

**LANGUAGE, DESIRE AND ABSENCE: A STUDY OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN  
MONIZA ALVI'S POETRY**Khadija Hassan<sup>1</sup>, Asia Khatoon<sup>2</sup>, Amber Hafeez<sup>3</sup>**Original Article**

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**Abstract**

*This paper aims to explore the figures of metaphor and metonymy in Moniza Alvi's poetry using Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory of language and identity formation. Critics view Alvi's poetry as an expression of an alienated and fragmented consciousness. Her constant reference towards Pakistan and its culture is viewed as an attempt to reconnect with her lost past. These approaches attempt to explain her poetry within the context of diaspora studies. However, a psychological analysis of the figures of metaphor and metonymy in Alvi's poetic language reveals a completely different layer of meaning. By applying Lacanian framework on selected poems of Moniza Alvi, the study presents Alvi's poetry as an allegory of a Poststructuralist subject lost in the labyrinth of language. It has been argued that Alvi's constant attempt at reconnecting with her birthplace through poetic representation falls short of evoking a real place. The analysis of figurative language in Alvi's poetry reveals how Alvi's poetic language is caught up in a constant sliding of signifiers in a metonymic chain and the result is a fragmented representation of a lost object. It has also been argued that the author is not consciously involved in this metonymic game of language; language shapes her subjectivity as much as it shapes her poetic language.*

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Metonymy, Signifier, Signified, Desire, Language, Subjectivity

**1. Introduction**

In his influential work *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes famously stated: "I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me" (Barthes, 1973/1975, p. 38). Language is one of the fundamental preoccupations of the poststructuralist theorists. A critical exploration of the polysemous and fluid nature of language can be both rewarding and frustrating at the same time. While for a critic, the ambiguities underlying a text provide him with an opportunity to explore the hitherto unknown aspects about a work, the inability of linguistic structures to convey the intended meaning frustrates the author's intentions. This paper aims to explore this fundamental poststructuralist idea of ineffectiveness of language in representing reality by analyzing the works of Pakistani-British poet Moniza Alvi. Alvi's parents moved to England when she was a few months old. She did not visit Pakistan until after the publication of her first poetry collection *The Country at my Shoulder*. Since then, she has published ten collections of poetry. Her poems have also been nominated for several prestigious literary awards including T.S. Eliot award and Whitbread Poetry

award and have won Poetry Business Prize and East Anglican Writers prize for poetry. Her poetry is memorable for its lyrical and dreamy representation of Pakistani culture. There is something surreal about the Pakistani cultural landscape that features in Alvi's poetic imagination. Alvi's poetry reflects her dual subjectivity and explores the themes of duality, partition, identity crisis, cultural hybridity, memory and nostalgia for the past.

In the poems selected for the purpose of textual analysis in this paper, Alvi attempts to integrate diverse images of Pakistani culture in order to create an imaginary montage of a land that was her birthplace. An atmosphere of longing and nostalgia surrounds the poems written about Pakistan and its culture. However, there is also in Alvi's poetry a hint of ambiguity and confusion that could be associated with her ambivalent feelings towards her motherland. Her poems express both a longing and an aversion for a place she hardly remembers but that will always haunt her. The depiction of Pakistani landscape in her poems is twofold: a benevolent, vibrant and bold presence on one hand and an intimidating and crushing burden threatening to unravel her identity on the other hand. The unique quality of Alvi's poetry lies in its evocation of a sensory as opposed to physical image of Pakistani culture and landscape. Pakistan in her poetry does not feature as a tangible place; it is rather an amalgamation of multiple sensory and abstract images.

By analyzing Alvi's poetry through Lacanian Psychoanalytic lens, this paper attempts to explain the paradoxical nature of Alvi's portrayal of Pakistan. Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory will serve to explain why the poet's attempt at portraying Pakistan as a presence only results in evoking a place that can never be experienced as a physical entity. It will also be useful in an innovative reading of metonymic and metaphoric axes in Alvi's poetry; instead of reading these figures as mere rhetorical expressions used for poetic effect, this paper will inquire into the broader question of how these figures frustrate the poet's desire to represent a lost object by entangling her in a chain of signifiers. Rather than viewing the ambivalence in Alvi's poetry as a reflection of her hybrid consciousness, the study intends to show that it is a product of primacy of the signifier over both subject and her discourse. The subject does not speak the language; the language speaks through the subject and is constantly working on many levels in order to delay the satisfaction of desire. Therefore, the paradoxical nature of Alvi's poetry is a result of a disjunction between the signifier and the signified.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

A close reading of Moniza Alvi's poetry reveals that her portrayal of Pakistani landscape evokes a surrealist landscape which can only be experienced as an abstract image. A paradox of representation arises from the constant conflict between the poet's attempted portrayal of Pakistan and the nostalgic experience it evokes in the reader. An attempt to resolve this paradox shall take into account the effects of the unconscious mechanisms on the poet's writing process and how this affects the final product of the poet's imagination.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

Drawing on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this paper aims to achieve the following objectives by the end of the discussion:

- To analyze the power of language in shaping the subject
- To present the subject of poetic language in a new light and explain how the constant sliding of signifier-signified relationships shapes a poetic discourse

### 1.3 Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions.

- How poetic language delays the evocation of a unified past by means of a symbolic substitute?
- How language causes the split of subject and creates a sense of alienation by virtue of this split?

## 2. Literature Review

Although Alvi's poetry has been recognized as a significant contribution to contemporary Diaspora literature, the scholarly research on her poetry has remained limited until now. The researchers have only now begun to explore the richness of themes and figurative language in Alvi's poetry. Her poetry has been analyzed by researchers using the theories of Postcolonial Feminism, Diaspora studies and Bhabha's idea of hybridity. These studies have particularly focused on textual analysis of Alvi's poetic language in order to identify themes of identity split, hybridity and duality. Alvi's unique poetic language and surrealist representation of Pakistani landscape has been taken as a sign of her awareness of being a subjectivity born of divided histories and dualities. Her ambivalent attitude towards identity and preoccupation with colors, symbols and fragmented language has been taken as a reflection of an alienated and split identity.

Significance of metaphor and metonymy to Alvi's poetic project has been a focus of many studies on her works. Some of these studies focus on Alvi's use of the trope of body as a reflection of her sense of being in-between two histories, cultures and identities. Shehata (2017) views Alvi's representation of body as a reflection of her corporeal attitude towards body as a site of conflict, cultural inscription and as a lived experience. Because she occupies third space in Bhabha's sense, Alvi's use of body as a site to be inscribed signifies her sense of belonging/not-belonging to either of the places and the experiences associated with body can serve for her as a point of reflection on her own fragmented identity. Rees-Jones (2005) equates Alvi's representation of body with feminist political practice in which body symbolizes the joining of public and private sphere in a nation state.

Mehar (2003) explores the role of figurative language in Alvi's poetic language using postcolonial theoretical framework. The metaphoric axis in Alvi's poetry reflects her hybrid consciousness. The flexibility of metaphor reflects Alvi's attempt to bridge the distances which separate her from her homeland. Wilkey (2015) presents Alvi's poetry as a celebration of mobility and as a feminine project aimed at carving a flexible space for female subjectivity. Swamy (2018) views Alvi's language as a reflection of her sense of displacement and diasporic sensibility. Using Bhabha's Postcolonial idea of hybridity and third place, she tries to situate Alvi's poetry in the historical and cultural context of her identity construction. Saeed et al. (2020) have used Psychoanalytic theory in order to analyze two distinct cultural landscapes featuring in Alvi's poetry as two distinct discourses on identity. They view Alvi's poetic language as mirroring the psychological conflict in her identity. These studies attempt to associate the metaphorical and metonymic aspects of Alvi's poetry with the question of description and representation.

Although these studies employ different theoretical frameworks in order to analyze the role of rhetorical devices and figurative language in shaping Alvi's poetic oeuvre, none of these studies have utilized the Lacanian Psychoanalytic theory to explore the effects of language in shaping a

poetic discourse. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap by rereading Alvi's poetry as a reflection of how language controls a poetic discourse by delaying the representation of the desired object by entangling the subject in a chain of signifiers and symbolic substitutes hence frustrating the subject's attempt at the representation of real.

Jacques Lacan was a French theorist and practitioner of Freudian Psychoanalytic practice. Lacan's work can be described as a radical rereading of Freudian Psychoanalysis. His Psychoanalytical theory cannot be understood without a reference to the works of his predecessor Sigmund Freud whose works laid the foundation of Psychoanalysis. Freud's discovery of the unconscious and its impacts on the subjectivity of an individual revolutionized the field of Psychology. Freud's theory of unconsciousness defines the unconscious as a store for the repressed infantile desires, painful memories and trauma (Freud, 1915/2004). The entry of a child into culture results in the creation of the unconscious. Although our conscious mind builds several barriers and defenses in order to prevent the overflow of unconscious thoughts into our life, the unconscious can manifest itself in the unguarded moments in the form of slips of tongue, inadvertent puns and dreams (Freud, 1901/1966). In language, the unconscious manifests itself through figures such as metaphor, metonymy and allusions.

The relevance of Freudian Psychoanalysis to the literary field lies in using this theory to reveal the fissures in the text's surface in order to unveil the unconscious desires and thoughts of the author or his characters. Lacan's rereading of Freud through a Poststructuralist lens puts language at the center of the process of subject formation. Lacan divides the process of identity formation in two stages: imaginary and symbolic. In the imaginary stage, the infant lives in a world of desires and possibilities and identifies with his mirror image- the image he views in the mirror (Lacan, 1966/2007). The entry into Symbolic order entails an acceptance of language and the social and cultural norms associated with it. The entry into language results in a split identity and loss of the wholeness associated with the mirror stage. Lacan views the unconscious as a product of this process. Lacan inverts the Saussurean sign structure in order to demonstrate the primacy of the signifier over the signified. From now on, the subject can only express his desire and longing for the *Real*—a world that he can never experience—through linguistic structures that predate his existence. The subject is constituted by language; he does not speak language but the language speaks through him. Since language is split between the signifier and the signified, the speaking subject can never fully express himself through language. He will always be caught up in the chain of signifiers where one signifier will only lead to another without ever truly representing the reality of the lost object. The loss of the desired object results in a lack that can never be fulfilled but only temporarily satisfied with symbolic substitutes (Lacan, 1966/2007).

Lacan's view that the unconscious is structured like language does not necessarily mean that the unconscious is like language; it means that the unconscious, like linguistic structures, speaks rhetorically through dreams, figures like metaphor and metonymy and mistakes of the subject. Lacan follows Roman Jakobson in studying metaphor and metonymy as two important components of language. In rhetoric, metaphor is a word that acts as a substitute for another word whereas metonymy refers to using part to symbolize whole. Jakobson viewed metaphor and metonymy as two axes of language in which metaphor refers to the axis of selection and metonymy to the axis of combination (Jakobson, 1995). Lacan viewed metaphor and metonymy as tools through which language defers the representation of the Real (Lacan, 1966/2007); hence the relevance of his theory to the literary field. Like a psychoanalyst, a literary critic must try to uncover

the hidden structures of the text in order to reveal the role of language in obstructing the representation of an object. By applying this theory on the selected poems of Moniza Alvi, the paper intends to reveal the role of figurative language in creating a paradoxical representation of an object or experience; the paradox of absence.

### 3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology employed in this paper is qualitative. A textual analysis of selected poems of Moniza Alvi will be carried out in order to address the questions raised in the introduction. The research aims at a rereading of metaphor and metonymy in Alvi's poetry by using Lacanian theory of Psychoanalysis.

### 4. Data Analysis

#### 4.1. Country as a Metaphor of Miniature

Growing up in England, Alvi did not return to Pakistan until after the publication of her first collection *The Country at My Shoulders*. At that time, she knew Pakistan solely through anecdotal narratives and stories she had heard from her Pakistani relatives. There has been a general misconception in the literary community that Alvi's poetry is a reflection of her childhood memories of Pakistan. Her attempt at reconstructing a country through the medium of imagination and language is what makes her poetry an interesting case study for Lacanian Psychoanalytic literary theory. Like a Lacanian subject, Alvi tries to express her desire for the lost object, the country of her birth, through the medium of poetry. The naivety of the subject lies in his near blindness towards the fact that language is not a transparent medium of expression. The representation of an object must always be mediated through the signifiers of language. In "The Country at My Shoulder", Alvi reconstructs her homeland through an amalgamation of multiple vistas of imaginary narratives and stories about Pakistani culture and landscape. However, the object, the country at poet's shoulder, remains unnamed. By using the metaphor of smallness, Alvi attempts to reclaim the infantile experiences by miniaturizing the country as something that can be carried over one's shoulders. The metaphorical smallness of the country serves to comprehend the cultural and social complexity of the homeland.

A pattern of metonymy can also be identified in this poem: from the game of "ludo" to learning "English in a class of seventy", women working in a hot afternoon to the arranged marriage of "Uncle Aqbar's daughter" who reads "Christina Rossetti", "bribery" to shooting a "tiger", there is a chain of metonymy leading from one signifier to the next without ever leading to the ultimate signifier of representation. The line "The country has become my body" aptly sums up the frustration of a subject caught up in a chain of signifiers. The attempt to represent the country through language only ends up entangling the subject in the linguistic axis of metonymy from which there is no escape as the poet "can't break bits off" of her body. The poet tries to stop the slippage of signifiers by "watering the country with English rain" and covering it with "English words" but the split created by language and symbolic order only results in fragmentation of the subject as well as the object. Metaphor and metonymy in this poem "invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic" (p.ix). The result of this gap is an eternally missing country which can only be experienced as an absence.

#### 4.2 Sari as a Metaphor and Metonym in “The Sari”

While a psychoanalytical reading of “The Country at my Shoulders” reveals the poet’s frustrated attempt to reconnect with her homeland, “The Sari” can be seen as a poem narrating the entry of a subject into symbolic order via entry into language and culture. In this poem, Alvi uses *Sari* as an extended metaphor which runs as a motif throughout the poem. Here, Sari symbolizes the dual cultures in which Alvi was brought up. The poem binds together two different cultures through the metaphor of a mythic sari which is unraveled by “all the people” from “Lahore to Hyderabad” and flutters “across the Arabian Sea”. A Lacanian reading of this poem presents a new perspective on the role of metaphor in Alvi’s poetry. The infant experiences himself as a *unified subjectivity* and this unity is threatened by the hugeness of sari and its cultural connotations. The “Wrapping” of the sari around the child is a re-enactment of the process of acculturation through which the subject enters the symbolic order. Another important theme explored in this poem is the relational notion of identity.

According to Lacan, the identity of a subject is constructed in *interaction* with others or what Lacan calls the *gaze* of the *other* and is therefore subject to flux (Lacan, 1958). In this poem, the identity of the infant is shaped by her subjection to the gaze of the people around her who “were all looking in on” her. The reference to the “local politicians” symbolizes the importance of cultural, societal and political forces in shaping the identity of a subject. The sari is also a metonym representing the diverse histories and cultures of the poet’s birthplace and adopted country. From mother’s womb to the “telescope” of the poet’s English grandmother to the places stretching from “Lahore to Hyderabad”, the sari covers thousands of miles representing the duality of the poet’s identity. In poetry, figurative language is usually viewed as a unifying force that brings about a unity among conflicting elements. New Critics also analyzed the figurative language in order to understand the underlying unified meaning of the poem (Brooks, 1956). However in Alvi’s poetry, Metaphor and Metonymy do not act as a unifying force. The sari does not act as a unifying force that brings about a fusion of two different cultures; it only intensifies the difference without offering any resolution in the end. The poem once again turns to the infant and ends with an authoritative declaration equating the child’s body with her country. A poem that begins as an attempt to narrate the personal history of the poet within the context of her dual identity ends up alienating the subject by declaring that the subject must bear the burden of her split identity; language shall offer no refuge.

#### 4.3 Henna and the Anonymous Girl in “An Unknown Girl”

“An Unknown Girl” narrates the poet’s encounter with a girl in the “neon bazaar” who applies henna on her hands in return “for a few rupees”. The experience of henna application is presented in a very positive and wholesome light. The poet is fascinated by the beautiful patterns of “brown veins” on her palms. The experience of the poet can be taken as symbolizing her acceptance of the hybrid nature of her identity. However, this sense of fulfillment does not last for a long time as the poet comes to realize that the beautiful amber color of henna will “fade in a week”. The application of henna and its fading color figuratively represent the poet’s attempt to connect with her Indo-Pakistan roots and her sadness at the ephemeral nature of such an experience. The frustration at the loss of a unified subjectivity is symbolized by the poet’s attempt at “clinging to these firm peacock lines”.

The symbolic nature of the figure of the “unknown girl” creates an atmosphere of ambiguity in the poem. The *unknown girl* could also be taken as symbolizing an imaginary past

version of the poet's present self. Her 'longing for the unknown girl' can also be read as a subject's longing for a past in which the desired object served as an anchoring point. Metaphor in this poem does not act as a bridge that transcends the gap between two different cultures; it only reinforces the idea of difference.

#### 4.4 Clothes as a Symbol of Difference in Alvi's Poetry

The symbolic significance of dressing in Alvi's poetry cannot be overstated. From "The Sari" to "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan", clothes as a symbolic substitute serve to bring out the contrast between two cultures and histories. Cultural anthropologists view dressing code as one of the basic components constituting a culture. The poem "Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan" employs the metonymic chain of clothes in order to negotiate between two cultures. The poem is usually taken as an expression of Alvi's hybrid origins and split consciousness. While she is fascinated by the beautiful presents, she still longs for "denim and corduroy". She envies one of her aunts who did not have to go through the ordeal of choosing between two identities. Unlike her aunt, the poet feels "alien" due to the absence of a place to which she could truly belong.

While an atmosphere of nostalgia and desire for belonging shapes Alvi's poetry on Pakistan, there is also a sense of alienation due to the gap between her expectations and reality. The poet feels alienated after realizing the stark contrast between her dreamy and bright-colored vision of Pakistan and the "fractured" reality of Pakistani landscape. An analysis of the metonymic structure of the poem reveals an underlying rupture which is a product of the gap between signifier and signified. The poet enters the metonymic world of language when she tries to portray Pakistani culture through the dress code. From the "peacock-blue salwar kameez" to the "apple-green sari", the poem slides from one signifier to another in an attempt to represent Pakistani culture. However, the gap between the signifier and signified only intensifies the irony in the poem. The vividness of the signifiers-blue, orange, gold, black, apple green color of the clothing items-is in stark contrast with the reality which they are meant to evoke; a conflicted and fractured land. These lines represent the frustration of a subject whose belief in the power of language to evoke reality is shaken by what he encounters. The poem ends on a very personal and poignant note; caught up in an incessant sliding of the signifiers, the poet declares herself to be "of no fixed nationality".

#### 4.5 Wedding as an Extended Metaphor in "The Wedding"

Wedding in this poem serves to bring out the contrast between two cultures and the gap between the expectations of the subject and reality. The frustration of the poet at not being able to reconstruct her past through poetry reaches its climax in this poem where the extended metaphor of wedding signifies her intense desire to relive an experience out of her reach. The wedding ceremony as metonym also alludes to the traditional Pakistani wedding ceremony. The poet's desire to "marry a country" is countered by the "spilled out" England symbolizing the impossibility of the satisfaction of desire. Since the identity of a subject is always in flux, the poet cannot choose between two identities. She must bear the burden of her fragmented identity.

### 5. Conclusion

The study of metaphor and metonymy in Moniza Alvi's poetry reveals the importance of linguistic structures in shaping and reflecting the subjective identity of individuals. While it cannot be declared as the only valid interpretation of Alvi's poetry, Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory can provide new insights into the role of figurative language in poetry. The Poststructuralists rightly

argued that the truth is a matter of perspective. This is also applicable to the study of literary texts. No single interpretation of a literary text can be taken as a final authority on its meaning and herein lies the limitation of research: through an act of omission, the research circles out a particular area of a text for analysis leaving out the remainder of the text. This study focuses on a Poststructuralist reading of figurative language in Alvi's poetry in order to reveal the role of language in reinforcing difference and gap. And while it is true that the figures of metaphor and metonymy occupy a significant space in Alvi's poetry, there is an abundance of other figural and literary devices which add to the richness and thematic unity of her poetry.

A Lacanian reading of metaphor and metonymy in Alvi's poetry is an attempt to present the relation between a subject and language in a new light. Humanist theories of literature strongly believe in the agency of the author and the power of language to represent reality. Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory challenges this assumption by exposing the role of language in delaying the fulfillment of desire. While the previous studies of Alvi's poetry provide brilliant insights into the richness and complexity of her poetry, they take her poetry to be a reflection of her subjectivity and past memories. The Poststructuralist reading of her poems shows that Alvi's attempt to rediscover a lost past through poetic representation entails a subjection to the signifiers of language. Language delays the subject's desire for presence by reinforcing the experience of separation. Therefore, Pakistan in Alvi's poetry can only be experienced as something elusive and always absent.

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