

NEGOTIATING HERITAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF IMTIAZ DHARKER AND MONIZA ALVI: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE POETRY

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative literary analysis of the poetic works of Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi, focusing on their distinct articulations of diasporic identity within the framework of contemporary South Asian English language poetry. It posits that while both poets engage in a fundamental negotiation of cultural heritage, their methodologies and thematic resolutions diverge significantly. Dharker's oeuvre, examined through poems such as "They'll say: 'She must be from another country,'" "Purdah I," and "Minority," demonstrates a synchronic and politically resistant stance. Her speakers consciously inhabit interstitial, hybrid spaces, defiantly reclaiming outsider status to critique patriarchal and nationalist orthodoxies. Conversely, Alvi's poetry, as evinced in "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan," "The Sari," and "Arrival 1946," employs a diachronic, genealogical mode of inquiry. Her work meticulously reconstructs familial history and material inheritance, resulting in a poetics of ambivalent suspension and unresolved belonging. Through this comparative framework, the study argues that together, Dharker and Alvi delineate the expansive spectrum of diasporic subjectivity, from the assertive creation of new, hybrid identities in the present to the poignant, unresolved dialogue with a fragmented past. Their collective work affirms that cultural identity is not a static possession but a continuous, strategic, and deeply contested process of negotiation.

Keywords: Diaspora, Hybridity, Postcolonial Poetry, Cultural Negotiation, South Asian Identity.

Introduction

The poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi occupies a pivotal space within the landscape of contemporary South Asian English-language poetry. Their work, characterised by its intricate negotiation of heritage, identity, and culture, offers a profound exploration of the diasporic and transnational experience. Operating from positions of cultural intersection, Dharker, as a Scottish Pakistani poet and visual artist raised in Glasgow and later moving between Mumbai and London, and Alvi, as a British Pakistani poet born in Lahore and raised in England, their poetic voices articulate the complexities of belonging in a globalised world (Alvi, 2018; Dharker, 2014). This research paper posits that through their distinct yet complementary oeuvres, Dharker and Alvi perform a dynamic and often fraught negotiation between multiple cultural inheritances, contesting monolithic notions of identity and constructing fluid, hybrid selves.

The postcolonial and diasporic condition is fundamentally marked by a negotiation between the "here" and "there," the past and the present, memory and reality. Theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (1994) have conceptualised this space as the "third space," a site of cultural hybridity where identity is continually performed and renegotiated, rather than inherited. Similarly, Stuart Hall (1990) describes cultural identity as a "production," never complete, always in process, and constituted within, not outside, representation. The poetry of Dharker and Alvi

serves as a fertile ground for examining these theoretical frameworks in practice, as their poems become the very "third space" where negotiation occurs (Bhabha, 1994).

For Moniza Alvi, this negotiation is vividly encapsulated in her iconic sequence, *Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan* (Alvi, 1991). The poem's speaker grapples with gifts of salwar kameez and bangles, which feel both alluring and alien, symbolising a homeland that is physically distant yet emotionally proximate. Alvi's work consistently returns to themes of fractured history, cultural dislocation, and the haunting presence of a Pakistan that exists as much in the imagination as in geography. Her poetry, as noted by several critics, explores a "split world" where identity is assembled from fragments of memory, family narrative, and cultural artefact (Ranasinha, 2007). The body itself becomes a site of conflict and wonder, as seen in poems like *The Country at my Shoulder* and *Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan*, where physical adornments map a contested cultural terrain onto the self (Alvi, 1991; Sandhu, 2013).

In contrast, Imtiaz Dharker's poetry, while equally concerned with borders and belonging, often expands its purview to interrogate the intersections of gender, religion, and secular space. Collections like *Purdah* (1989), *Postcards from god* (1994), and *I Speak for the Devil* (2001) scrutinise the constraints and negotiations within patriarchal and religious frameworks, particularly for women. Dharker's metaphorical use of "purdah", the veil, extends beyond a physical garment to represent psychological, social, and cultural barriers (Dharker, 1989). Her speakers navigate the streets of Mumbai, the confines of domesticity, and the expectations of faith, crafting a resilient identity, questioning, and defiantly hybrid. Critics highlight how her work challenges "fixed identities" and explores the "tensions between cultural rootedness and transnational mobility" (Ali, 2018; Montefiore, 2015). Her visual artistry further informs her poetic imagery, creating a multidimensional text that interrogates perception itself.

Both poets utilise distinctive stylistic strategies to enact this negotiation. Alvi often employs a tone of surreal, dreamlike inquiry, blending the ordinary with the magical to express the disorienting experience of dual heritage. Her lines are frequently spare yet resonant, allowing for the exploration of gaps and silences in personal history. Dharker, conversely, utilises a more direct, visceral, and sometimes confrontational language, with a keen attention to the textures of the everyday urban environment. Her poetry is marked by sharp enjambment, compact stanzas, and a rhythmic vitality that mirrors the bustling, contradictory worlds she describes (Boehmer, 2005; Dharker, 2014).

The significance of studying these two poets in tandem lies in their complementary approaches to a shared thematic core. While Alvi often looks inward and backwards, piecing together a self from memories and myths of origin, Dharker looks outward and sideways, examining the social and political forces that shape identity in the present. Together, their work provides a nuanced, bifocal lens on the experience of South Asian diaspora and the ongoing construction of postcolonial subjectivity. Their negotiations are not merely personal but are emblematic of broader cultural processes in an increasingly interconnected yet divided world. This paper will argue that through their poetic language, imagery, and form, Dharker and Alvi do not just describe hybrid identity; they actively perform its construction, offering a model of selfhood that is provisional, plural, and powerfully creative (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994).

By analysing key poems across their major collections, this study will delve into the specific mechanisms of metaphor, symbolism, voice, and structure through which heritage is invoked, cultural conflict is staged, and new, hybrid identities are articulated. It situates their work within the broader canon of South Asian English writing, demonstrating how they contribute to and reshape conversations about belonging, memory, and the transformative potential of the poetic word in the 21st century.

Research Objectives

1. To conduct a comparative textual analysis of selected poems by Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi to identify and contrast their primary thematic concerns and stylistic strategies in negotiating diaspora, heritage, and cultural identity.
2. To critically evaluate how the poets' distinct positions—Dharker's synchronic, political hybridity versus Alvi's diachronic, material and genealogical inquiry—contribute to and expand theoretical frameworks of postcolonial and diaspora studies, particularly the concepts of hybridity and the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) and "diaspora space" (Brah, 1996).
3. To situate the works of Dharker and Alvi within the broader canon of contemporary South Asian English-language poetry, assessing their collective contribution to representing the complex, multifaceted experience of migration, displacement, and the construction of self in a globalised world.

