

# Diasporic Identities: A Study of Zulfikar Ghose and Moniza Alvi's Poetry

Sameen Tahir<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan<sup>2\*</sup>, Dr. Mahrukh Shakir<sup>3</sup>, Sadia Sharif<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, University of Education, Lahore

<sup>2\*,3</sup>Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

<sup>4</sup>Department of English, University of Education (Attock Campus)

---

**ABSTRACT:** Diasporic identities emerge as a result of settling down in countries other than the native ones because of different circumstances. Some of the reasons for people's migration are either they leave their homelands for better lifestyle or for gaining security and fame. The place of Pakistani diaspora is analyzed in the current study. Every place has its different cultural values, norms and mores, traditions and politics, and when individuals leave their homeland, they face cultural, environmental and political changes. These changes play a great role in transforming diasporic identities. Zulfikar Ghose and Moniza Alvi are Pakistani poets, living in England. In this study, the causes and effects of their immigration have been analyzed in order to explore their identities. The elements of their positionality conflicts are tried to be traced out, and a separate place of Pakistani diaspora is attempted to be established while deconstructing their poetry. The study concludes that the poets are assimilationists who celebrate transnationalism which puts them in identities of Bhabha's liminal spaces because they experience and follow two cultures and have changed into ruptures of hybridization and alienation.

**Keywords:** Diasporic Identities, Hybridization, Positionality Conflicts.

## Introduction and Review of Related Literature

Diaspora studies include the feelings, problems, luxuries, emotional stability or instability and difficulties faced by the people who leave their homeland to get settled in hostland. This immigration can have different reasons behind it; for commoners, it provides economic and social benefits, and for politicians or people of influence, immigration provides chances to gain more fame, honor and recognition. Meanwhile, for artists, immigrations can play the same role because they are influenced individuals as well.

Diasporic identities from all countries are different from each other. African Diasporas face problems of being a subject of experimentation, marginalization, enslavement and cheap labor. Meanwhile, South Asian Diasporas face problems of language, demotion, tag of being terrorists and disgrace. The artists do face the problems of estrangement in land of strangers. Salman Rushdie, Edward Said, Chitra Banerjee and Bapsi Sidhwa are some names from the list of South Asian Diasporas who have left their countries for different reasons.

Pakistani Diaspora is different in its nature. In India, artists are recognized and acknowledged by institutions, like Sahitya Academy, and they receive awards for their masterpieces as well, but unfortunately, in Pakistan such awards are associated with politics, not with the efforts of writers. Most of the writers move to the West in order to get fame, and to be celebrated. Zulfikar Ghose and Moniza Alvi are from the list of those Pakistani diasporic writers. This study tends to analyze their poetry in order to deconstruct their longing, belonging, nostalgia, denial and poetic statements in order to know the positionality conflict between their statements and their poetry.

Pakistani Diaspora faces identity crisis more than the Indian dispersion because Pakistanis' roots are blurred to be mapped because Muslims' history rests in Arab countries whereas their cultural history places in the Sub-continent and two nation theory. Therefore, Pakistani identity is already a conflict within the country. Pakistani diasporic writers try to meet at a point where they find opportunities to encounter their past and present, and get an abstract vision of homeland and hostland.

Moniza Alvi is a Pakistani-British poetess and writer. Her father is a Pakistani whereas her mother is a British. She left Pakistan when she was ten years old, but she revisited it after the publication of her first book *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993). Her reasons to revisit Pakistan can be political, but while reading her poetry, it can be stated that she feels deep connection with her motherland. *Peacock Luggage* is her book of poems which received award of the Poetry Business in 1991. It was written with the help of Daniel Peter. Her poetry and short stories indicate the themes of duality, difference, displacement, borders and edges, possibility, worldliness, surreal or fantastical world of fractured and partially recovered identities.

In an article, it has been said about Moniza Alvi's poetry and short fiction that the idea of a distant place is important to Alvi because her work is filled with glimpses, with echoes of large areas of experience "tantalizingly" out of reach (Bainbridge). The question is whether these ideas of distant place, i.e. Alvi's sufferings, analyzed in this study that is Alvi's or real or not. Or what are the reasons behind her denial to move back to Pakistan? Her ideas of being a diasporic writer haunt her, and it is said about her: "Alvi's poetry is imbued with a spirit of duality, partition, fractured identity and transformation" (Evans-Bush). In the current study, her assimilation and fractured identity are analyzed to know the inner conflict.

