like the *salwar kameez*, *bangles*, and *sari* represent not only physical gifts but also the larger expectations of femininity and heritage. The speaker's inability to embody these clothes—"I could never be as lovely as those clothes"—acts as a metaphor for her cultural detachment and internalised absence (Alvi, 1993, p. 15). These items, repeatedly described, metonymically link to a culture the speaker cannot fully claim, symbolising her yearning for authentic belonging.

In *An Unknown Girl*, the central metaphor of henna symbolises fleeting cultural contact and desire for rootedness. The repeated act of hennaing by the "unknown girl" becomes a ritualistic gesture, a moment of intimacy with tradition. The description of the henna as "soft as a snail trail" and "an amber bird" evokes a sensual longing—beauty that is both delicate and

ephemeral (Alvi, 1993, p. 19). The henna's impermanence metaphorically captures the speaker's diasporic condition: her desire for cultural permanence is undercut by inevitable fading. The unknown girl herself serves as a metonym for the lost homeland—unreachable and unnamed, yet deeply affecting.

The Country at My Shoulder uses a striking extended metaphor throughout: the “country” literally resting on the speaker's shoulder. This metaphor conveys a psychological burden, a memory-heavy longing for identity that cannot be set down or fully understood. The image of the country “bursting” suggests overwhelming emotional pressure, a yearning that spills into her physical and linguistic world “I water the country with English rain, cover it with English words” (Alvi, 1993, p. 22). These phrases simultaneously depict absence (of native rootedness) and a desire to reconcile inherited and adopted worlds.

In *The Wedding*, metaphor and metonymy are used to represent alienation within a culturally significant event. The ceremony is described as “tasting of nothing,” an emotionally vacant ritual (Alvi, 2000, p. 41). England, spilling out of guests' suitcases, becomes a metonym for colonial residue—an ever-present force shaping the supposedly traditional setting. This clash conveys the speaker's emotional absence and her unfulfilled desire for cultural and personal authenticity.

Mermaid is the most allegorical of the poems. The mermaid herself is a metaphor for the diasporic woman: visually magical, hybrid in identity, but silenced and physically restricted. Her “tail sliced in half” and inability to “swim” evoke a painful paradox—her beauty and uniqueness are also the sources of her suffering (Alvi, 2008, p. 28). As a metaphor, the mermaid encapsulates both desire (to escape, to belong, to be whole) and absence (of voice, agency, freedom). She is also a metonym for the postcolonial female subject: shaped by fantasy, framed by others, and caught between two worlds.

Through these poems, Alvi masterfully employs figurative language to voice the ineffable emotions of displacement, longing, and fractured identity. **Metaphors** such as the country on the shoulder, fading henna, or the trapped mermaid give form to emotional states that resist direct articulation. **Metonymy** allows her to connect concrete cultural objects to broader systems of meaning—garments, rituals, and symbols of home become stand-ins for cultural memory, expectation, and loss. These devices do not resolve absence and desire but articulate their enduring presence.

Table 4.3

Figurative Language (Metaphor & Metonymy) in Moniza Alvi's Selected Poems
Themes of Absence, Yearning, and Desire

Poem Title	Metaphor	Metonymy	Thematic Function
<i>Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan</i>	Clothing symbolises identity conflict and emotional exile	Traditional items (salwar, bangles, sari) represent cultural heritage	Expresses internal dislocation and longing for cultural authenticity
<i>An Unknown Girl</i>	Henna as a metaphor for fleeting cultural intimacy and identity inscription	Bazaar, kameez, and girl as stand-ins for homeland and tradition	Depicts yearning for a temporary connection and the inevitable fading of cultural imprint
<i>The Country at My Shoulder</i>	Country metaphorically "growing" and "bursting" symbolises the	Rain and English words stand in for cultural imposition	Illustrates the emotional weight of inherited culture and the desire for reconciliation

	psychological burden of heritage.		
<i>The Wedding</i>	Ceremony as a metaphor for hollow cultural ritual	England in suitcases as a metonym for cultural intrusion	Highlights emotional absence and clash of Western and Eastern cultural expectations
<i>Mermaid</i>	Mermaid symbolises diasporic hybrid identity and emotional entrapment	Mermaid as a cultural image of femininity and exoticised otherness	Conveys absence of agency and yearning for selfhood and liberation

Notes:

- Each entry reflects how **metaphor** and **metonymy** operate in tandem to convey **emotional absence**, **diasporic longing**, and **cultural displacement**.