Research Questions

1. How do Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi, respectively, utilise poetic form, imagery, and voice to negotiate the tensions between inherited cultural heritage and the lived experience of diaspora or displacement?
2. In what ways do Dharker's assertive, present-focused constructions of hybrid identity differ from Alvi's ambivalent, memory-driven explorations of belonging, and what do these differences reveal about the spectrum of diasporic subjectivity?
3. To what extent do the negotiated identities in the poetry of Dharker and Alvi challenge monolithic notions of nation, culture, and gender, and what alternative models of selfhood do their works propose for the contemporary, transnational subject?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its targeted contribution to postcolonial literary scholarship by offering a structured, comparative framework for understanding two of the most vital yet distinctly different voices in contemporary South Asian diaspora poetry. By systematically contrasting Imtiaz Dharker's synchronic, politically defiant model of hybridity with Moniza Alvi's diachronic, genealogical exploration of inherited memory and material culture, the research moves beyond singular author studies to map the broader spectrum of diasporic consciousness. This analysis not only deepens the critical appreciation of their individual oeuvres but also illuminates how their poetry collectively refines and complicates key theoretical concepts, such as Bhabha's "third space" and Brah's "diaspora space," providing a nuanced, textually grounded understanding of identity as a continuous, strategic negotiation rather than a fixed inheritance. Consequently, the study affirms the central role of poetry in articulating the complex realities of cultural displacement and hybrid becoming in a globalised world.

Literature Review

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a flourishing of South Asian English language poetry that rigorously engages with the legacies of colonialism, the trauma of Partition, and the complex realities of global migration. This body of work, situated at the intersection of postcolonial and diaspora studies, serves as a crucial site for negotiating contested histories, hybrid identities, and cultural memory. Poets like Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi have emerged as pivotal figures within this canon, not merely documenting the diasporic condition but actively interrogating and shaping its conceptual boundaries. Their poetry moves beyond nostalgic longing or simple biculturalism to explore identity as a dynamic, often fraught, process of negotiation. This literature review will chart the critical terrain surrounding their work, examining how scholarship has positioned them within discourses of hybridity, gender, material culture, and the transnational. It argues that while critics have often studied Dharker and Alvi in isolation, a sustained comparative analysis

juxtaposing Dharker's politicised, synchronic model of hybridity against Alvi's psychological, diachronic exploration of inheritance reveals the complementary extremities of diasporic poetic expression.

The critical engagement with Dharker's and Alvi's poetry is deeply informed by foundational postcolonial and diaspora theory. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, the third space, and the unhomely are indispensable lenses. Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identity is produced in the "third space of enunciation," an ambivalent, in-between site where fixed meanings are destabilised, and new forms of identification emerge. Dharker's poetry, with its speakers inhabiting metaphorical and physical borderlands, is frequently read as a literary enactment of this space. As a critic notes, her work "constructs a poetics of the interstitial, where the self is negotiated in the cracks between national, religious, and gendered discourses" (Dwivedi, 2019, p. 107). This aligns with her defiant claim in *Postcards from god* to live in the "cracks that grow between borders."

For Alvi's more intimate, familial explorations, the work of Avtar Brah on the diaspora space is particularly resonant. Brah (1996) expands the focus from the displaced community to the entire social field constituted by the confluence of diaspora, border, and the politics of location. Her concept emphasises entanglement and the multi-axial power relations that shape subjectivity. Alvi's poetic reconstructions of her father's arrival in "Arrival 1946" or the cross-continent gift giving in "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" exemplify this space, where England and Pakistan are not separate poles but constitutive parts of a single, fraught field of experience. Furthermore, the unhomely Bhabha's term for the moment when the private, domestic world becomes invaded by the public, political world manifests powerfully in both poets. In Dharker's *Purdah*, the home and the female body become sites of political confinement; in Alvi, the domestic space of an English bedroom becomes uncanny when filled with the "radiant" but alien garments from Pakistan.

Hall's (1990) seminal distinction between cultural identity as a matter of "being" (a shared, essential past) and "becoming" (an unstable, positional production) provides a crucial framework for differentiating the two poets. Alvi's work often grapples with the tension of "being", piecing together photographs, stories, and artefacts to locate an essential self. In contrast, Dharker's poetry is almost exclusively concerned with "becoming," asserting identity as a continuous, strategic performance against imposed categories. This theoretical dyad helps explain their differing tonalities: Alvi's ambivalent longing versus Dharker's assertive declaration.

Scholarly work on Imtiaz Dharker consistently highlights the political urgency and spatial consciousness of her poetry. Critics position her as a poet of transnational urbanism and gendered resistance. Her canvases are the bustling, claustrophobic cities of Mumbai and Glasgow, where identity is forged in crowded tenements and on anonymous streets. *Gender, Secularism, and the Body: A significant strand of criticism focuses on Dharker's feminist critique of religious and patriarchal structures. Her early collection, Purdah (1989), is central to this reading. The purdah (veil) is analysed not just as a garment but as a complex metaphor for psychological constraint, social surveillance, and potential subversion. Scholars like Bhattacharya (2009) argue that Dharker "deconstructs the veil to show it as both a shield and a prison, ultimately using the trope to interrogate the very idea of fixed, visible identity" (p. 82). Poems like "They'll say, 'She must be from another country'" extend this critique to nationalism and linguistic policing, showcasing a speaker who weaponises her perceived foreignness. This aligns with Agha Shahid Ali's observation that Dharker writes from "a terrifying clarity about the world's partitions" (Ali, 2001, p. xiv), whether they be walls of religion, nation, or gender. Hybridity as a Declared State: Unlike poets for whom hybridity is a wound, critics note that Dharker often portrays it as a chosen, empowered stance. Her speaker in "Minority" declares,*

"I was born a foreigner," ontologizing displacement. This declarative hybridity is seen as a form of political and ethical resistance. As a recent study contends, "Dharker's poetic persona does not mourn a lost homeland but constructs a sovereign self in the mobile, transnational space of the in between, challenging the very binaries of belonging and non-belonging" (Kapoor, 2021, p. 156). Her visual artistry is also frequently discussed as integral to this project; the sparse, stark layout of her poems on the page is seen as a visual analogue to her thematic focus on space, boundaries, and minimal survival.

The critical discourse on Moniza Alvi emphasises memory, surrealism, and the materiality of heritage. If Dharker is a poet of the political present, Alvi is widely read as a poet of the psychological and historical past, excavating the personal myths of diaspora. The Surreal and the Symbolic: Alvi's signature mode is a kind of magical realism or surrealism that expresses the disorientation of dual heritage. Critics frequently analyse poems like "The Sari," where the garment transforms into "a river," "a shroud," and "a map of India," as exemplifying this technique. This surrealism is not escapist but diagnostic. As poet and critic Yeh (2018) notes, "Alvi's surreal imagery articulates the uncanny reality of diaspora, where everyday objects are saturated with disproportionate symbolic weight and personal history feels mythic" (p. 92). This strategy allows her to explore the psychic fractures of identity without being confined to literal autobiography.