Ghose is considered as the most chaotic and confused poet because of his surreal themes. He is a novelist, poet and essayist. He was born in Sialkot when it was part of India, but after partition, it got merged in Pakistan. His masterpieces are *The Loss of India*, *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, *Jets from Orange*, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* and *The Contradictions*. His themes

include realism, magical realism, surrealism, culturally alienated identities and sense of displacement. In the review of Britannica, it has been stated about Ghose that the themes in *The Loss of India* (1964), *Selected Poems* (1991), and *50 Poems* (2010) are often about the travels and memories of a self-aware alien (Britannica). However, in the current study, his alienation is discussed with reference to diasporic theories. A research article concludes that Ghose's work depicts the relationship between postcolonial textual production and Anglo-American reception in a way that emphasizes how its parameters exclude Ghose's own works (Brouillette). In this study, Ghose's postcolonial trauma has been analyzed with the addition of diasporic trauma in order to explore his identity.

Salman Rushdie gives concept of "Imaginary Homelands" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*) in his essay in order to show that Diasporas are not accepted in their homeland and at the same time, host country feels estrangement towards them. Likewise, John Rechy's concept of "hyphenated subjectivities" and Said's idea of "contrapuntal identity" (Said, *The Mind of Winter*) show the enigmatic identities of diasporas who struggle hard to prove their loyalty. Avtar Brah focuses on the aspects of "how, where and why" (A. Brah) of immigration because circumstances also help in portraying identities. These theoretical lenses are used to analyze their poems.

### **Analysis of Moniza Alvi's Works**

Post-colonial world can be seen as a historical continuity of various colonial legacies. Diaspora identities are one of these oppressive legacies that continue to haunt the lives of those with a history of migration, either forced to cater for the shortage of the labor in Britain during colonial rule, or for their own economical purposes. Diaspora, in words of Cohen, can be defined as people, living together in one country, who acknowledge that "the old country" (homeland) always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. In this way, their lives become a mess of "fragmented," "discontinuous" and "incommensurable" existence, where the static and conventional notions of "home," "belonging" and "rootedness" no longer work with the absence of the originative and fixed ties. Identity finds its redefinition from "a sovereign and essentialized subject" to a "discursive product" that is constantly "remade and remodeled" through the "art of the present" in the "border lives" of those who are in a perpetual condition of "migrancy" (Rushdie). In this way, the idea of "home" becomes disturbed, with the individuals constantly lining in a sense of being "in-between," within the liminal space, undergoing the process of "hybridization," where their hybrid identity never let them be owned by either side (Bhabha). However, few find this "liminal" and "perilous in-between" space as the advantageous vantage point to have a "partial and plural view of the world," but again this view leads many towards an identity crisis that is revealed in their ambivalent attitudes towards their home country.

Muneeza Alvi, a Pakistani-British writer, is also one among those having such discursive identities, living a "border life on the margins of contrary homelands." Her poetry becomes "diaspora aesthetics," when she unconsciously views her identity from a transnational lens, blending both her fascination with her father's land and the idea of host country as her comfort zone. In this way, her poetry becomes a realization of her deep felt 'lines cape[s]', duality,

difference, displacement, borders and edges. Deryn Rees-Jones is of the view that “much of Alvi's work engages with a surreal or fantastical world of fractured and partially recovered identity . . . and she is distinctive in her ability to boldly yet seamlessly inhabit such a world.”

This sense of up-rootedness and identity crisis is best expressed in her poem, “I would like to be a Dot in a painting by Miro,” where we find her successfully evoking a place or identity in a complex state of fluidity or compromise by way of a clear, uncomplicated conceit. This starkly yet gently articulates the notion of being out-of-place, 'not a perfect circle,' and the arbitrary tensions that underpin such a position (Alvi). The desire of being rooted in some fixed origin that is the dilemma of diasporic identities is best expressed in her longing to be a dot “barely distinguished from other dots” where she might claim her right of belongingness to other dots, her own people. However, it is her liminal position that makes her suffer from the duality of her loyalties that compel her at the same time to connect to and to move away from her “mythical home” towards the “lemon stripe” that is the illusions of host country.

Furthermore, it is her border life that makes her unique, having a transnational empathy, with a dynamic identity, and yet she simultaneously retains a sense of bright-eyed, almost child-like beguilement during the process: at being perched, fluidly yet advantageously, 'on the edge of animation, a dream, a dance, a fantastic construction.' Her situation allows her not to “get too close” not “too far away,” from anything, thus having a plural view of life.

