

# Identity and culture in presents from my aunts in pakistan essay

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IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN 'PRESENTS FROM MY AUNTS IN PAKISTAN' The poem, 'Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan', appears to be about a young girl, half English, half Pakistani, talking about clothes she received as presents from her aunts, who live in Pakistan. What the poem is really exploring, though, is the poet's views on Pakistani and English culture and how she fits into one, both or neither of these cultures. A society's culture is made up of many things such as the food we eat, the music we listen to and how we dance, as well as our traditions to name just a few, but clothing is also a very important part of a society's culture.

In this poem, the poet uses clothes as a symbol to represent both the Pakistani and British culture. I aim to examine the poet's use of imagery to express what she thinks, how she feels and what she really desires, as well as why she feels the way she does about her identity and culture. The poet uses images of clothing to express how she feels about both the Pakistani culture and British culture. She begins the poem by describing the presents she has received: "a salwar-kameez peacock-blue and another glistening like an orange split open. These vivid and colourful images are rich in connotations and appeal to several of our senses: the sense of sight, smell and taste. The first salwar-kameez refers to one of nature's most beautiful and majestic of all birds, the male peacock. This image gives the impression that the Pakistani culture is outwardly very showy, grand and beautiful in its richness and variety.

This idea is further developed through the image of the orange, as the colour of the orange appeals to our sense of sight. Orange is a warm and vibrant

colour that makes us think of warm, sunny days in summer. It gives not only the idea of warmth but also joyfulness. The image also appeals to the sense of smell.

You can almost smell the scent of the orange as the words are read and for many people the smell of an orange is very pleasant. The smell makes us imagine the taste of the orange's sweet flesh. These images give an overall impression of just how much the poet admires the richness of the Pakistani culture. She sees the culture as rich, joyful, vibrant and beautiful. At the same time, she recognises that not everyone sees the Pakistani culture the way she does. Her "salwar kameez didn't impress the schoolfriend" who "asked to see" her "weekend clothes". Clearly, the poet's view of Pakistan is personal to her. The clothes, symbolic of Pakistani culture, meant nothing to her friend.

Despite the poet's admiration for the Pakistani culture, however, we are told that what she really desires is the British culture; she "longed for denim and corduroy." This appears odd considering the wonderful imagery she uses to describe the Pakistani culture. After all, neither denim nor corduroy is described using the richness of imagery used for the Pakistani clothing. Indeed, in sharp contrast, the way they are presented is quite dull and boring with no exotic imagery. However, the denim and corduroy, whilst not presented as beautifully rich and vibrant, they still carry deep and interesting connotations which express her view of the British culture. Both these fabrics are known to be warm to wear, hard wearing and practical, down-to-earth,

rather than showy garments, which are suitable to be worn for most everyday practical pursuits.

It suggests that whilst she may admire the Pakistani culture, she views the British way of life as more practical, down-to-earth and more suitable to everyday living. Indeed, the lifestyle she herself longs for. Although, she longs to be wholly a part of the British culture, the poem suggests she is being prevented from doing so, always being pulled back into the Pakistani culture and the people she holds responsible for not allowing her to fly free to seek her own place in the world are her aunts from Pakistan. This idea is conveyed through the images of the presents which they keep buying for her, namely, the salwar-kameez which she says is her “costume” and it “clung” to her and she “was aflame” and “couldn’t rise up out of its fire. This image alludes to the mythical phoenix which burned in its own nest of cinnamon twigs and rose from the ashes renewed, but the poet, unlike the phoenix, is burned by the clothes and cannot rise from its ashes. She is trapped in the Pakistani culture, no matter how hard she tries to escape. The idea of burning suggests the pain she is suffering as a result because she is not comfortable in the Pakistani culture just as she is uncomfortable in the Pakistani clothes, which she says are “alien in the sitting-room” followed by she “could never be as lovely as those clothes”. It is not just the clothes which are out-of-place in the sitting room, she feels out of place in the clothes.

In other words, she is not comfortable in the Pakistani culture. She recognises that the two cultures do not mix well and she feels it is impossible

to be part of both, that she has to choose one over the other. The one she chooses is the British culture and yet she feels she cannot be a part of it and the one she rejects is the Pakistani culture but it will not let her go, indeed, her aunts will not let her go. We are told her aunts “ requested cardigans from Marks and Spencer”. Marks and Spencer are quintessentially British and have become a British institution known for making quality products. The poet is using Marks and Spencer as a symbol for the British culture.