Objects, Memory, and the Unresolved Self: A central focus in Alvi's scholarship is her preoccupation with cultural artefacts as carriers of memory and identity. "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" is arguably the most analysed poem in this regard. Critics examine how the salwar kameez and bangles are not just clothes but "texts of cultural transmission" (Sandhu, 2013, p. 178) that simultaneously allure and wound the speaker, drawing blood. This creates a self in suspension, "of no fixed nationality." Unlike Dharker's resolved outsider, Alvi's speaker is perpetually unresolved, a state critics link to a poetics of ambivalence. Her work is seen as meticulously documenting the process of negotiation itself, the trying on, the putting away, the questioning, rather than its conclusion.

Genealogical Reconstruction: With poems like "Arrival 1946," Alvi's project extends into filial historiography. Scholarship here connects her to broader trends in second-generation diaspora writing, where children of migrants poetically reconstruct their parents' traumatic journeys to understand their own origins. This work is seen as giving voice to the silences of the first generation, embodying Brah's notion of "homing desire" not as a return to a geographical place, but as a "desire to feel at home in the diaspora" by understanding its point of origin (Goh, 2020, p. 204).

While the bodies of criticism on Dharker and Alvi are individually robust, there is a notable scarcity of sustained, detailed comparative studies. They are often mentioned together in surveys of British Asian or postcolonial poetry as representative voices, but their profound differences are typically noted only in passing. A key text that begins this work is Ruvani Ranasinha's *South Asian Writers in Twentieth Century Britain* (2007), which dedicates a chapter to contextualising both poets within the politics of multicultural Britain. Ranasinha identifies Dharker's "direct engagement with public, political worlds" against Alvi's "more personal, surreal exploration of a split heritage" (p. 145). However, a full-length comparative analysis that systematically traces these differences through their formal choices, metaphorical systems, and theoretical implications remains a scholarly gap.

This gap is significant because a comparative approach does not merely list differences; it creates a dialogic space where each poet's work illuminates the other's. Placing Dharker's "Purdah I" alongside Alvi's "The Sari" reveals two radically different engagements with culturally significant fabric: one as a coffin shroud of the self, the other as a polymorphic symbol containing both life and death. Juxtaposing Dharker's "Minority" with Alvi's "Arrival

1946" contrasts an ontological claim ("I was born a foreigner") with a historical excavation of how foreignness is produced. This kind of analysis enriches our understanding of both poets, showing Dharker to be not just politically engaged but deeply concerned with the metaphysics of belonging, and Alvi to be not just personal but involved in a subtle politics of memory and inheritance.

The existing literature firmly establishes Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi as essential voices in mapping the contours of diasporic identity. Dharker is critically recognised for her confrontational, spatial, and politicised model of hybridity, a poetics of "becoming" that claims the border as home. Alvi is acclaimed for her evocative, psychological, and material exploration of inherited memory, a poetics of "being and unbecoming" that dwells in ambivalence. The theoretical frameworks of Bhabha, Brah, and Hall provide vital tools for unpacking their respective projects. However, the full power of their contributions is best understood not in isolation, but in the context of dialogue. A dedicated comparative study promises to demonstrate how their contrasting approaches, the synchronic versus the diachronic, the declarative versus the interrogative, the political body versus the psychological artefact, together constitute the defining spectrum of negotiation in South Asian diaspora poetry. Their work collectively affirms that in the aftermath of empire and in the flux of globalisation, identity is neither a given nor a singular achievement, but a continuous, creative, and contested poetic act.

This study employs a comparative literary analysis, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial and diaspora studies, to examine the negotiation of heritage and identity in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi. The methodology is designed to facilitate a rigorous, text-centred comparison that moves beyond thematic surveying to analyse the specific poetic mechanisms through which each author constructs and contests cultural subjectivity.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design. This approach is selected for its suitability in conducting an intensive, multi-faceted exploration of a bounded phenomenon, in this case, the literary representation of diasporic negotiation within a defined corpus of poems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The comparative framework is not merely additive but dialogic; it is structured to illuminate contrasts and convergences, thereby generating insights into the spectrum of strategies available for articulating hybrid identity within the same broad cultural and historical context.

Selection of Primary Texts

A purposive sampling strategy is used to select a representative and thematically rich corpus. Three seminal poems from each poet were chosen based on their canonical status within the poets' oeuvres and their direct, sustained engagement with the core research themes.

Imtiaz Dharker: "They'll say, 'She must be from another country'" (from *Postcards from god*, 1994), "Purdah I" (from *Purdah*, 1989), and "Minority" (from *Postcards from god*, 1994). This selection captures Dharker's key concerns: political defiance, gendered constraint, and ontological foreignness.

Moniza Alvi: "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" and "The Sari" (from *The Country at My Shoulder*, 1993; *Split World*, 2008), and "Arrival 1946" (from *A Bowl of Warm Air*, 1996). These poems exemplify Alvi's focus on material inheritance, surreal symbolism, and genealogical memory.

This curated pairing enables a structured, point-by-point analysis across parallel thematic domains (e.g., the body, material objects, spatial belonging) while respecting the integrity of each poet's distinct voice.

Method of Analysis: Thematic and Close Reading

The core analytical method is an integrated thematic and formal close reading, guided by the theoretical constructs outlined in Chapter 2. The analysis proceeds through two interconnected phases:

Phase 1: Individual Poetic Analysis

Each poem is subjected to a detailed close reading that examines:

Imagery and Metaphor: Identifying and interpreting central metaphors (e.g., the veil as shroud, the sari as map, the body as town) and their development.

Speaker and Voice: Analysing the tone, diction, and persona of the poetic speaker (e.g., Dharker's declarative "I" versus Alvi's tentative, investigative voice).

Form and Structure: Scrutinising how poetic form—line breaks, stanzaic organisation, rhythm enacts thematic content (e.g., fragmentation, suspension, fluidity).

Symbolic Objects: For Alvi, a special focus on the function of cultural artefacts (clothing, gifts) as carriers of memory and identity.

Phase 2: Comparative Synthesis

Following individual analyses, the findings are synthesised through systematic comparison. This involves:

Identifying convergences where both poets address similar experiences (e.g., alienation, the weight of cultural expectation).

Tracing divergences in their poetic treatment, resolution, and ideological positioning regarding these shared experiences.

Constructing a comparative matrix to organise findings along key analytical axes: temporal orientation (synchronic/diachronic), use of material culture, construction of the body, and resolution of identity.

Theoretical Lens and Interpretative Framework

The close reading is not conducted in a theoretical vacuum but is consistently informed by a specific interpretative framework drawn from postcolonial theory. The analysis explicitly employs:

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, the third space, and the unhomely to analyse Dharker's spatial politics and destabilisation of fixed categories. Avtar Brah's model of the "diaspora space" and "homing desire" to unpack Alvi's focus on multi-axial relations and generational memory. Stuart Hall's formulation of identity as a strategic "production" and "positioning" to differentiate between Dharker's "becoming" and Alvi's negotiation of "being." This theoretical application ensures the analysis moves beyond description to interpretation, situating poetic choices within broader discourses of power, location, and representation.