Another poem by Alvi, “Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan,” reveals the trauma of identity crisis marked by the presence of “uncanny moments” that do not allow her to develop a sense of deep horizontal comradeship with any of the two sides of the border. Simultaneously, she feels connected to her ancestral homeland through the iconic fragments and scraps in the form of gifts from her Pakistani aunts (Alvi, Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan). In this way, the bright color ‘shalwarkameez,’ peacock blue, embossed slippers, candy-stripped glass bangles and apple green ‘sari,’ become the fragmentary pieces through which she tries to construct a narrative to “relocate and reclaim her mythical home.”

But soon her diasporic duality and hybridization makes her feel a sense of being alienated from both of her ancestral and host country. Her baggage or interior knowledge that she carries from her father's side becomes “alien in the sitting room,” where she fears she will be “mocked and discriminated” by her friends from host country, for her love for her own cultural practices. This fear estranges her from the sense of rootedness, and her longing for bright color dresses, that indicates her love for her culture, is transformed with a desire for “denim and corduroy” standing for the values of her host countries. But soon we find her “disqualified from thinking of the new land as her home,” that again leads her to “glimpse” her split identity in the “mirror work, the miniature glass circles” to relocate herself within the fixed origins of homeland, but the broken images in the “broken mirrors” while she stares through the “fretwork at the Shalimar garden,” proves to her that she is of “no fixed nationality.”

The complicated and complex relationship with “home” is again reflected in “The Wedding,” where Alvi presents her “unhomely” presence in such an influential way as to feel under the rich imagery borrowed from her homeland. Her disqualification and dissatisfaction with the values of the host country is expressed in the form of the distaste for her “quite wedding” ceremony in the host country, “that tasted nothing, had little color.” She refers to her ancestral land by using the icons of “lost city” that can be interpreted as her ancestral land, Lahore. She constantly uses the fragmented and fractured icons of “river” (that might be the Ravi), “gardens” and “buffaloes in the dark water” revealing her interior knowledge to recreate and mobilize her identity through the act of imagination where home is a dream, and all these cultural icons further reinforce her “incommensurable cultural temporalities,” that she is trying to relocate through the “maps on hands” (Alvi, The Wedding). In this way, she is using the fragments of cultural identity in order to reconnect her bond to her land along with describing her strong desire to “marry a country,” thus to claim a fixed identity.

### **Analysis of Zulfikar Ghose’s Works**

Zulfikar Ghose is unique in his nature of producing poetry because he has faced colonization, partition of Pakistan and India (1947), partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh (1971) and 9/11 bombardment. That is why his sufferings are different from those of other Diasporas. He wants to be acknowledged by his country. So his intentions to move abroad were merely political.

His poems “Flying over India” and “This Landscape, These People” are analyzed to investigate the roots of his identity. Ghose, while leaving Bombay, stated that when he left, he left two countries, and now he is in London. He accepts that he is rootless. His approach is nomadic, and alienation and deracination indicates that wherever he feels comfort, he stays there. In the poem “Flying over India” from his book 50 Selected Poems, he claims this “identity-less-ness” of his because he wants to get settled in space. The poem gives picture of his flight in plane, and he is crossing Pakistan and India, but he states that these countries are “slow in progress” (Ghose). He is over-ambitious about his identity. He seems to show inclusiveness in his approach when he shares his knowledge about the “animals,” “sand-holes” and “intactness of growth” which James Clifford calls “transnationalism” among Diasporas (Clifford). He portrays concept of “lost generation” when he says about his belonging “neither city, nor villages.” His conflict is disturbing because it seems he is suffering from trauma of not being recognized. In that way he becomes native informant as well.

Ghose, while leaving his homeland, not only rejects the countries, but their older civilizations as well. He despises the pilot when he views the sinking of “sand-dune civilization” and indirectly calls Westerners more advanced because they do not feel nostalgic for their destroyed and diminished past. This shows his assimilation with Western culture even without entering into it.

Zulfikar Ghose’s another poem “This Landscape, These People” shows his presence in England where he enjoys his “eighth spring,” and still says that he is scared of attachments because

he says he does not “want to touch” the woods while crossing the forest (Ghose, *This Landscape, These People*). He shows his love for England, but still states that England is like a chair in museum, and he can only see it but cannot touch it. That shows his existence in “cultural spaces” (A. Brah). Since he has very less attachment with the new continent, he just takes a watch over the native English people and their land. He describes them as “strolling with stiff country sides?” He says that the English men walk with stiff gait which presents their rigid and fancy picture of their habitual life. He could not find a casual behavior among the English men as he has found among the Indians.