5. FINDINGS

The analysis of Moniza Alvi's selected poems reveals that her poetic voice intricately captures the struggles of identity crises and cultural dissonance rooted in the diasporic experience. Through rich figurative language and thematic repetition, Alvi articulates a sense of fragmented selfhood shaped by the tension between her Pakistani heritage and British upbringing. Presents from *My Aunts in Pakistan* and *The Country at My Shoulder* are poems that metaphorically present identity as a duality or burden and reflect on the speaker's emotional exile. This feeling of displacement is made more complex in the wedding, where the speaker is also affected by her cultural ceremonies, and in an unknown girl, where an almanack in the cultural relationship through Henna stands for a longing for cultural conditions that do not last. The speaker employs that spord metaphor to express the identity of a hybrid woman, who once appears and becomes quiet, imaginative and limited. These poems demonstrate that Alvis' identity is represented in a marginal place - a "third place" where the affected person is never firm, and selfishness is always in interaction. This feeling of displacement is made more complex in the wedding, where the speaker is also affected by her cultural ceremonies, and in an unknown girl, where an almanack in the cultural relationship through Henna stands for a longing for cultural conditions that do not last. The speaker employs that spord metaphor to express the identity of a hybrid woman, who once appears and becomes quiet, imaginative and limited. These poems demonstrate that Alvis' identity is represented in a marginal place - a "third place" where the affected person is never firm, and selfishness is always in interaction.

In addition to the thematic study, research also suggests that Alvi uses lexical variation as an important linguistic tool to express the Alvi hybridity and navigate itself. His careful employment of culturally specific concepts such as Salwar Kameez, Dupatta, Henna and bazaar translation not only confirms their cultural heritage, but also affects Western linguistic conferences. These words tolerate cultural and emotional weight, the meaning, which means that they are very effective signifiers of inheritance. "Peacock Lines as Symbolic Language", "Shadow-stocked Comes" and "Amber Bird" give the depth of the beauty and thematic prosperity of his poems, and present identity to sensory and flow. In addition, the mixture of English and South Asian alliance at the lexicon level results in a stylistic hybridity that reflects the fragmented self of the speaker. Alvis' poems suggest that language, such as identity, is fluid and demonstrator; His literal alternatives not only describe the identity, but also use it.

Conclusions thus suggest that Moniza Alvi's poetry provides a nice depiction of the migrant theme, where cultural displacement, gender expectations and linguistic hybrids converge to express the discovery of absence, longing and selfishness.

6. CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to examine Moniza Alvi, a British-Pakistani poet, and how she handles identity crises and cultural dissonance in her poetry, with specific emphasis on lexical variation and figurative expression. Through the close analysis of five selected poems—*Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*, *An Unknown Girl*, *The Country at My Shoulder*, *The Wedding*, and *Mermaid*—the research revealed that Alvi's poetic voice is situated within a complex diasporic consciousness that oscillates between belonging and alienation, heritage and modernity, visibility and marginalization.

The research concludes that the poetry of Alvi graphically portrays the fractured self of the diasporic subject, particularly the South Asian woman navigating multiple cultural worlds. Through the repetition of themes such as exile, yearning, gendered expectation, and emotive displacement, she develops a resonant description of the postcolonial state. These themes are not only conveyed through content but also symbolically embedded in her poetic structure and language. Alvi's use of metaphor and metonymy—like the disappearing henna, the nation on her shoulder, or the picture of the captive mermaid—formulates the elusive experiences of longing, absence, and psychological weight.

Moreover, it was found that Alvi's choice of words is especially important in defining hybrid identity. The application of culturally specific words, symbolic terms, and bilingual expressions cumulatively forms an unparalleled verbal texture that mirrors the poet's in-between condition. Her variation of lexis is not redundant but rather a deliberate stylistic and ideological tool confirming yet problematizing cultural identity. This fusion of language and cultural imagery places Alvi's work firmly within the realm of postcolonial feminist poetics, where language becomes a medium of both memory and resistance.

In conclusion, Moniza Alvi's poetry offers a profound and nuanced exploration of diasporic identity through its thematic depth and stylistic hybridity. Her work challenges monolithic notions of nationality and culture, instead proposing a layered understanding of identity as evolving, intersectional, and often fractured. The study contributes to broader discourses on postcolonial literature, diasporic writing, and gendered subjectivity, and it affirms Alvi's place as a significant poetic voice in contemporary British and South Asian literary landscapes.

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