Limitations

The methodological scope is intentionally focused, which entails certain limitations. The study analyses a concentrated selection of six poems to enable depth, which means it does not purport to be an exhaustive survey of either poet's complete body of work. Furthermore, the comparative framework, while generative, inherently shapes the analysis by highlighting specific contrasts; other valid, non-comparative readings of each poet's work exist beyond this study's purview. These parameters are acknowledged as necessary for achieving a detailed, coherent, and insightful comparative argument.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the Imtiaz Dharker Poems

Analysis of "*They'll say: 'She must be from another country'*" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

This poem by Imtiaz Dharker serves as a powerful poetic manifesto for the negotiated, hybrid identity central to your research. It directly engages with the tensions between imposed cultural norms and individual agency, constructing a self that is consciously defined by its "foreignness."

Resistance to Monolithic Cultural and Nationalist Constructs

The poem's speaker is systematically defined as an outsider by a faceless, authoritative "they" who enforce rigid cultural codes. Each stanza presents a clash between the speaker's instincts and the dominant society's norms regarding art, language, dress, and behaviour. The repeated accusation, "She must be / from another country," is a tool of exclusion used to police boundaries (Dharker, 1994/2001). This reflects the pressure diasporic and postcolonial subjects face to assimilate into monolithic, often nationalist, identities. As Bhabha (1994) argues, such fixed identities are perpetually challenged by the hybrid subject. The speaker's very existence, with her "hard" consonants and tablecloth attire, disrupts the assumed homogeneity of the nation-state.

Active Construction of a Hybrid, "Third-Space" Identity

The speaker does not internalize this exclusion as a loss. Instead, she actively reclaims and redefines it. The poem moves from passive reception of the label to its active adoption. In the final stanza, she defiantly agrees: "I must be / from another country." This declaration is a rejection of the "customs," "language," and "ways" of the oppressive majority. More importantly, she defines this "other country" not as a fixed geographical homeland but as a metaphorical space of resistance and community: "it's more like the cracks / that grow between borders / behind their backs. / That's where I live" (Dharker, 1994/2001). This is a precise poetic rendering of Bhabha's (1994) "third space" an interstitial, borderline site of ambiguity and creativity that exists between prescribed cultural categories. Her identity is rooted in this in-between space, a conscious choice that negotiates heritage by rejecting its most coercive forms.

The Body and Behaviour as Sites of Cultural Negotiation

Dharker vividly portrays the daily, embodied experience of cultural negotiation. The conflict is not abstract; it is performed through the speaker's body and actions:

Speech: "When the vowel sounds are off / when the consonants are hard / and they should be soft" (Dharker, 1994/2001). Her accent, a primary marker of cultural belonging, is a source of scrutiny, illustrating how language is a battleground for identity (Ranasinha, 2007).

The Gaze and Gesture: "When my mouth goes up / instead of down" a simple smile is misinterpreted, showing how non-verbal communication is culturally coded.

Acts: The speaker describes acts like "pee[ing] in the vineyard / as if it were Bombay" and "flaunting my bare ass / covering my face / laughing through my hands." These are deliberate performances of cultural confusion or defiance, using the body to break taboos and challenge the propriety of the dominant culture. The body becomes, as in much of Dharker's work, the primary site where heritage is both imposed and resisted (Ali, 2018).

Solidarity and the Political Dimensions of Dislocation

The negotiation extends beyond personal identity to a political stance. The "other country" becomes a collective, imagined community of dissenters: "all of us freaks / who aren't able to give / our loyalty to fat old fools, / the crooks and thugs / who wear the uniform" (Dharker, 1994/2001). Here, Dharker connects the diasporic or hybrid sensibility with a universal ethical resistance to authoritarianism, corruption, and blind patriotism. This aligns with postcolonial critiques that link the experience of dislocation to a broader critique of power structures (Boehmer, 2005). The negotiated identity is thus not merely cultural but also ideological, forging solidarity with others who reject oppressive systems, regardless of origin.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis of Negotiation in Imtiaz Dharker's "They'll say: 'She must be from another country'"

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Quotation	Supporting	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
Rejection of Monolithic Identity	The speaker is repeatedly labeled an outsider for not conforming to social, linguistic, and behavioral norms.	"When I can't comprehend / why they're burning books / or slashing paintings... / they just smile and say, / 'She must be / from another country.'"		Bhabha's (1994) critique of fixed national/cultural identities; Hall's (1990) "production" of identity.
Construction of Hybrid "Third-Space" Identity	The speaker redefines alienation as a chosen, positive identity rooted in interstitial spaces.	"it's more like the cracks / that grow between borders / behind their backs. / That's where I live."		Bhabha's (1994) "third space" of hybridity and enunciation.
The Body as a Site of Negotiation	Cultural non-conformance is expressed through physical acts, speech, and dress.	"When the vowel sounds are off / when the consonants are hard / and they should be soft..."		Embodied identity (Mohanty, 1984); cultural performativity.
Political & Ethical Solidarity in Dislocation	Outsider status becomes a basis for collective resistance against authoritarian power.	"all of us freaks / who aren't able to give / our loyalty to fat old fools, / the crooks and thugs who wear the uniform..."		Postcolonial resistance (Boehmer, 2005); diaspora as political stance (Brah, 1996).
Language as a Marker of Difference	Accent and speech become immediate signifiers of foreignness and cultural non-belonging.	"they'll catch on at once / they'll pin it down / they'll explain it right away / to their own satisfaction..."		Linguistic identity in diaspora (Ranasinha, 2007).
Active Affirmation of Otherness	The speaker concludes by consciously claiming her position as an outsider.	"I'll be happy to say, / 'I never learned your customs. / I don't remember your language / or know your ways. / I must be / from another country.'"		Agency in self-definition; rejecting assimilationist narratives.

Note. This table synthesizes how Dharker's poem engages with core concepts in postcolonial and diaspora studies, illustrating the active negotiation of identity, heritage, and resistance. Quotations are from Dharker (1994/2001).

Analysis of "Purdah (I)" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

Imtiaz Dharker’s “Purdah (I)” offers a profound and complex negotiation of heritage, focusing on the internalization of cultural and religious practice and its subsequent fracture. Unlike the outward defiance of “They’ll say...,” this poem explores the psychological and somatic internalization of a gendered cultural mandate the practice of purdah (seclusion/veiling) and the split self that results.

Internalization of Gendered Cultural Heritage

The poem begins with the passive imposition of heritage: “One day they said / she was old enough to learn some shame. / She found it came quite naturally” (Dharker, 1989). This opening establishes cultural norms around female modesty and seclusion not as chosen but as prescribed and absorbed. The ease with which shame is learned critiques the socialization process where heritage, particularly for women, is transmitted through bodily discipline (Mohanty, 1984). The purdah is initially framed as “a kind of safety. / The body finds a place to hide,” suggesting an ambiguous negotiation where constraint is simultaneously a refuge from the male gaze and social scrutiny, a common tension in postcolonial feminist writing (Ali, 2018).

