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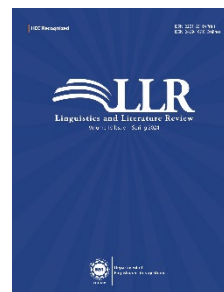
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# Exploring Spatiality in Selected Poems of Moniza Alvi: A Poetic Cartography of Displacement

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## Abstract

This research aims to analyze the dynamics of space in Moniza Alvi's seven poems from her collection *The Country at my Shoulder* (1993). It explores how spatial anxiety and dislocated geographical and cultural concerns become prominent in her poems through different spaces. This research mainly highlights the collision of two diverse cultures and value systems in Alvi's poems to bring forth her transcultural quests, which display the influence of geographical perplexity on postmodern literature. The research employs the theoretical framework of spatiality primarily discussed by Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre and Benjamin N. Vis. First, architectural spaces, such as rooms and buildings, are discussed in the context of her native culture, as architectural trends of a nation are representative of its culture. Second, social and filial spaces are traced in the form of city space and social ties to unearth their influence on the poet's existence. Third, diasporic spaces are analyzed through the contrast of oriental and occidental psyches to determine the poet's vacillation between dual cultures. Fourth, geological and body spaces are interpreted through the metaphor of a displaced geography to highlight the angst of dislocation. These spaces are specifically explored in the light of the philosophies of different critics of space. This exploration shows that Alvi's poetry proves to be a multi-spatial platform that is reflective of the general restlessness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to postmodern spatial crisis and the dilemma of migration.

**Keywords:** culture, diaspora, displacement, geography, spaces

## Introduction

Moniza Alvi is a contemporary Pakistani British poet. The thematic concerns of her poetry revolve around various episodes of her life, mostly based on her experiences as an expatriate. These themes include cultural displacement, geographical dislocation, migration and feminist concerns. Since Alvi seems to bring forth the conflict between double identities, this

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research explores the impact of geographic and diasporic spaces on the poet's psyche and her work. It traces the role of "childhood memories, family anecdotes and flights of imagination" (Shamsie, [1997](#), p. 402) in creating spatial anxiety, as Alvi states: "... attracted by fantasy and by the strange-seeming ... I see my writing as a way of creating and recreating my life extending its possibilities through the imaginative engagement with feelings and experiences" (Shamsie, [1997](#), p. 402). Therefore, this collection of poetry explicates her journey and struggle between dual identity.

Alvi's poems exhibit a strong affiliation with her native land which appears in the form of an emotional and spiritual restlessness marked by her oriental femininity the link between her traditional feminine role and her oriental consciousness in her poems. This natural connection between her womanhood and homeland is also highlighted by the Indian author Malashri Lal who writes: "In subsequent volumes about universal themes such as motherhood or marriage, her Asian background comes in, but is incidental" (Lal & Kumar, [2007](#), p. 259). Thereby, as stated above, her oriental consciousness is strongly linked to her feminine roles.

The contemporary Indian author Malashri Lal compares Alvi's poetry with her Pakistani contemporaries, and credits "her lyrical multicultural poetry [that] enabled her to integrate the Pakistani side into her life" (Lal & Kumar, [2007](#), p. 259). Lal traces the presence of Alvi's native land in her poetry as

In her first collection, *The Country at My Shoulder*, Pakistan appears as a distant place evoked by stories, anecdotes, culture and imagery. In her second, *A Bowl of Warm Air*, Pakistan, becomes a place she visits but where she remains an observer (p. 259).

This suggests the traces of her cultural collective unconscious, which contrasts with her diasporic self a dilemma that permeates her poetry.

Similarly, an Indian-American critic, Mitali Pati Wong, also locates the theme of immigration in Alvi's poems. She writes in her book *The English Language Poetry of South Asians: A Critical Study*, "Alvi creates the voices of South Asian immigrants whose memories of lost homelands surface in surrealistic imagery" (Wong, [2013](#), p. 93). She holds the notions that "the South Asian ethnic elements and the English setting and landscape are fused into an unreal dream world in Alvi's poems" which according to her "is a

reinforcement of the unhomeliness of exile, of alienation, of anxiety, and of the quest for self-identity” (Wong, [2013](#), p. 94). Therefore, the crises related to identity are displayed in Alvi’s poetry through diasporic themes.

Alvi’s poetry has been analyzed by various critics both of national and international significance, highlighting eclectic aspects of her poetic concerns. One contemporary British author and critic Alvi ([2008](#)) analyzes her poetry as “sparse, oblique, surreal, compassionate and original” commenting that Alvi “has unique insight into splits, both emotional and cultural” (par.1).

