

”presents from my
aunts in pakistan”
and ”an unknown girl”
by moniza alvi essay
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In both poems 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' and 'An Unknown Girl' by Moniza Alvi, contrasts in cultures are heightened by the perspectives of the respective characters in the poems. In the case of both poems, the characters appear to have an insight into both cultures that they are part of but not sure which one for which they feel a connection. The two cultures explored are that of the western, generally more free and liberal culture, and that of the eastern, Asian part of the world, where freedom is not so openly encouraged and where women or suffer from prejudice from males and are considered to be less worthy. This can be seen in 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', where there are "sweeper-girls", not boys, or just sweepers. Since both characters in the poems are apparently female, there would seem to be more of diversity in cultures for them rather than males.

This conflict in cultures can be seen in 'Presents from my Aunt in Pakistan', when the girl's salwar kameez "didn't impress the schoolfriend", indicating that items that would be seen as valuable and appealing in one culture (the eastern one) would be seen in the same light as in another culture (the western culture). This difference is also highlighted as the poet, Moniza Alvi, is an English-Pakistani and probably also experiences these same feelings and encounters these incidents, where she finds her caught between cultures, just as the girl in the poem does.

In 'An Unknown Girl', the female character displays the difference in the cultures by pointing out "western perms" and "banners for Miss India" in the "evening bazaar". Both these concepts originate from the western world as cited by the former, and the banners indicating the western concept of

beauty contests, often based on superficial qualities and considered untraditional in a country like India, where the poem is set. This also illustrates the difference in the two cultures and how the west is generally more moderate and liberal than the east.

Clothing is another aspect of both cultures that differs vastly and this is highlighted in both poems. In 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', "candy-striped glass bangles" and "embossed slippers, gold and black, points curling" are seen as the typical fare of the eastern culture, items given to the narrator by her aunts who see their value from an eastern viewpoint, but are shunned usually by western culture due to their often colourful and vibrant appearance, as the western fashion sense appears to centre around slightly more mundane colour combinations. This can also be seen in 'An unknown girl', as the "Unknown Girl" who is "hennaing" the lady's hand observes the "satin-peach knee", referring to the colour of the clothing that is being worn by the "unknown girl". Also, the examples from both poems contain a high level of detail and description which may suggest that they lack enough knowledge of their Asian cultures to concisely describe items, something which is more evident in 'An unknown girl' as the narrator in that poem rarely mentions the specific name of a traditional Indian article.

References to Asian culture are also given in both poems, with the citation of a peacock, the national bird of India, seen in both. This reference gives an indication that both characters are indeed aware of their other cultural and religious influences, or their eastern culture. In 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', a "salwar kameez, peacock-blue" was sent to her. The fact that

the colour was described as the colour of the Indian national bird suggests that the girl in the poem still relates western articles with eastern adjectives, showing her connection with both cultures. The reference to peacocks is also seen in ' An unknown girl' where " a peacock spreads its lines", and more significantly, " I am clinging to these firm peacock lines". The latter suggests that the woman in poem is trying to cling to her culture through some eventually insignificant " dry brown lines" which she sees as a peacock. She does however, realise this, as in her view, " It will fade in a week", which shows that she knows her link to Indian culture will soon be gone with the lines on her hand.

A distancing from Asian culture can be seen in ' Present from my Aunts in Pakistan', which clearly outlines the separation the girl in the poem feels from her Asian background and culture. She finds that " each silken-satin top-was alien in the sitting room", indicating that she finds it difficult to be a part of her Asian culture whilst living in a western society. She realises that she could never be as lovely as those clothes", emphasising how she does not fit into the eastern culture and how one culture cannot be lived as the same time as another. A transition from one to the other is seen as the girl from ' Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" " wanted (her) parents' camel skin lamp" as she considers " the cruelty and the transformation from camel to shade". The camel could be representative of the eastern culture and the shade could represent the western culture. The fact that a transformation from camel to shade is desired suggests that the narrator prefers the western culture to the eastern one.

Further evidence of the gap in cultures is seen when western descriptions are given for eastern details and examples of this are found in both poems. In 'An Unknown Girl', the word "icing" is used to describe the process of hennaing which again shows an unfamiliarity with the eastern culture, possibly through being wholly changed whilst living in a more western culture. Also, in 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', a simile, "like stained-glass", is used to describe the eastern concept of art, again indicating the unfamiliarity of the eastern culture.

Both characters in the poems appear to be trying to find a common medium for them to be related to both cultures, with the girl in 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' who "often admired the mirror work", and the woman from 'An Unknown Girl' "clinging to these firm peacock lines" and "revealing soft as a snail trail" her only source of relation to the eastern culture. In the former quote, the word 'clinging' appears in the present participle, which may give evidence that her association with the eastern culture is only in the present, and not permanent, which gives a further sense of desperation. The fact that the girl in 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' only admired the mirror work, and did not wear the apparel, shows how she is not completely in favour of donning eastern items whilst situated in a western society, perhaps in fear of being seen as an outcast amongst her peers, who we find are important to her as she showed a salwar kameez which "didn't impress the school-friend". However, in 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan', there could be an unwanted connection with the eastern culture, as the girl's "costume clung to (her)". In this context, the word '

cling' could be interpreted negatively, which tells us that maybe she does not want to be associated with any other culture apart from the one that she is living in, the western one.

Perhaps another sign of the cultural differences which exist between countries in the eastern part of the world and the western part of the world are the aunts from 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' who "requested cardigans from Marks and Spencers", a distinctly British company which is probably held in high regard in Pakistan but would not be considered so in England itself as it is seen as normal, humdrum sort of clothing.

The two poems show the divergence of cultures between the two parts of the world. It consists of social differences, along with religious ones that culminate in an immeasurable contrast between the two parts of the world. These contrasts can be seen through the different channels which explore the contrasts, such as clothing and the disparity in tastes and desires. The difficulty of absorbing two cultural influences is also emphasised throughout both poems with a lack of knowledge of the eastern culture as well as a preference for the western one which further stresses that the characters are aware of the need for a firm cultural identity.