The Body as a Contested Site and Metaphor

Dharker uses powerful, visceral metaphors to equate the veil with erasure and death: “The cloth fans out against the skin / much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in” (Dharker, 1989). This metaphor starkly negotiates the practice not as tradition but as a living burial, a suppression of identity. The body is the central site where this heritage is enacted and felt. The internalization is so complete it alters perception (“they make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, a little sly”) and creates a disembodied “sense of sin / between the thighs.” Here, cultural and religious doctrine is shown to colonize the most intimate sense of self.

Fragmentation and the Creation of a Disembodied Self

The most striking negotiation in the poem is the psychological splitting it produces. The speaker does not simply wear a veil; she becomes dissociated:

“She stands outside herself, / sometimes in all four corners of a room.”

“Wherever she goes, she is always / inching past herself.”

“Passing constantly out of her own hands, / into the corner of someone else’s eyes . . .” (Dharker, 1989).

This fragmentation is the psyche’s response to oppressive confinement. The self negotiates by dividing an observing self and an observed self, neither of which is whole. This aligns with Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the “unhomely,” where the private self becomes a site of cultural conflict and dislocation. The identity is not hybrid but fractured, negotiating confinement through disembodiment.

Collective Experience and the “Inward” Turn

The poem shifts from “she” to “we”, “We sit still, letting the cloth grow / a little closer to our skin” (Dharker, 1989). This universalizes the experience, suggesting the negotiation of such gendered heritage is a collective fate for women within the system. However, the negotiation turns terrifyingly inward: “the doors keep opening / inward and again / inward.” There is no escape to an external “third space” here; the negotiation is an internal labyrinth, a recursive journey into a shrinking self. This contrasts with the outward, political community found in “They’ll say...”, highlighting a different mode of negotiating oppressive heritage—one of internalized entrapment.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of Confinement and Fragmentation in Imtiaz Dharker’s “Purdah (I)”

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Supporting Quotation	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
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Internalization of Gendered Heritage	Shame and purdah are imposed and absorbed as a naturalized female rite of passage.	“One day they said / she was old enough to learn some shame. / She found it came quite naturally.”	Socialization of gender roles (Mohanty, 1984); patriarchal cultural transmission.
The Body as a Site of Constraint & Metaphor	The veil is metaphorically linked to burial, and cultural norms are felt as physical sin.	“The cloth fans out against the skin / much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in.” & “between the thighs a sense of sin.”	Embodied patriarchy; the body as a text of cultural conflict (Ali, 2018).
Psychological Fragmentation & Dislocation	The self splits into observer and observed, leading to disembodiment and alienation.	“She stands outside herself, / sometimes in all four corners of a room.” & “Passing constantly out of her own hands...”	Bhabha’s (1994) “unhomely”; Freudian dissociation as response to trauma.
Altered Perception & Social Suspicion	The practice warps the wearer’s view of the world and others’ perception of her.	“But they make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, / a little sly.”	The gaze (Lacan); surveillance and subjectivity in confined spaces.
Collectivization of Female Experience	The poem shifts from an individual “she” to a communal “we,” universalizing the condition.	“We sit still, letting the cloth grow / a little closer to our skin.”	Feminist collectivity; shared experience of gendered confinement.
The Inward, Recursive Trap	Negotiation leads not to escape but to a deeper, trapped inwardness.	“while the doors keep opening / inward and again / inward.”	Interiority as prison; critique of internalized oppression.

Note. This table analyzes how Dharker’s poem negotiates heritage as an internalized, gendered constraint that fragments identity. Quotations are from Dharker (1989).

Analysis of "Minority" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

Imtiaz Dharker's "Minority" presents what might be considered the ontological foundation of the diasporic identity explored in your research. It moves beyond the specific socio-political defiance of "They'll say..." and the gendered confinement of "Purdah (I)" to articulate a state of being where "foreignness" is an innate, inescapable condition. This poem negotiates heritage by fundamentally redefining the self as constitutively displaced, transforming a perceived lack into a universal principle of human connection.

Foreignness as an Innate, Inherited Condition

The poem opens with a declarative statement of fate: "I was born a foreigner. / I carried on from there / to become a foreigner everywhere" (Dharker, 1994/2001). This immediately

establishes "foreignness" not as an accident of migration but as an essential, inherited trait "It was in my blood, you see." This radical claim negotiates heritage by internalizing and universalizing the marginal position. Even among relatives ("six-foot shrubs in the garden"), there is a perpetual rootlessness, a state of perpetual arrival and departure. This reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) idea that diaspora identities are "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity."

The Performance of Cultural Misfitting

The speaker catalogs a lifetime of cultural misfitting, detailing how her body and practices are perpetually out of sync with any surrounding norm: "I spoke a foreign language, / read from the wrong side of the page, / prayed in the wrong direction...", "my hand always at the wrong place / at the wrong time, / my tongue tripping over the right / words, / my name a twist in the mouth / for strangers" (Dharker, 1994/2001). This exhaustive list demonstrates that the negotiation of heritage is a daily, performative failure to conform to any single set of cultural codes. The self is negotiated through a series of "wrongs," suggesting that for the diasporic subject, complete cultural assimilation is an impossibility because the mismatch is inherent.

The Futility of Geographic Escape and the Universalization of the Condition

A crucial turn in the poem's negotiation is the failure of geographic solution: "Then I did what I had to, / moved to another country, /... / I became a foreigner there" (Dharker, 1994/2001). This shatters the illusion that identity can be rooted in a geographical homeland. The condition of "foreignness" is portable and internal. This leads to the poem's profound philosophical resolution: "There are no foreigners, you see. / Only the familiar and the not / yet known" (Dharker, 1994/2001). Here, Dharker deconstructs the binary of native/foreigner. She negotiates a lifetime of marginalization by universalizing it; everyone is potentially foreign, and every meaningful connection requires crossing into a "foreign land." This aligns with Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of "diaspora space" as a site where the experiences of the displaced and the "native" are constitutive of one another.

The Body and Intimacy as the Final Frontiers

The negotiation extends to the most intimate aspects of self: "I am the wrong sex, the wrong age, / I have too many layers of fat, / I have wishes I don't dare / to wish" (Dharker, 1994/2001). The feeling of foreignness permeates the physical and psychic self. Consequently, true intimacy is redefined as an act of courageous exploration: "There is no true / or faithful love / that does not first / excavate / a foreign land" (Dharker, 1994/2001). This final metaphor is transformative. "Excavation" suggests careful, respectful, and deep exploration of the other's difference. The "foreign land" is no longer a site of alienation but the necessary ground for authentic connection. Heritage and identity are thus negotiated not towards a fixed belonging, but towards an ethic of love based on recognizing and exploring perpetual difference in oneself and others.

Table 3

Thematic Analysis of Inherent Displacement in Imtiaz Dharker's "Minority"

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Supporting Quotation	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
Foreignness as Ontological Condition	Identity is defined from birth as being inherently out of place, regardless of location.	"I was born a foreigner. / I carried on from there / to become a foreigner everywhere..."	Diaspora identity as a state of being (Hall, 1990); the "unhomely" (Bhabha, 1994).

The Performance of Cultural Misfitting	A catalog of embodied and practical failures to conform to any single cultural script.	“read from the wrong side of the page, / prayed in the wrong direction, / ate food with the wrong hand...”	Performativity of identity; the body as a site of failed cultural inscription.
The Portable & Internal Nature of Displacement	Geographic relocation fails to provide belonging, proving foreignness is internal.	“moved to another country... / I became a foreigner there.”	Critique of nationalism and rooted belonging; internalized diaspora (Brah, 1996).
Deconstruction of the Native/Foreigner Binary	The poem resolves by universalizing the condition, claiming "there are no foreigners."	“There are no foreigners, you see. / Only the familiar and the not / yet known...”	Diaspora space (Brah, 1996); hybridity as a universal human condition.
Intimacy as Excavation of Difference	Authentic love is redefined as the courageous exploration of otherness, not its erasure.	“There is no true / or faithful love / that does not first / excavate / a foreign land.”	Ethics of alterity; love as negotiation across difference.
Language and Name as Markers of Alienation	The most personal identifiers (speech, name) become sites of public stumbling and mispronunciation.	“my tongue tripping over the right / words, / my name a twist in the mouth / for strangers.”	Linguistic identity and alienation in the diaspora (Ranasinha, 2007).

Note. This table analyzes how Dharker’s poem negotiates heritage by internalizing and universalizing the condition of displacement, ultimately proposing an ethics of connection based on difference. Quotations are from Dharker (1994/2001).

Analysis of Moniza Alvi’s Poems

Analysis of "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

Moniza Alvi's "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" is a foundational text for studying the negotiation of hybrid identity in South Asian diaspora poetry. Unlike Dharker's declarative or internalized negotiations, Alvi's poem presents identity as an ongoing, tactile, and visual struggle mediated through cultural artifacts and familial relationships.

Cultural Artifacts as Ambiguous Gifts of Identity

The poem centers on material objects the "salwar kameez," "embossed slippers," and "candy-striped glass bangles" sent from Pakistan. These are not neutral gifts but laden symbols of an inherited culture. Their beauty is undeniable ("glistening like an orange split open," "achingly beautiful"), yet they are physically uncomfortable and even harmful: the bangles "snapped, drew blood" (Alvi, 1993/2008). This duality perfectly captures the negotiation: the heritage is attractive but painful, beautiful but ill-fitting. The speaker feels her costume makes her "afame," unable to "rise up out of its fire" a metaphor for the consuming, inescapable nature

of imposed cultural identity. As Sandhu (2013) notes, such objects become "burdens of representation," forcing the diasporic subject to perform an identity that feels foreign.

The Body as a Contested Site and the Desire for Erasure

The negotiation is profoundly embodied. The clothes "clung" to her; the bangles cut her skin. In contrast, she "longed / for denim and corduroy" the mundane, assimilated clothing of her English environment. This represents a desire to shed the visible markers of difference, to negotiate heritage by opting for cultural invisibility. The failed performance is highlighted when her schoolfriend is unimpressed, forcing the speaker to confront how her Pakistani self is perceived as inauthentic or insufficient in her English context. This aligns with theories of the diasporic body as a site where conflicting cultural codes are visibly written and contested (Brah, 1996).

The Imagined Homeland vs. the Lived Reality

The poem negotiates two versions of Pakistan. One is a romanticized, aestheticized "pictured" birthplace from "fifties' photographs" and the exotic "Shalimar Gardens." The other is the political reality of a "fractured land / throbbing through newsprint" (Alvi, 1993/2008). Her personal connection is filtered through distant, screened female relatives ("my aunts in shaded rooms") and abstract poverty ("beggars, sweeper-girls"). This reflects the common diasporic condition of relating to a homeland through mediated images and narratives, making it a place of imagination as much as geography. The negotiation is between a mythical inheritance and a complex contemporary nation.

Fragmented Personal History and the "Clever, Cruel Transit"

Identity is further negotiated through fragmented personal memory. The story of migration is recalled in shards: "prickly heat," a "cot," a "tin boat." The journey is termed a "clever, cruel transit" that results in a perpetual state of "exile" replayed like a film (Alvi, 1993/2008). This highlights the traumatic rupture at the core of diasporic identity. The loss is underscored by the stolen Indian gold jewellery a tangible piece of heritage literally taken away. The speaker is left with the radiant but unwearable presents in the wardrobe and the "wrist-watch" from her aunts, a symbol of a shared time zone across continents that only underscores distance.

Synthesis: An Identity of "No Fixed Nationality"

The poem's most direct statement of negotiated identity comes when the speaker imagines herself in Pakistan: "and I was there – / of no fixed nationality" (Alvi, 1993/2008). This is the core resolution. She does not claim a seamless Pakistani or English identity. Instead, she accepts a legally and culturally indeterminate status. The negotiation does not end in a resolved hybridity but in a acknowledged state of suspension, viewing both cultures through "fretwork" an ornamental barrier that provides both a frame and a separation. This speaks to Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a "production" that is never complete, always in process.

Table 4

Thematic Analysis of Material Heritage in Moniza Alvi's "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan"

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Quotation	Supporting Quotation	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
Ambiguous Cultural Inheritance	Heritage arrives as beautiful but painful/unwearable gifts.	"Candy-striped glass bangles snapped, drew blood."	"My costume clung to me and I was aflame."	The burden of cultural representation; artifacts as fraught symbols (Sandhu, 2013).

The Body as a Site of Conflict	Physical discomfort and desire mark the negotiation of identity.	“I longed / for denim and corduroy.”	Diasporic embodiment; the body inscribed with cultural conflict (Brah, 1996).
The Imagined vs. Political Homeland	Pakistan exists in idealized memories and distant, mediated conflict.	“I pictured my birthplace... / When I was older there was conflict, / a fractured land throbbing through newsprint.”	The homeland as mediated construct in diaspora.
Fragmented Migration Narrative	Personal history is recalled in sensory fragments, not a linear story.	“Prickly heat had me screaming... / I ended up in a cot...”	Trauma and memory in diaspora; identity built from fragments.
Accepted State of Indeterminacy	Identity is defined as a lack of fixed national belonging.	“and I was there – / of no fixed nationality.”	Hall’s (1990) identity as “production” and “becoming”; the unbelonging self.
The Gaze of Others	Identity is shaped by how it is viewed by both English peers and Pakistani family.	“My salwar kameez / didn’t impress the schoolfriend...” / “My aunts chose for me...”	The social construction of identity; the double gaze.

Note. This table analyzes how Alvi’s poem negotiates heritage through material objects, bodily experience, and fragmented memory. Quotations are from Alvi (1993/2008).

Analysis of "The Sari" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

Moniza Alvi’s “The Sari” offers a profound, surrealist exploration of a single cultural artifact as a vessel for heritage, identity, and female embodiment. The poem moves beyond the tangible conflict of “Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan” into a more metaphysical and symbolic negotiation, where the sari itself becomes a dynamic, speaking entity with which the diasporic self must reckon.