Alvi evidently admits that her poems are the representative of her transcultural experiences, and her country is present at the basis of her poetry as a foothold. This is evident from her words quoted in an online article by a contemporary Indian writer Rukhaya ([2015](#)) with reference to her poem “Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan”

I found it was important to write the Pakistan poems because I was getting in touch with my background. And maybe there’s a bit of a message behind the poems about something I went through, that I want to maybe open a few doors if possible (para. 2).

However, not all of her poems refer to her transcultural quest or Pakistani background. Her poems cater to diverse thematic features. She states: “the poems that do not concern my Asian background are equally important to me ... I have written about Pakistan partly because it was, in the first instance, a fantasy” (p. 14). The reference to her native land can be traced in her initial poetry; however, her later poems carry diverse themes.

This research highlights the diasporic cultural concerns in selected poems of Moniza Alvi. These poems are significantly emblematic of her dilemma of dual identity and geographical dislocation. Thus, her poetry is representative of the plight of expatriate women who bear the burden of cultural legacy and torn identity. Various spaces in Alvi’s poetry appear to influence her female and diasporic consciousness, which this research will analyze tracing how they represent her psychological, emotional, cultural, and social ambience. The research focuses on the following questions: To what extent can body space become a metaphor for a displaced geography? Does diasporic space in her poems represent a cultural quest? Can architectural spaces highlight the poet’s cultural legacy and her psyche?

## Literature Review

Spatiality was recognized as a proper theoretical framework in the 20th century, though as a metaphysical concept, it has existed since Greek times. The framework deals with the critical concepts of geo criticism and literary cartography both can be regarded as the tools of literary analysis involving the study of geographic space and the complex interaction of individuals and spaces. The contemporary American critic Tally ([2013](#)) writes in his book *Spatiality*:

Literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live (p. 2).

In introducing *Spatiality*, Tally Jr. writes, “One experiences a sense of disorientation, a sort of cartographic anxiety or spatial perplexity that appears to be a part of our fundamental being-in-the-world ... this bewilderment has increased with the modern and especially postmodern condition” (p. 1). Therefore, the framework emblemizes the postmodern condition of existence and the need of mapping through spaces.

One of the most famous critics to explore this discourse is the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who discusses the concept of architectural spaces in his book *The Poetics of Space*. These spaces include various concrete constructs such as indoor and outdoor spaces, corners and miniature, drawers and chests, and the concept of shapes which constitute and contain a specific space. Exploring the relation between individuals and their dwelling places, he writes: “The house, quite obviously, is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space” (Bachelard, [1994](#), p. 3). According to him, the house that an individual dwells in makes him grow roots in it as it becomes a means of his first encounter with a larger cosmological setting. He states:

We should therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a ‘corner of the world’ ... For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word (Bachelard, [1994](#), p. 4).

The term 'root' suggests that one's residence becomes his origin, which eventually provides him an identity a distinct self through which he is recognized in the society.

Another prominent space to be explored in Alvi's poetry is the social space a concept explored by the French critic Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre holds the view that

(Social) space is a (social) product" claiming that the "space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it (p. 26).

This philosophy suggests that, on the one hand, social space is a production by the society, and on the other hand, a phenomenon that overpowers and shapes the existence of the entities within the society.

Another subdivision of social space is city space, which Lefebvre discusses in the following words: "Consider the case of a city space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period. Is this city a *work* or a *product*" (Alvi, [1991](#), p. 73). Elaborating this notion further, he writes: "Can a space of this kind really still be described as a 'work'? There is an overwhelming case for saying that it is a product... it is reproducible, and it results from repetitive actions" (p. 73). The philosophized concept of "work" earns it a state of completion and consequently stagnation, whereas the term "product" is employed as referring to a state of process, movement and activity (p. 73).

Similarly, Vis ([2009](#)), a British critic, describes the indestructible connection between individuals and space in his book *Built Environments Constructed Societies*. Vis discusses the concept of the space of the human body and writes that "body not only conditions how human beings are within space, it also conditions all (inter) actions within space" (p. 39). His ideas highlight the most immediate space that humans encounter in the form of bodily construct effective in shaping once existence. He further elaborates:

The human body is at the basis of all existentialist approaches, as it takes into account that humans have and are bodies at the same time .... Starting with the body itself, the experience of the body results

in *body space*, which has been characterized in many different ways (p. 41).

Body space in Alvi's poetry also refers to the history of her native land and colonization, which highlights Edward Said's concept of the analogy of land and the female body. The contemporary British critic Justin D. Edwards elaborates this concept in his book *Postcolonial Literature* while endorsing Said's philosophy of gender, sexuality, and colonization, and states that "The Eastern female body comes to symbolize the 'penetrable' nature of the region and the land that is to be (or has been) conquered. For Said, then, gender and sexuality become important tropes for the power relations" (Edwards, [2008](#), p. 98). This interpretation aligns with Ghaffar' (2020) application of Said's views in their analysis of Robert Baron's *Mirza*, which illustrates how Eurocentric perspectives perpetuate reductive and colonially imposed tropes to assert cultural superiority.

Another kind of space explored in the primary text is diasporic space, which is discussed by many contemporary writers whose articles have been composed by a British critic, Nando Sigona, in *Diasporas Reimagined Spaces, Practices and Belonging*. The book contains various significant concepts regarding diasporic spaces. One such concept is of "the imagined community" which "Refers to the nation with which one has an affinity without necessarily knowing its members personally" (Hear, [2015](#), p. 34). Having this imagined community and affinity in the collective unconscious, the expatriate undergoes a "comparison ongoing between the current and past places of residence" (Heil, [2015](#), p. 43), which is evidently present in Alvi's poetry. Hence this creates a diasporic space in her poetry at the foundation of which lies the "ethnic discrimination [which] strengthens their ... identity" (Eliassi, [2015](#), p. 46). Through these concepts, various spaces have been unearthed in Alvi's poetry to represent a postmodern spatial anxiety.

### Research Methodology

This research is a content based textual analysis of Moniza Alvi's poetry in the light of spatiality. The methodology includes the formulation of relationships between recurrent patterns and elements within the text in order to categorize them into specific spaces and decipher the spatial structure of the text. It also focuses on the diction employed by the poet to analyze spatial patterns through linguistic features. Using the framework of

spatiality and its various aspects discussed by critics such as Bachelard, Lefebvre and Vis, this research analyzes symbols, images, metaphors, literary devices, and themes in Alvi's poetry, exploring underlying connotations of terms. It examines how these symbols and themes represent various spaces, including concrete spaces such as architectural spaces, geophysical and body spaces, and abstract spaces, such as diasporic spaces, socio-filial spaces and circular spaces. The research will explore the poet's psyche through these spaces and their effect on her social, cultural, and geographical surroundings. Thus, the recurrence of various spaces is studied through thematic and stylistic analysis of the poems.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Alvi's poetry appears to be emblematic of her diasporic experiences, revealing her identity that vacillates between the oriental and occidental consciousness. In the midst of a foreign culture and value system, Alvi's relation to Pakistan seems to provide her a distinct identity with which she connects at core. This identity and the dilemma of migration will be traced under the following headings through the references of her past and present, East and West, Pakistan and England, which are juxtaposed in the form of spaces in her poems.

#### **Architectural Spaces**

The architecture of any dwelling profoundly influences an individual's psychological and existential setup. The architectural spaces in Alvi's poems can be discussed in the light of Bachelard's notions, who discusses that even when a person is partitioned with his "first universe" (p. 4), it resides in his psychological space as a concrete existence, and it is not only the residents who associate themselves with a certain architecture, but the place also derives a specific meaning through its inhabitants as they identify it with certain fragments of their lives. This is highlighted by his notion that "the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are" (p. 5). This philosophy becomes quite apt in Alvi's poetry in which the architectural references take the readers back to her "Immemorial" past (Bachelard, [1994](#), p. 6), for instance, the references to Shalimar Gardens or her ancestral home in Lahore (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 31). The space of architecture



contains a complexity which ascribes an abstract meaning to the otherwise concrete and tangible dwelling-place as Bachelard propagates the idea that “through poems, perhaps more than through recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house” (p. 6). Likewise, in “Presents from my aunts in Pakistan”, the space of the architecture appears as a dense reflection of her struggle against the duality of her existence.

In the above-mentioned poem, the architectural space is divided into two categories, one in Lahore, and the other is her English residence. The stylistic employment of images and setting of the poem is specifically significant in determining her association with these spaces; for instance, with regard to her English setup, she states: “I tried each satin-silk top/ was alien in the sitting-room” (p. 30), and “I ended up in a cot/ in my English grandmother’s dining-room, / found myself alone” (p. 31). The placement of the word “alien” with “sitting-room”, and “alone” with “dining-room” (p. 30) displays the alienation that these spaces carry within them for the poet, despite their purpose of providing comfort and being a space for the gathering of the members of the house. Similarly, the poet mentions: “I wanted my parents’ camel-skin lamp/ switching it on in my bedroom” (p. 30); the activity of switching the lamp on and off suggests two binaries which are symbolic of the poet’s conflicting states while sitting in an English “bedroom” and desiring a Pakistani “camel-skin lamp” (p. 30). Thus, the space of the bedroom appears as a ground for generating a struggle between two cultures, which is evident in most of Alvi’s poems.

On the other hand, the architectural spaces which she recalls from her native land create another kind of impact, which is again revealed through the vocabulary that refers to an ease which this architecture offers. Alvi states: “Sometimes I saw Lahore/ my aunts in shaded rooms” (p.31); The ‘room’ in these lines has been described as having two significant qualities with which it is associated: it is “shaded” and houses her “aunts” (p. 31). The adjective “shaded” garnishes the space of the room with a coolness, shelter, and protection, as the word itself suggests; similarly, the term “aunts” complements this space by referring to intimacy, connection, and warmth (p. 31). This kind of architectural space reveals the poet’s close link to her country, and especially city, which emerge in the form of the reminiscences of her “Motionless Childhood” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6), and provides her a certain kind of protection and solace from the fret and fury of a diasporic existence. In a similar fashion, she “marvel[s] at the colors/

like stained glass” (p. 30), and “star[es] through the fretwork/ at the Shalimar Gardens” (p. 31). The colors of the “camel-skin lamp” are likened to “stained glass” (p. 30) which is a distinct element of the old Eastern architecture used in the construction of doors, windows, and wardrobes. It also connects to the traditional designing style using vibrant colors going back to the old times. Likewise, the “fretwork/ at the Shalimar Gardens” is also an eminent example of the Mughal architecture, and the verb “staring” (p. 31) displays the poet’s fascination with her history and ethnicity. Therefore, the architectural space in these lines intrigues the poet’s psyche.

The architectural space also embraces the concrete space of furniture and the interior accessories such as wardrobes, which can be taken as a door to the poet’s secret self. This notion of the association of furniture with the poet’s intimate self can be analyzed with reference to Bachelard’s (1994) concept of:

Shelves ... [as] veritable organs of the secret psychological life... without [which] ... our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy.... Every poet of furniture ... knows that the inner space of an old wardrobe is deep. A wardrobe’s inner space is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody (p. 78).

Thus, it shows that the furniture in an individual’s residence is highly significant, as it is a silent and inanimate observer and container of one’s secrets. Especially, the wardrobes in which one hides one’s possessions - which cannot be displayed outside to be viewed by every visitor - are a means to explore his confidentialities. In the poem under critique, Alvi refers to her wardrobe by stating that the “presents were radiant in my wardrobe (p. 31); these gifts, which are a reminder and emblem of her native identity in a foreign land, are kept by the poet in her wardrobe, which symbolizes a space that is segregated from the outer space and allows no external invasion. They generate a vivacious ambience inside the cosmos of the wardrobe, yet are not allowed to vivify the space of her room or house. Subsequently, it reveals that the poet’s wardrobe provides her with a space where she can hide her Pakistani self that is symbolized by her Eastern outfits as it contrasts with the space outside her wardrobe.

Architectural spaces in Alvi’s poetry not only exist in the form of buildings and furniture but also in the form of the architecture of vehicle, which can be a reference to feminine marginalization and social

confinements that Alvi as a female encounter. She writes that she was “raised in a glove compartment” where she “listened/ for the sound of the engine” (p. 9). Herein, ‘glove compartment’ and ‘engine’, being two significant components of the car’s architecture producing an architectural space that is quite different from the traditional spaces of buildings, rooms, and furniture. This kind of architecture, rather than connecting her to any specific culture, becomes a mode of bringing forth the suppression that she faced as a female and diaspora, as ‘glove compartment’ suggests congestion, suffocation, and imprisonment. Similarly, ‘engine’ being the most important part that generates life for the vehicle, symbolizes the masculine superiority or the foreign land that plays a basic role in sidelining the female or the diasporic community, respectively. The association of herself with a dashboard, and externalization of the most important roles, has clearly made Alvi the voice of the subjugated communities. Thereby, it can be said that architectural spaces in Alvi’s poetry reveal her subconscious struggle between two contrasting identities, which is also evident through social spaces in her poems.

### **Social and Filial Spaces**

Social space becomes one of the most eminent aspects of spatiality in Alvi’s poetry with reference to her experiences with a foreign land and culture. Social space refers to an ambience that exists as a mode of interaction between a number of individuals. Lefebvre believes that “(Social) space ... subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity, their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (p. 73). His description provides a foundation to conceptualize social space which involves the interrelations of the objects and individuals in Alvi’s poetry as her two famous poems “The Country at my Shoulder” (p. 34), and ‘Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan’ (p. 30) reveal. These poems expose her social space as populated by two opposite cultures which make her “half-English” (p. 30) and half-native, making her aim at “no fixed nationality” (p. 31), yet earning her a dual identity. This duality disrupts the “relative order” of the “things produced” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 73) in her social space, as two divergent traditional settings do not cohere with each other. Thereby, Alvi’s social space generates a liminality, throughout which hints at the poet’s urge to question her identity while wanting to “shake the dust from the country/ smooth it with [her] hands” (p. 34).

The social and familial relations play the most significant role in shaping one's social space. Alvi's social space can also be determined through Lefebvre's notions of social space, which, according to him, consists of objects which are not only things but also relations along with networks and pathways which make the social interaction possible (Lefebvre, [1991](#)). These networks (Lefebvre, [1991](#)) emerge in Alvi's poems in the form of her encounter with two different societies – the Pakistani traditions, ties, and values intriguing her constantly, and her English setting carrying an equally potent pull on her psyche. Likewise, the relations which find way into her poems are divided into two kinds; on one side is her “English grandmother” and “schoolfriend” (p. 31), while on the other side is her “cousin Azam”, “Uncle Aqbar”, and “Uncle Kamil” (pp. 34), the former representing her reality and present, the latter, her imagination and past. However, a collision of both societies is evident in her poems. For instance, she writes:

My salwar kameez  
Didn't impress the schoolfriend  
Who sat on my bed, asked to see  
My weekend clothes (p. 31).

The “schoolfriend” represents the English society with its respective values and trends which now are dominant in the poet's current social space. Her psychological framework and lifestyle make her long for “denim and corduroy” which refers to more practical fabric and outfits, resulting in an alienation with the traditional Eastern dresses. Her affiliation with the Western environment earns her an Englishness; this space once produced, affects her dealings with other social spaces she exists in, for instance, her native society which has been distanced by her modernized existence.

The poet's social space, developed as a result of her encounter with an English society, not only affects her Pakistani identity but also shapes her feminine space. For instance, in her poem “The Sari” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 36) the poet has been made to decipher herself as a female entity by the individuals around her as “they wrapped and wrapped [her] in it/ whispering *Your body is your country*” (p. 36). Here, the social space has been referred to through the pronoun ‘they’ which she elaborates in the second stanza of the poem:

They were all looking in on me –  
Father, Grandmother,  
The cook's boy, the sweeper girl,

The bullock with the sharp  
Shoulder blades,  
The local politicians (p. 36).

This socio-filial space around her controls her psyche as it is through it that she determines her role as a female. This discernment brings forth the idea that her “body is [her] country” which is to be covered in a “sari”, (p. 36) and highlights the fact that as one’s country provides one a certain nationality, the female body provides a woman her identity. Consequently, her feminine space is dominated by her social space.

An essential fragment of social space is the space of a city the center of various cultural, social and traditional activities which make it a space fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities (Lefebvre, [1991](#), p. 73). This makes city space a vibrant social space according to Lefebvre’s notion of it being a product (p. 73). However, apart from these, the most important trait of a city is its historical significance. The claim that the space of city is a ‘product’ rather than a ‘work’ is also apt in Alvi’s representation of city space as the references to Lahore and Hyderabad, or the incorporation of the word ‘city’ carries a different meaning every time it is employed in her poems according to their respective happenstances. Thereby, the image of one specific city alters in different poems; so, does its space. Consequently, the city becomes a ‘product’.

In the poem “Map of India” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 73), city becomes a means of conveyance by transferring the poet to her past, thus, “each city has a window/ which [she] leave[s] open/ a little wider each time” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 37). The term ‘window’ emblematically suggests that the encounter with the cities on the map offers her a peep into certain elements of her past: the social, historical, cultural, and ancestral background. This “window” that is left open “a little wider each time” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 37) is a clue to the fact that this city brings fragments from her past or subconscious mind into her present life. City space portrayed in these lines becomes a source of realization and assertion of her geographical dislocation, and the social and cultural crisis, initiating a process of bringing back memories and reliving the past. It also reveals that within the wider social space, this poem displays her psychological and memory spaces, which directly affect her social space.

In another poem, “When We Ask to Leave Our City”, (p. 46) Alvi incorporates figurative references to the political and social anxiety that she encounters as a diaspora. The angst of being out of place, politically controlled by an opposing force, and the lifeless existence, which is a byproduct of this surrounding turmoil, is represented through the imagery of an “umbilical cord” as:

And they offer a kind of umbilical cord  
To connect us up to the coldest stars.  
We’ll stay in our city  
Opt for decent bread  
Lean our unruly heads  
Against the wall (p. 46).

City herein offers a space that provides a social, political, and cultural foothold to the otherwise unstable foreign existence of the poet. In other words, the city provides a sheltered space to simmer down her existential upheaval like the lines “lean our unruly heads/ against the wall” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 46) reveal an expression of relief or a final reclusion. The pronoun ‘our’ attached to the word ‘city’ creates an image of possession which develops a certain belonging and makes her “opt for decent bread” (p. 46) that a foreign land cannot provide. The pronoun ‘they’ represents the opposite force the authorities which possess hegemony in the immigrated land. These entities, marked by an entirely dissimilar cultural, social, religious, and political space, connect the poet to the “coldest stars” (p. 46) where ‘star’ carries a certain reference to height and light yet the term ‘coldest’ with its superlative degree mars the charm by being devoid of life, warmth, and energy, being an antithesis of the poet’s own city her own space. Therefore, city, in this poem, does not appear as an inactive space, rather it is socially and politically vibrant as it opens up a complex philosophy of belonging and bondage.

Analogously, the poem “Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 31) contains a reference to Lahore in similar undertones as Alvi pictures various elements and aspects related to Lahore in her memory which open up avenues offering an insight into city space. The pictorial representation of the city and the visual imagery is evident from the following lines:

Sometimes I saw Lahore –

My aunts in shaded rooms,  
 Screened from male visitors,  
 Sorting presents,  
 Wrapping them in tissue,  
 Or there were beggars, sweeper-girls  
 And I was there –  
 Of no fixed nationality,  
 Staring through fretwork  
 At the Shalimar Gardens (p. 31).

In this verse, ‘Lahore’ involves three different spaces within a single image of a city; these are: feminine space, familial space, and historical space. Both feminine and familial spaces are developed through picturing the “aunts” secluded from men; this seclusion creates a peculiar feminine space which is further adorned with typical womanish deeds like preparing gifts to send to distant relatives (p. 31). The “Shalimar Gardens”, being an illustration of the excellence of Mughal architecture, carries the essence of the Eastern culture and history (p. 31). These spaces prove to be a montage of the specific traits of the city in her mind as the hyphen after the noun ‘Lahore’ shows.

The poet’s existence in two contrasting social spaces and geographical landscapes rightly justifies her dilemma of duality a conundrum, which is also present in the form of diasporic spaces in her poems.

### **Diasporic Spaces**

According to Hear (2015), the kinship between the members of the same community is the basic factor that generates the concept of diaspora; consequently, the “imagined community” possesses a prominent place and role in the diasporic existence. This psychological and emotional affinity with one’s community is eminent in Alvi’s poetry which covers a large portion in her poems in the form of diasporic space because of her affiliation with Pakistan “without knowing its members personally” (p. 34), as the term ‘diaspora’ has more strong connections with the immigrant’s native land than the foreign place.

The diasporic spaces in Alvi’s poems can be analyzed with reference to Hear’s idea of the “imagined community” (p. 34) as she writes about her cousin who studies ‘Christina Rossetti’, and “Azam [who] wants the visitors to play/ ludo with him all the time” (p. 34). There are also minor references

to her family in the host country such as her mother or grandmother, which, along with the kith and kin in Pakistan, describe Alvi's perception and comprehension of her call to these people, and add to the diasporic space in her poems.

Alvi's poetry can be regarded as a perfect illustration of Tilmann Heil's notion of the constant "comparison ... between the current and past places of residence" (p. 44) of the diaspora as the poem "The Country at my Shoulder" (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 34) highlights a liminal space which is created as a repercussion of her displaced land. Though she is carrying her hometown "at [her] shoulder", she still hankers to "water the country with English rain/ cover it with English words" in order to "shake the dust from the country/ smooth it with [her] hands" (p. 35). However, this urge cannot be regarded as the poet's inclination towards the English side of her persona; rather it reveals her yearning to cover the empty spaces which are present in both of her existences: the Englishness in her native space, and the Oriental in the foreign space. Failing to fill the missing spaces, the poet consequently dwells in a diasporic space which comprises her existential struggles. It is important to mention that this diasporic space is grounded in her strong ties with her "co-nationals, co-religionists and co-ethnics" (Hear, [2015](#), p. 34) which is evident from her poetry. This community includes her "cousin Azam [who] ... learns English in a class of seventy", "the women stone-breakers", "Uncle Aqbar [who] drives down the mountain/ to arrange his daughter's marriage" and "the men... in loose cotton clothes" (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 34). The poem is quite ironic as these people share the same national, cultural, and religious identity with her, yet are different in their practices and personal spaces. Therefore, it is through this divergence that she apprehends herself and her identity as a diaspora.

The poem "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 30) is quite self-explanatory with regard to diasporic space. A distinguishing aspect of this poem is that the diasporic space is created more through socio-cultural entities and less by the people. The only reference to the people in Pakistan is either of her "aunts" or the "beggars, sweeper-girls" (p. 31); however, the strong kinship with these individuals is represented and symbolized through the objects which connect the poet to them and her Eastern identity. The "peacock blue" "salwar kameez", the "embossed slippers" which are "gold and black" in color, the "candy-striped bangles", the "apple-green sari" that is "silver-bordered", and the "camel-skin lamp"



(Alvi, [1993](#), p. 30) are the emblems of another world that she cannot dwell in, yet possesses an affinity with it, earning her the status of diaspora. The two contrasting lines in the second stanza of the poem describe her feeling “alien in the sitting-room” as she “could never be as lovely/ as those clothes” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 30) and suggest two contrary perspectives. She acknowledges the grandeur and aesthetic excellence of these gifts which is a clue to her remote connection with them as her cultural heritage, however, the alienation that distances her from it is caused by her ease with “denim and corduroy” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 30) and “cardigans/ from Marks and Spencers” (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 30) which is symbolic of the English side of her personality. This space between her affiliation and alienation can be entitled as her diasporic space.

The critic Barzoo Eliassi refers to the “ethnic discrimination [that] strengthens” (p. 46) the diaspora’s identity, as is the case with Alvi whose “ethnic discrimination” (Eliassi, [2015](#), p. 46) perhaps reverts her native geography. However, the encounter with this cultural distinction is quite complex as at certain times, it brings her from a crossroads to the assertion of her ancestral and cultural reality, and at other times, makes her exist in a cultural duality.

The word “map” in the title of the poem “Map of India” is symbolic of her spatial anxiety and dislocation, whereas “India” implies an oriental space due to its geographical location on the world map, and its cultural and traditional values along with a history that it shares with Pakistan. This poem displays the poet’s urge to identify and connect with her historical legacy by analyzing this map:

If I stare at the country long enough  
I can prise it off the paper,  
Lift it like a flap of skin.  
Sometimes it’s an advent calendar –  
Each city has a window  
Which I leave open  
A little wider each time (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 37).

Skin is the largest and most protective organ of a body; therefore, the analogy drawn between skin and the country is self-descriptive in highlighting the eminence of the poet’s oriental background in her life. The ability to “prise it off” (p. 37) reveals that the map not only exists as an

abstract concept or reminiscence of her past, but stands as a concrete, physical reality in her present existence, being far more than an illustration on paper. Moreover, the “advent calendar” suggests that this emblem of her past influences the poet’s future as, through it, she counts on the coming times. Old stories open by like “windows” (p. 37) describing how the poet’s diasporic space is maintained by the intervention of her past in the present.

Alvi’s poems offer a complex web of fragmented connections which take the readers back to her native land to understand her identity crisis. The diasporic existence, as discussed above, generates an existential crisis in the poet’s life; this existential angst makes her explore her physical and body space.

### **Physical and Body Spaces**

Alvi’s poetry contains various references to the human body, which are incorporated in terms of her geographical locality, metaphorized as her country. Vis (2009) discusses body space with regard to the inherent existential angst of the humans relating it to “existential philosophy and anthropological embodiment” (p. 39) which are prominent in Alvi’s poems as a reflection of her spatial displacement.

The poem “The Country at my Shoulder” Alvi (1993) contains an extended metaphor of body as is evident from the title itself. The poem thematically represents the poet’s memory of Pakistan which is intensified by apt references of her body parts. The poem opens with the following verse: “There’s a country at my shoulder/ growing larger soon it will burst/ rivers will spill out, run down my chest” (p. 34). The two body parts referred to in this verse, namely, ‘shoulders’ and ‘chest’, are the most essential parts of a person’s stature and biological wellbeing; the shoulders make him remain upright and the chest, as it contains and protects the heart—is a central component of the body. However, it is quite ironic that the “country” which exists at her “shoulder” and is a means of her uprightness and honor due to her prized oriental legacy, is going to “burst” (Alvi, 1993, p. 34). This legacy is highlighted in the rest of the poem through various references to her Pakistani relatives and other social connections, and can be taken as her “anthropological” (Vis, 2009, p. 39) concerns. Alvi highlights two reasons for which the country bursts: first, it is “growing larger” (Alvi, 1993, p. 34), which offers a “psychoanalytic” (Vis, 2009, p. 41) insight into the poet’s psyche as this abstract expansion is symbolic of the assertion of

the country's worth in the poet's life. The second reason is stated in the poem's last verse which connects back to the initial verse through the reappearance of the phrase "soon it will burst", followed by the second cause of the bursting the poet's desire to "water the country with English rain" (Alvi, [1993](#), p. 34). As the country bursts, "rivers will spill out, run down [her] chest" which suggests that the chest the central part of her body—has become a geographical landscape, and "rivers" imply the tears which have spilled out symbolizing that the map has been emblematically imprinted on her body and she carries the weight of the memory of a "country" on her "shoulder" (p.34). Therefore, the body space in this poem is specifically employed to refer to her country, which reveals the notion that as the body provides the initial most space to a human (Vis, [2009](#), p. 39), native land generates a similar spatial construct.

Vis's description that body space can be used in "anthropomorphic" references of "cultural life" (p. 41) is much appropriate with regard to Alvi's poems because her country has been referred to as her body, making it alive like an entity inhabiting the poet's psychological space. She writes: "the country has become my body" (p. 35); an identical assertion is found in "Sari" in which she writes: "Eventually / They wrapped and wrapped me in it/ Whispering *Your body is your country*" (p. 36). Body space, in these verses, has been used to anthropomorphize (Vis, [2009](#), p. 41) the country, which metaphorically suggests a number of interpretations; it shows that body space has been broadened abstractly in order to amalgamate it with her national and ethnic space; this multiplicity of spaces makes her fill the void that has been created by distancing from her country physically. Secondly, the analogy between the country and the female body is highly symbolic; the female body is a source of the development of a feminine identity, likewise the country, when it becomes her body, satiates the existential needs through the supply of a national identity.

The female body has been also discussed as analogous to a colonized land by the postcolonial theorists, considering it a "penetrable" region (Edwards, [2008](#), p. 98). The land/woman analogy by Said and Edwards is much applicable to Alvi's poetry due to the fact that Pakistan has a history of colonization. Just as a piece of land is colonized by the colonial power, a female body is said to be a land colonized by the masculine powers, thereby highlighting the hegemonic dynamics. It, thus, shows that body space has been used by Alvi as an anthropological and historical reference that

provides a unique narrative of the bygone times. A similar description of the past is represented in the poem “Map of India” (Alvi, 1993, p. 37) with the aid of body space. India, being a neighboring country, shares a history of colonization with Pakistan. Therefore, the reference of India and its map takes the readers back to the pre-independence times and consequently, to the poet’s historical space, as she states: “India is manageable—smaller than/ My hand, the Mahanadi River/ Thinner than my lifeline” (p. 37). The two parts of the body hand and life line are compared with a piece of land, which again levels both while parallelizing them. Secondly, the reference to “lifeline” (p. 37) is very significant as it reflects two images: lifeline in an individual’s palm that represents lifespan, and the other, heartbeat displayed on a heart rate monitor. Both images, when associated with a certain piece of land, generate life for the poet.

Through the parallelization of the country to “hand” and “lifeline” (p. 37), Alvi miniaturizes India, creating a microcosmic picture of the country as it is likened to her hand; its geographic features discussed in terms of bodily features. The “Mahanadi River” is paradoxical to the term “thinner” (p. 37) as the term ‘maha’ and ‘nadi’ literally imply ‘Great River’, yet it is thin. This shows the poet’s intimacy with her native land and its geography, as it appears to be closer to her than her hand. The adjective “manageable” also suggests the poet’s ease with her own geographic space that contrasts with the place she is dwelling in which is not “thinner”, “manageable”, and “smaller” (p. 37) and is not easy to comprehend and connect to. Therefore, in this poem, body space is used to develop a comparison that results in a display of her intimacy and close comprehension of her geological roots.

### Conclusion

This research has analyzed the poetry of Moniza Alvi taken from the book *The Country at my Shoulder*, in the light of spatiality. An analysis of the spaces in her poetry reveals internal chaos generated by the duality of the poet’s being as she exists in two prominently contrasting environments, Pakistan and England, the former dwells in her memory, and the latter, in her present consciousness as a concrete reality. Therefore, the research analyzes her poetry by focusing on her diasporic existence as a context.

The research has highlighted that the increasing existential crisis due to a modernized existence has resulted in a heightened need for identity and meaning in the postmodern world, which is evident through space as an

essential fragment of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century literature. Alvi's experiences act as a microcosm for the spatial and cartographic anxiety of other Pakistani diasporic writers. The study has also explored her feminine psyche, that is strongly linked with her native identity, forming a complete narrative through memory. Her poetry reflects her personal dilemma of migration as well as spatial restlessness, contributing to a new feminist stance to postmodern literature.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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