This suggests that even her aunts recognise the benefits of the British culture for women, they too desire what the poet desires, but still they play a part in preventing her from embracing the British culture as she wishes to do. The confusion of this situation in which the poet has found herself has left the poet feeling like she has no fixed identity she can call her own. Her identity is broken into tiny pieces like the “ mirror-work” in which she “ tried to glimpse” herself. When she looks in the mirrors she can see only parts of herself broken into tiny little pieces, which is a poignant image of how she feels about her own identity.

This idea of having no fixed identity is reiterated in the final stanza of the poem when the poet tells us she was in Pakistan and “ of no fixed nationality, staring through fretwork at the Shalimar Gardens”. Clearly she feels isolated from the Pakistani culture with the fretwork acting as a symbolic barrier between herself and where her family feel she belongs. Her isolation from both cultures is further expressed in the images of the three of them when they “ sailed to England”. She says that “ prickly heat had me screaming on the way. I ended up in a cot in my English grandmother’s

dining room. ” This image suggests a rebirth since we think of babies crying when they first come out of the mother’s womb and they are then placed in a cot. The poet seems to be telling us that the journey from Pakistan to England was her own symbolic rebirth, the point at which she became a different person.

The person she becomes is fragile like the “ tin boat” and she feels “ alone” because now she feels she is like no other because she is half English and half Pakistani, so she belongs nowhere. In fact, the poet, we are told is “ half-English. The fusion of east meets west , of English and Pakistani is symbolised by her “ parent’s camel-skin-lamp”.

The poet is the lamp. Traditionally light is associated with western civilisation. This comes from the ancient Greeks, who invented the Olympic Games and civilisation and even today the Olympic torch is carried from Greece to wherever the games are being held. The Olympic Games are seen as a civilised none violent way for human kind to compete without doing harm to another person. The camel is an animal common in the Middle East. The lamp therefore symbolises the poet because like the poet it is a fusion of east and west. When the poet switches on the lamp in her bedroom “ to consider the cruelty and the transformation” she is contemplating the cruelty and transformation she herself has gone through being brought from the Pakistan in the east to Britain in the West.

She is considering how that transformation has traumatised her resulting in her feelings of having no identity which she can call her own. At the same

time, however, she can “ marvel at the colours like stained glass”. In other words, she also recognises the beauty of being part of two different cultures. What we also need to explore, of course, is the reason why she feels alone and traumatised and why she feels she cannot accept the Pakistani culture. Clearly she sees something wonderful about this culture, so why does she have a problem with belonging to it? The clues can be found early on in the poem in the first stanza when she talks about the “ candy-striped glass bangles snapped, drew blood. ” On the one hand, the description of the bangles colour matches the idea of the colourful culture expressed through the clothes, but the image of the bangles fragility and the violent image of when they snapped and drew blood gives us reason to believe that despite the outward show of beauty, the Pakistani culture holds something dark and unpleasant underneath. In particular, women, who wear the bangles seem to be seriously affected by this darker side to the Pakistani culture. Blood is our life force.

If we lose too much blood we die. Therefore, the idea of women having their very life blood drained out of them by the Pakistani culture is very strong in this image. We learn more about the darker side of the Pakistani culture in the penultimate stanza when we learn that Pakistan was in “ conflict”, it is a “ fractured land”. Of course, on the one hand she is referring to the problems faced by Pakistan as a whole, but on the other hand, she is also referring to the split between men and women and how they are treated differently in Pakistan. Her aunts are visualised “ in shaded rooms, screened from male visitors”.

Women in Pakistan cannot be looked upon by men outside of their immediate family. Nor can women have careers like men. If they are married or their father is alive, the highlight of their day appears to be wrapping presents. The fact that it is women who live in this darker side of the Pakistani culture is suggested because it is the women who are in the shaded rooms and not the men. Women who do not have the good fortune to be married or have a father who is alive to support them can find themselves on the streets where the only way of surviving is as “ beggars” or “ sweeper-girls”. This shows that women in Pakistan have very limited options and, therefore, suggests the poet cannot come to terms with this.

She has seen what it is like for women in Britain, she has seen the opportunities open to them and that is the life she wants for herself so whilst she loves the Pakistani culture in many ways, she cannot embrace it and she knows that “ she can never be as lovely as those clothes”, the clothes which represent the Pakistani culture and lifestyle. In conclusion, therefore, ‘ Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan’ is a poem about one girl’s struggle to come to terms with her mixed nationality and her inability to find her own true identity as a girl attempting to live within two incompatible cultures. She desires one culture (English) and yet has another culture thrust upon her (Pakistani) despite not feeling comfortable with or able to embrace that culture fully. She shows admiration for the Pakistani culture in her description of the clothes and also her discomfort with that culture in her descriptions of herself wearing the clothes.



She recognises, however, that despite her desire for the English culture, she cannot fully embrace that either and so she is left in no man's land with no fixed identity.