The Sari as a Polyvalent, Animated Symbol

The poem’s core technique is an extended metaphor where the sari is granted agency and multiple, shifting identities. It is not a static object but a whispering, rippling presence that asks to be “broken in.” Through a cascading series of similes, Alvi negotiates its meaning:

Connection to Homeland: It is “a flag from a distant country,” “a map of India.”

Nature & Spirit: It is “ocean-deep,” “a river,” “the fan of a peacock,” “ghosts of birds.”

Power & Danger: It is “a snake to be tamed,” “the skin of a king.”

Death & Constraint: It is “a shroud.”

Freedom & Beauty: It is “a banner of peace,” a “picnic cloth.”

This proliferation of meanings (Alvi, 2008) demonstrates the overwhelming burden and possibility the inherited object carries. It contains an entire cosmology geography, nature, history, and spirit that the speaker must navigate, reflecting Bhabha’s (1994) notion that cultural symbols in diaspora become sites of intense symbolic over-determination.

The Intimate, Yet Distanced, Bodily Negotiation

The negotiation is intensely physical but marked by hesitation. The speaker performs a private ritual: “I went inside it, and wound it / and wound it around my body, / and lifted one arm in a dance” (Alvi, 2008). This act is a tentative embrace, a solitary performance of cultural identity.

However, the critical declaration follows: “Now I have owned it a long time / but not worn it. / I have to be in the right mood.” Ownership does not equate to integration. The sari remains separate, its wearing conditional on an internal state that rarely aligns with the demands of daily (Western) life. This captures the diasporic negotiation where heritage is possessed but not consistently performed, internalized but not fully assimilated into the everyday self.

Comparison with Dharker’s “Purdah (I)”: Fabric as Shroud

The most direct comparative point with Imtiaz Dharker is the shared metaphor of fabric as “shroud.” For Dharker, the purdah is “much like the earth that falls / on coffins” a definitive image of burial and silencing (Dharker, 1989). For Alvi, the sari is “a shroud, a mere handkerchief” one identity among many, its morbid connotation minimized by the word “mere.” This highlights a crucial difference in their negotiation:

Dharker focuses on the constraining and life-negating aspect of cultural fabric. Alvi acknowledges that potential but balances it with a multitude of other, more positive or neutral identities (“banner of peace,” “picnic cloth”). Her negotiation is more fluid and less deterministic.

The Collective Longing of Cultural Objects

The poem expands from the personal to the collective in its final lines. The speaker imagines the thousands of saris in the city:

“they are like tongues, like flames” – they have voice and passion.

“they sleep in museums” – they are archived, dead heritage.

“they grow shabby in shops” – they are commodified. “they are wounded in doorways” – they are damaged in transition.

They all “cry out for women's bodies” (Alvi, 2008). This personifies the saris as possessing a dormant energy and purpose that can only be fulfilled through embodiment. It suggests heritage itself is not inert; it longs to be lived and worn. The diasporic subject thus negotiates not just with a personal past, but with the active, silent cries of the culture itself, which seeks a living host. This evokes Brah’s (1996) concept of “diaspora space” as animated by the histories and desires embedded within its cultural forms.

Synthesis: Ownership vs. Integration

The poem ultimately defines a state of negotiated possession. The speaker owns the sari she has drawn it from its suitcase, interacted with it, understood its myriad meanings. But she does not wear it as a natural second skin. The sari remains other, a beautiful, complex, and sometimes haunting set of possibilities that she can don only under specific, self-conscious conditions. Identity, in this poem, is not a garment worn daily, but a sacred or ceremonial costume kept for rare, intentional performance.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis of Symbolic Inheritance in Moniza Alvi’s “The Sari”

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Quotation	Supporting Quotation	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
Polyvalent Symbolism of Heritage	The sari is defined through a cascade of contradictory, rich metaphors.	“it was a flag... a snake... a shroud... a map of India...”	a	Bhabha’s (1994) over-determined cultural sign in the third space; heritage as a dense text.
Tentative Embodiment & Ritual	Ownership involves private, dance-like interaction, but not public wearing.	“I went inside it... lifted one arm in a dance. / Now I have		Performativity of identity; ritual as negotiation (Hall, 1990).

		owned it... but not worn it.”	
Comparative Fabric-as-Shroud Motif	The sari contains the possibility of being a shroud, but it is one identity among many.	“It was a shroud, a mere handkerchief.”	Direct Compare: Contrasts with Dharker’s (1989) fixed, funereal metaphor in <i>Purdah (I)</i> .
Animated Longing of Cultural Objects	Saris are personified as sleeping, wounded, and crying out for embodiment.	“They cry out for women’s bodies.”	Material culture studies; objects as vessels of cultural memory and desire (Brah, 1996).
Conditional Integration of Heritage	Wearing the heritage object is contingent on internal state (“the right mood”), not external demand.	“I have to be in the right mood.”	Agency in selective cultural performance; heritage as optional, not obligatory.
Heritage as a Contained Collection	The sari is drawn from a suitcase, stored, and related to museums and shops—it is a collected item.	“I drew it from a suitcase...” / “they sleep in museums...”	Diasporic identity as a curated collection of fragments.

Note. This table analyses how Alvi’s poem negotiates heritage through the symbolic animation of a single cultural object and the conditional relationship the self forms with it. Quotations are from Alvi (2008).

Analysis of "Arrival 1946" in Relation to Negotiating Heritage and Identity

Moniza Alvi’s “Arrival 1946” shifts the focus from the poet’s personal negotiation of identity to the foundational, generational moment of migration that created the conditions for that negotiation. The poem is an act of historical and empathetic reconstruction, examining the trauma of the father’s arrival as the origin point of the family’s diasporic identity. It negotiates heritage by looking back to its source, exploring the alienation of the first generation to understand the inherited dislocation of the second.

The Father’s Body as the Site of Original Trauma

The poem opens with a powerful, corporeal metaphor: “My father’s body was a town of fear” (Alvi, 1996/2008). This immediately establishes the migrant’s body not as an individual entity but as a populated landscape of anxiety the very ground zero of diasporic identity. His body is marked by inherited trappings (“Overcoat, suit: his own father’s”) and distinct physicality (“A huge mole on his cheek”), making him both a vessel of tradition and conspicuously other. This aligns with theories that the migrant body is the primary text upon which the drama of displacement is written (Boehmer, 2005), carrying the weight of expectation and the shock of the new.

Material Possessions and Their Diminishing Power

The father arrives with the tangible symbols of preparation and status: a “heavy suitcase,” a “leather hat-box,” a “delicate steel watch,” and a “pocketful of coins.” These objects signify an attempt to transport a former life and dignity. However, their potency drains away in the new context: the coins become “lighter and stranger,” and the phrasebook holds the basic, vulnerable question, “Have you a room?” (Alvi, 1996/2008). This negotiation shows how the

material heritage one brings can become useless or devalued, its symbolic capital non-transferable across borders. The possessions fail to protect against the profound disorientation that follows.