The distinction made by Ghose about his living in India and Europe emphasizes the quality of independence that he has experienced in both the countries. In England, he could make only a watch over things, but in the indigenous country he has pulled coconuts from the tall trees. In addition, he has plucked and tasted the pomegranates which have turned his tongue purple, and he has chilies to ‘burn’ his mouth. He has used the word ‘burn’ to express the spiciness of the chilies. He has found stones to kick and play with them; such minor activities have assisted him to be amused and feel the independence of his homeland. It brings out the fact that living in the motherland for so many years can have very less impact on the behaviour of the human being because they do not realize its worthiness to a remarkable level, but being separated from the motherland can cause severe effect and remain as a diasporic consciousness. Therefore, he proudly confesses that he was born to this country, and with much impudence he affirms that everything is his.

“This Landscape, These People” has multiple ideas with regard to the diasporic consciousness. Zulfikar Ghose has juxtaposed his experience in India as well as in England. Being an inhabitant of both the countries has rendered him memorable scenes and distinguishable differences on the basis of people and their culture that prevails in extremely two dissimilar countries. His explication gives filmy images of the vibrant India and the fancy England. Spending years in the countries have granted unforgettable pictures on independence, loss of liberty and above all they have stirred up the diasporic views and thoughts.

Initially, the poet feels discomfort of being an Indian expatriate in Europe but towards the end of the poem he has penned his intimate rapport with England. He says that he meets England as a secret lover and plucks leaves, and eventually he admits that “Stranger or an inhabitant; this is my home.” Although he has adapted to the estranged life gracefully in course of time, yet he realizes the difference that the countries make and has made in his life. In the initial days of his excitement, his life had been a miserable, and now the same country has satisfied him with its richness and liberty. However, nostalgic perception is predominant in the poem, and it kindles the diasporic consciousness of the poet undeniably. Thus, the juxtaposing style of the poet has instilled a diasporic and indigenous consciousness to the poem.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that both of the poets, Zulfikar Ghose and Moniza Alvi, have deeper connection with their roots, but because of political, social and economic matters, they have left their homeland. Moniza Alvi shows love for Pakistan in her poetry, but she chooses to marry a country and that is England. Meanwhile, she enjoys wearing Pakistani dresses, she calls English wedding “boring,” but to make her name in the world of art, she finds Western academy more suitable for her. On the other hand, Zulfikar Ghose’s identity is confusing because he gives hints of his deep love for his homeland in his poetry, but he does not claim his identity of being Pakistani. His concerns and motives are clear about moving abroad because he wants to be recognized. Both of the poets are assimilationists, and they celebrate transnationalism which puts them in identities of Bhabha’s liminal spaces because they follow two cultures and have changed into ruptures of hybridization and alienation.

## References

- Alvi, M. (2007). I would Like to be a Dot in Painting by Miro. London. Retrieved from <https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/i-would-like-to-be-a-dot-in-a-painting-by-miro>
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2006). Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan. London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2010). The Wedding. London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993). The Country at My Shoulder. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alvi, M., & Daniels, P. (1992). Peacock Luggage. California: Smith/Doorstop Books.
- Anderson, B. (1983). Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso.
- Bainbridge, C. (2005). The Guardian. Retrieved in June 2018 from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview23>.
- Brah, A. (1996). Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities. London: Routledge.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 10 June 1999. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zulfikar-Ghose>.
- Brouillette, S. (2007). Zulfikar Ghose's the Triple Mirror of the Self and Cosmopolitan Authentication. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53, 97-119.
- Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9 (3), 275-428.
- Evans-Bush, K. (2011). About Us: Poetry International Web. Retrieved on 12 June 2018 from <https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/20999/29/Moniza-Alvi>.
- Ghose, Z. Flying Over India: 50 Selected Poems. Retrieved from <https://dianatham.wordpress.com/2009/07/09/flying-over-india/>

Webology (ISSN: 1735-188X)  
Volume 18, Number 6, 2021

Ghose, Z. This Landscape, These People: 50 Selected Poems

Rushdie, S. (1991). Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism. New York.

Said, E. (1984). The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile.