

Reading poems from other cultures: 5. *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*

This audio bite is about *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan* by Moniza Alvi.

- ELIOT: *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan* is about how the poet felt when she was around 13 years old and living in England. Her father was from Pakistan, her mother from England, and she felt she didn't really belong to either country, or either culture.
- ALIX: The poem starts with her thinking about the presents, mainly clothes and jewellery, which her aunts sent her over the years. These are from Pakistan and they are very different to what she normally wears. They are very colourful, and she seems to like looking at them. However, she doesn't seem so happy to wear them because they don't fit in with the way of life in England.
- ELIOT: In fact, she even says she was alien in the sitting room – that these presents felt completely out of place. And then she says she longed for denim, as if wearing jeans would make her fit in, and that she'd feel more English, and more at home.
- ALIX: Then she thinks about other things which they have in the house from Pakistan, like a camel-skin lamp, her mother's jewellery and her salwar kameez, which is like loose trousers and a top. Each of these brings back a strong memory.
- ELIOT: And each one has a strong contrast. For instance, the lamp is cruel, but beautiful. Her mother loved the jewellery, but it was stolen. She admired her clothes, but they didn't impress her friend.
- ALIX: Perhaps the best contrast is when she describes her clothes from Pakistan as 'radiant', meaning they seem very colourful and special. But her family in Pakistan seem more impressed by an ordinary cardigan from Marks and Spencers.
- ELIOT: The poet writes this to show how she never felt at home in either culture. Each culture seems to have different ideas about what is good, or what is beautiful. And the things in her home constantly remind her that she is a mixture of the two cultures.
- ALIX: The last part of the poem is when the clothes remind her about sailing to England when she was young. Even then she seemed unhappy – she cried on the way and when she arrived, she played alone.
- ELIOT: Photographs give her an idea of Pakistan, but she hasn't been back since she left as a baby and she can only imagine what it is like. She imagines the war that took place, and her aunts

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wrapping up the presents they sent her, and finally she imagines herself there.

ALIX: She then says she is of no fixed nationality. She isn't English, she says she's only half-English. And she isn't Pakistani now – in fact she describes herself as looking through fretwork at the Shalimar Gardens, as if she's an outsider looking at other people through a fence. And realising she doesn't belong there.

ELIOT: So *Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan* is all about growing up in two cultures. It uses the presents she's been sent to make contrasts between Pakistan and England. A lot of the poem is about the young girl's feelings – she likes the presents, but they don't really suit her. And the more she thinks about it, the less at home she feels. At the end, it's as if she feels homeless – she is stuck between two very different places.

Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan has a lot to say about identity and culture but you could also use it if you wanted to write about change, a particular place or childhood experiences.