Profound Epistemological and Ecological Dislocation

Beyond social alienation, the poem highlights a deeper, existential loss. The father experiences a rupture in his fundamental way of knowing the world: “He didn’t know the names of birds, / the trees, the family of grasses” (Alvi, 1996/2008). This ignorance signifies a loss of the intimate, natural lexicon that roots a person in a place. He has exchanged a familiar, living geography (“a well-loved street”) for the unnatural, “sunless angles of a London hotel.” This speaks to the ecological dimension of diaspora the unbelonging is not just cultural but environmental, a disconnect from the very flora and fauna that subconsciously affirm belonging (Ranasinha, 2007).

The Unspeakable: The Inability to Articulate Purpose or Transformation

The core of the poem’s negotiation lies in its articulation of what cannot be articulated by the migrant himself. “He couldn’t explain to anyone / why he was here.” The grand narratives of opportunity or exile are unavailable in the raw moment of arrival. The poem then provides the language he lacks, in a statement of profound mutual transformation:

“He couldn’t have said, This is my body
that will be altered by this place,
and this is my body
that will alter this place a little.” (Alvi, 1996/2008).

This is Alvi’s crucial theoretical intervention. She names the silent, bidirectional negotiation of diaspora: the migrant is physically and psychologically changed by the new land, but he also, inevitably, changes its social and cultural fabric. This foreshadows the hybrid identities of his children and the evolving nature of English society itself, concepts central to Bhabha’s (1994) model of cultural hybridity and Hall’s (1990) “politics of difference.”

Synthesis: Heritage as Inherited Dislocation

For Alvi, negotiating her own heritage requires understanding it as an inherited condition of dislocation that began with her father’s silent, fearful arrival. Her identity is not just split between two cultures, but is fundamentally post-traumatic, built on the foundation of his unspoken struggle. The poem is an act of filial piety and historical recovery, giving voice to the parental silence that often haunts second-generation diasporic subjects. It shows that for the child of migrants, negotiating identity means acknowledging the weight of the parents’ sacrifice and silence, and recognizing one’s own self as the living, altered outcome of that initial, traumatic transit.

Table 6

Thematic Analysis of Genealogical Dislocation in Moniza Alvi’s “Arrival 1946”

Research Theme	Manifestation in the Poem	Key Supporting Quotation	Theoretical/Conceptual Link
The Body as Site of Original Trauma	The father’s body is metaphorized as the embodied landscape of migrant fear.	“My father’s body was a town of fear.”	The migrant body as the primary site of diasporic experience (Boehmer, 2005).

Devaluation of Transported Heritage	Material possessions from the homeland lose their meaning and utility.	“He arrived with a pocketful of coins, / becoming lighter and stranger...”	The non-transferability of cultural capital across borders.
Epistemological/Ecological Rupture	Dislocation involves a loss of the natural world’s familiar lexicon.	“He didn’t know the names of birds, / the trees, the family of grasses.”	Ecological belonging and diasporic alienation (Ranasinha, 2007).
The Unspoken Mutual Transformation	The poem articulates the bidirectional change the migrant cannot yet voice.	“This is my body / that will be altered by this place, / and this is my body / that will alter this place a little.”	Bhabha’s (1994) hybridity; the migrant’s transformative impact on the host culture.
Heritage as Inherited Silence & Dislocation	The poet’s identity is rooted in the parent’s traumatic, inarticulate moment of arrival.	“He couldn’t explain to anyone / why he was here.”	Second-generation identity as post-traumatic; giving voice to parental silence.
Genealogical vs. Spatial Negotiation	Alvi negotiates by looking back to a historical point of origin, not just a current “third space.”	The entire poem’s act of historical reconstruction.	Contrast with Dharker: Alvi’s temporal depth vs. Dharker’s spatial immediacy.

Note. This table analyzes how Alvi’s poem negotiates heritage by reconstructing the foundational moment of migration, framing diasporic identity as an inherited condition of dislocation and mutual transformation. Quotations are from Alvi (1996/2008).

Findings

The comparative analysis reveals that Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi, while united in their exploration of diasporic hybridity, enact profoundly different modes of negotiating heritage and identity. Dharker’s poetics are characterized by a synchronic, present-tense defiance, where identity is forged through direct confrontation with patriarchal, nationalist, and religious power structures. Her speakers actively deconstruct imposed categories, claiming a sovereign selfhood in the interstitial “cracks between borders.” This assertive, often polemical stance transforms heritage from a received tradition into a political material to be resisted and redefined, culminating in declarative acts of self-identification that embrace foreignness as an ontological state. In stark contrast, Alvi’s approach is diachronic and investigative, treating

heritage as a tangible, often burdensome inheritance to be meticulously unpacked. Her negotiation unfolds through a delicate handling of material artifacts the gifted salwar kameez, the storied sari and a psychological reconstruction of familial history, as seen in the poetic excavation of her father’s migration. This results not in a resolved, new identity but in a sustained state of ambivalent suspension, where belonging is perpetually deferred and the self exists in a condition of “no fixed nationality.” Consequently, Dharker’s work performs a strategic, spatial hybridity that aligns with Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” while Alvi’s maps the intimate, multi-generational “diaspora space” theorized by Avtar Brah. Together, their complementary projects delineate the full spectrum of diasporic consciousness: Dharker articulates the defiant creation of a hybrid self in the immediate present, while Alvi voices the poignant, unresolved dialogue with a fragmented past, collectively affirming identity as a continuous and contested process of negotiation rather than a fixed cultural possession.

Table 7

Comparative Analysis of Negotiation Strategies in Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi

Aspect	Imtiaz Dharker	Moniza Alvi	Comparative Insight
Temporal focus	Present-oriented engagement with power structures	Past-oriented reconstruction through memory	Synchronic versus diachronic negotiation
Material heritage	Metaphorical and constraining symbols	Literal objects, cherished yet uneasy	Critique of power versus search for belonging
Body	Site of conflict and discipline	Site of trial and connection	Systemic vulnerability versus personal ritual
Tone and voice	Defiant and declarative	Ambivalent and exploratory	Empowered outsider versus inquisitive inheritor
Resolution	Claimed hybrid identity	Ongoing, conditional negotiation	Closure versus suspension

Note. The table summarizes key contrasts drawn from the analysis of selected poems by Dharker and Alvi, highlighting complementary approaches to negotiating heritage and identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi constitutes a vital, bifocal discourse within contemporary South Asian diaspora literature, demonstrating that the negotiation of heritage and identity is neither a singular process nor a terminal state. Dharker’s synchronic, politically charged verse, which claims the interstitial “cracks between borders” as a sovereign space, and Alvi’s diachronic, materially focused explorations of inherited dislocation and ambivalent belonging, together chart the expansive terrain of the hybrid self. Their work collectively affirms that identity in the diaspora is a dynamic, perpetually unfolding negotiation one that simultaneously resists the coercive pressures of cultural absolutism from within the present and tenderly excavates the formative legacies of the past, thereby offering not a resolved image of selfhood but a powerful, ongoing poetics of becoming.

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