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ABSTRACT

As discussions about the hijab circulate in twenty-first century Western Europe, it seems as though few lawmakers are looking to the narratives and experiences of Muslim and South Asian women to give voice to the practice. This thesis looks at the poets Kamala Das, Intiaz Dharker, and Moniza Alvi to try and locate how this unease with the South Asian female body in the U.K. is reflected in poetic language. In particular, these poets seem to complicate how the body is used as a focal point for discussions about female empowerment and agency. However, this focus on the female body is still silencing and restricting her voice and therefore her agency and political power. I explore questions of poetic form and British literary conventions in the work of these poets, especially in the wake of national displacement and diaspora. In studying the work of these poets, my objective is not to compartmentalize their narratives and experiences, but rather to illustrate how varied and contradictory some of these narratives can be.
INTRODUCTION

In a 2006 column that has since been removed from the Lancashire Telegraph website, former Leader of the House of Commons Jack Straw describes his discomfort when interacting with “veiled” women. David Bartlett, in writing a summary of Straw’s column, includes some of the government minister’s quotes: “a veil could be seen as ‘a visible statement of separation and difference,’ … ‘Above all, it was because I [Straw] felt uncomfortable about talking to someone face-to-face who I could not see,’ he added,” (“Straw in plea to Muslim women: Take off your veils”).

Straw’s “discomfort” about confronting a veiled woman—likely an Islamic woman of color—is indicative of a broader treatment of minority communities in the post-9/11 West, especially the U.S. and the U.K. Straw sees a symbol of “separation and difference” based on the woman’s decision to wear the hijab, but the separation and difference is indicative of much more than just a physical barrier concealing the face or hair. This division within the community creates “veils” between the U.K.’s Western (white) “monoculture” and the cultures of its resident minorities. Though Straw attempted to hedge his statement by claiming that he felt uncomfortable talking to “someone” with a hidden face, the gendered implication of his statement is extremely obvious in the context of the discussion surrounding the hijab. The Muslim (often South Asian) female body becomes a site of political discourse and conversation, and often people with few ties to the South Asian or Muslim community have opinions about the patriarchal, oppressive associations between the hijab and South Asian women. Vijay Mishra argues that part of the reason for this political discussion is rooted in questions of
female agency, writing, “what if these chador-wearing women are really enjoying their
diasporic lives amidst us and constructing the nation ‘otherwise’?” (14). My project seeks
to answer how some South Asian female poets navigate this question within their poetry,
and how they double back on questions of national and gender identity to forge a space
for the South Asian female voice. Ultimately, notions of female identity are still fed
through a postcolonial loop in which the subject is aware that her identity causes
discomfort—sometimes outrage—amongst Westerners.

This thesis examines the political implications of South Asian women’s poetry
written and published in English. This project is particularly invested in contemporary
poetry, or at least, poetry penned in the latter half of the twentieth century. In using the
poetry of Kamala Das, Imtiaz Dharker, and Moniza Alvi as a catalyst, this thesis seeks to
locate how female subjectivities are inscribed on the body—a body that provokes
considerable political controversy in Western countries. How does a displaced identity
contribute to a feminist discourse? In particular, how do the lingering effects of British
colonial rule distort or problematize these subjectivities, especially those (dis)located in
diaspora? My purpose in putting the poetry of Das, Dharker, and Alvi in conversation
with each other is to map a trajectory of how subjectivity is figured alongside the borders
of patriarchy and hegemony. The questions I listed above do not have simple answers
that can apply to all members of the community; however, my purpose in pursuing this
project is to demonstrate how South Asian women writers living in the U.K. can assert
their agency even within a marginalizing environment. Through the use of plurality and
anonymity in the language of their poetry, and by incorporating the motif of textures and
weaving, Das, Dharker, and Alvi seem to craft new poetic and political landscapes outside of the Western hegemonic structures.

As its theoretical framework, this thesis consults Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as a touchstone. Spivak writes,

> as an object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (82-83)

This argument provides some foundation for this project, as it represents what Das, Dharker, and Alvi attempt to bring attention to through their poetry. The fact that the poets I analyze are middle-class and well-educated already situates them outside of Spivak’s definition of the subaltern as the most marginalized of populations, “the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (78).

However, their poetry is a gateway to understanding South Asian women’s narratives in the context of contemporary notions of nationhood and race. Indeed, both Kamala Das and Intiaz Dharker are associated with political activism on behalf of South Asian women and disadvantaged populations—Das in India and Dharker in the U.K. My analysis of Moniza Alvi’s poetry will also expand on the British political climate in which South Asian women are currently occupying.

My first chapter looks to the poetry of Kamala Das to explore how female subjectivity is internally complicated by the pressures of a patriarchal community. I look to three poems: “An Introduction” (1965), “The Sensuous Woman” (1984), and “Alien Territories” (2000). Das struggles with contradictions surrounding an evolving South
Asian female subjecthood: namely, the contradictions between a sexually liberated female subject and patriarchal forces that constrain the female body to traditional roles based on gender essentialism. Das attempts to “reconcile” these hegemonic, patriarchal structures by distorting the bodies and the localities of her poem’s subjects. This way, her poetry can attempt to grasp at some semblance of subjectivity for women without directly challenging oppressive structures. However, by the end of Das’s poetic career, her poetry begins to display ambivalences about national identity, putting pressure on questions of where to locate the female subject. Das also sets a precedent for South Asian female poets by virtue of her willingness to use the confessional form in order to explore different aspects of identity. While Dharker and Alvi do not utilize as many confessional techniques as Das, their poetic voices are still ultimately dedicated to the exploration of female identity and experience.

I then move to the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, a contemporary poet and a Pakistani immigrant to the U.K. Dharker utilizes a collective female voice in order to push back against patriarchal and nationalist attitudes in the U.K. Her poetry is complicated by paradoxes of landscape: indeed, is Dharker’s poetry objecting to the patriarchal and hegemonic structures of the U.K., or of those structures in an enclosed minority community within the U.K.? Her use of a collective female voice functions as a woven textile in her poetry, however, this weaving of a communal voice still leaves gaps in the formation of a collective experience. In particular, I look to her poems “Purdah (1)” (1989) and “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” (2006). While “Purdah (1)” is a severe illustration of the oppressiveness of purdah and its misogynistic implications, “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” is also a rebellion
against British critics of “foreign” cultures. “They’ll Say…” advocates for sexual liberation and sardonically questions censorship. However, Dharker’s acceptance of Western feminism as a means of combatting the hegemonic and patriarchal forces that limit South Asian female identity lacks an intersectional, global perspective.

My final chapter turns to the poetry of Moniza Alvi to situate the question of a diasporic, displaced identity in the context of the British New Labour government of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Alvi’s poetry grapples with some of the same conflicts that Dharker also illustrates in her writing; however, Alvi’s poetry works within the context of diaspora and globalization rather than static communities confined to the borders of a nation. Alvi’s poetry neither embraces nor rejects Western feminism as a method for handling global issues, however, her poetry does illustrate the limits of Western feminism in mobile, diasporic communities.

Both Alvi and Dharker explicitly mention the hijab in their poetry, a garment under constant criticism in many Western European countries, including the U.K. For example, in France, the veil has been banned in all public schools. While this project is not limited entirely to the hijab as a central motif in the poetry, I would still like to briefly visit its significance in the postcolonial discussion. Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor notes the implications of the victimization of South Asian or Muslim women in Western society and how such stereotypes are part of a larger colonial attitude. Writing on the prevalence of “victim” narratives in many Muslim memoirs published in Western countries, Cheruvallil-Contractor describes how a certain narrative has already taken hold in how female subjectivity is aligned with victimhood in the Western world: “…stories of injustices in foreign locales, difference from the reader’s habitat, and which reinforce the
undiscerning reader’s beliefs in the superiority of one culture over another, which then is othered as the misogynist, exotic and different perpetuator of injustices against women,”
(24). Aware of these stereotypes of Muslim women, Dharker and Alvi both attempt to describe what the veil means to them: with Dharker rejecting the veil and its patriarchal implications, while Alvi instead demonstrates how the veil can be a shared experience amongst many women living in diaspora.

The veil or hijab is only one example of how the poets I examine grapple with how the South Asian female body is a site of discourse. However, the legislation over the hijab in some countries is a testament to how the policing of the marginalized woman’s body can occur both within a small cultural community and a broader, national community. How can identity be figured in a country where one’s agency is constantly being compromised for the sake of a Western feminist ideal?
THE “DISTORTED” SELF: COMPROMISING THE INDIAN FEMALE SUBJECT IN 
THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

In a 1992 interview with Indian literary critic P.P. Raveendran, poet Kamala Das (1934-2009) asserted her views on feminism as an organized social movement:

Feminism as the westerns [sic] see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because I have loved my husband and I still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them. Most of the feminists I met outside the country were lesbians—out and out lesbians. I do not think I’m a lesbian … I must speak the truth. I believe that we must abandon a thing if it has no moral foundation whether it be a belief, a political system or a religious system. (73)

Despite her disapproval of Western feminism, many critics typify Das as a feminist poet. However, Das’s criticism of western feminism illustrates one angle of the ongoing political and academic debates that are invested in postcolonial women’s liberation movements. Because emerging criticisms of postcolonial texts are more attuned than ever to the nuances of oppression and marginalization, more and more discussion is evolving around questions of intersectionality and the variety of experience.

In this chapter, I examine the contradictions in Das’s poetry between female subjective identities and the hegemonic forces of patriarchy and nationalism (in the wake of post-colonialism) that complicate her poetry throughout her lifetime. In line with my
greater argument that the female body serves as a place of tension between these forces, Das’s contribution to transnational feminist poetry is one invested in the lone female subject. Ultimately, Das’s female subject is always at odds with hegemonic forces, and the body is a place of compromise for Das rather than a place of rejection. The only way for Das to reconcile these contradictions is to construct a disassembled female subject in her poetry, one that has to “distort” itself to exist alongside critical dialogue, constraining notions of traditional femininity, and the monotheistic religion of Islam. The paradoxes Das confronts are not ever fully reconciled, although her contribution to transnational and postcolonial feminist poetry laid the groundwork for future poets to explore issues of community and history through a more collective, politicized female body.

Das herself was an activist on behalf of women, even running as a candidate for the Indian Parliament in 1984. Despite her attempt to break into the Indian political arena, Das vastly underestimated the amount of votes she could earn and lost the race as a consequence. However, in 2000 Das launched a political party on behalf of underprivileged women and their families. But regardless of her literary accomplishments, including thirteen books published in English and seventeen books published in Malayam, Das claims she “would not mind if all the writings that had been produced in this world would one day get burnt if it can ensure peace. The ultimate aim of literature and art must be to establish peace on this earth” (Raveendran 72). Das began publishing poetry in her 30s with the release of her collection *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965, following a breakdown that kept her isolated and fearing death. Das continued to publish poetry, especially erotic love poetry, for the rest of her life, until her death in 2009.
The feminism Das senses “within” herself and her devotion to easing the suffering of others are themes that many critics discuss as being emblematic of her poetry. Indian poet and critic K. Satchidanandan notes “Kamala Das’s intense desire to identify herself with the silenced victims of oppression, patriarchal as well as political” (53). Current critical discussion of Das in particular gravitates towards the themes of sexuality and eroticism in her work. While Das’s treatment of female sexuality and her celebration of the female body seem to be popular themes in current conversations about Das, I complicate that notion by instead illustrating Das’s ambivalence regarding the female body and how it can confine the female subject rather than act as a medium for liberation. I trace these paradoxes through the years, beginning with Das’s Karali girlhood and ending after her conversion to Islam in her 60s. Ultimately, Das is unsuccessful in her attempt to mitigate these paradoxes, as evidenced by the ambivalences illustrated in her later poetry.

“AN INTRODUCTION” (1965)

“An Introduction,” Das’s most popular poem, is a back-and-forth between aspects of the speaker’s identity that are at odds with one another, and how the body becomes a space for that friction to occur. The tension arises from the poem’s dialogue, and the text effectively uses naming/anonymity as a tool alongside the dialogue to complicate both naming and power. The poem puts pressure on the question of a fragmented identity: is the disassembled self a product of a collection of outside voices from the family and community? Or, rather, is the fragmented self a collection of internal
paradoxes regarding femininity and nationality? The speaker’s body is where this friction plays out—the speaker’s critics attempt to control her body, and her body becomes a site of rebellion. Das ultimately writes of a disassembled, fragmented female subject that exists alongside, and is in dialogue with, the more centralized and limiting notions of identity. Das never successfully answers the question as to what compromises the fragmented identity of her poem’s subject; instead, she attempts to narrow her subject back into a less fragmented identity, one that neither challenges nor conforms to the pressures of her community and culture.

“An Introduction” echoes the “confessional” poetry of the mid-1960s. Written in free verse, “An Introduction” illustrates a disassembling of the self through its use of dialogues. The tension in the poem arises through these dialogues, and from essentialist notions of power as inflexible and central, in contrast with the displaced self that the speaker exemplifies with lines about her body. In other words, the poem is a kind of conversation between inflexible tenants of hegemony and a scattered, displaced self that seeks reconciliation with these critical voices. The poem communicates a fragmented national and gender identity within the context of mid-twentieth century India, almost twenty years after the British withdrawal and the bloody Indian Partition that displaced Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in both India and Pakistan.

“An Introduction” is an introduction of a female subject and a description of her identity and how it exists outside of the borders of nationality and gender. The poem is about the speaker asserting her identity, although she asserts it within the context of strict assumptions about gender and nationality. The poem moves through the speaker’s assertion of her identity as an Indian woman, albeit one who speaks many languages. The
speaker then describes how her language is something she alone possesses, and how it is a tool for her expression. Following this profile of the speaker as a literal “speaker” of languages, the poem moves towards a description of the speaker’s experiences as a woman. By utilizing dialogue, Das gives voice to the forces of patriarchal oppression, which pressure the speaker to conform to a more traditional model of femininity. The end of the poem describes the speaker’s assumption of multiple identities and attempts to offer a global solution to the problems of gendered oppression. This solution suggests that the speaker aligns herself with an indeterminate “you,” essentially settling on a model of subjectivity that is based in empathy and aligning her experience with that of the reader.

The function of dialogue in twentieth-century women’s poetry is described by Jane Dowson in her introduction to *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women’s Poetry* (2011). Dowson writes: “Dialogue, mostly internal, avoids the fixed lyric subject, negotiates between private and public spaces and allows for a sense of self-inrelation … Two or more voices reinforce, counter or expose social and personal power relations” (7). Because dialogue in “An Introduction” has a “statement-response” format (with the critics of the speaker supplying a statement, and the speaker responding), the dialogue in the poem is indeed internal, as Dowson describes. The dialogue also serves to reinforce power relations, although the speaker in the poem is constantly grappling for space alongside the objections to her subjectivity, rather than successfully deconstructing these pressures. Ultimately, Das offers a disassembled female subject alongside the critical voices that seek to pressure certain power relations.
Naming and ego is essential to the poem’s notions of power, but Das also breaks down the centralized function of a name by scattering it. By displacing the language of names and by opening and closing the poem with an emphasis on the self—the “I”—Das complicates the dialogue in the poem. To whom is the speaker conversing with? Does the speaker’s identity change between the opening and closing lines? By not specifically naming her critics, Das is seeking to disrupt their power and instead assert her own agency and subjectivity. To Das’s speaker, the identities of the “friends” and “cousins” who criticize her are disempowered because they lack names. They are instead defined solely by their relationship to the speaker. The speaker later describes her own name, or names, listing them as they pertain to what others want from her: a centralized identity that can easily be situated in a hierarchy of gender or nationality. The critics insist that the speaker settle on one name or identity: “Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better / Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to / Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games” (lines 40-42). The speaker’s disassembled, scattered self is a threat to those who attempt to limit her to a specific gendered or national role.

Additionally, “An Introduction” begins—and ends—with the word “I.” This beginning mirrors even the poem’s title, with the uppercase “I” appearing in the word “Introduction.” The “I’s” that appear throughout poem provide a frame, and even the body of the letter “I” resembles an incomplete box. In thinking of this poem as a box or a frame, then it is appropriate to also think about how Das’s exploration of identity seeks to break free of those restrictions. However, Das’s speaker is ultimately unable to entirely cast off these hegemonic systems of power. Bijay Kumar Das writes that “the key word of her poetry is resistance—but it is resistance leading to reconciliation, not
confrontation” [italics mine] (247). “An Introduction” is an appropriate example of this argument, in that Das’s speaker concludes the poem by offering a solution that blurs the line between the female subject and the world around her.

Das emphasizes the importance of identity, especially a named identity:

I don’t know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of the week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, (lines 1-5)

Nehru serves as the beginning, or the “introduction” to the speaker’s own mental list of powerful people as the first Prime Minister of India. Nehru died in 1964, around the time that Das’s “An Introduction” was written. Nehru was also an integral part of the Partition negotiations in India in the mid-1940s, which resulted not only in violence but also a fragmented national identity as displaced Muslims and Hindus alike struggled for adequate representation in a new post-colonial government. The Indian Partition resulted in the former colony splitting, and India and Pakistan became separate nations. The speaker’s fluency in English is a reference to colonial rule in India, pre-Nehru, while her other two language proficiencies are not described. The mention of Nehru also alludes to the centralized forces of power that the speaker seems to attempt reconciliation alongside her own desire for agency.

The speaker claims she “speaks three languages, writes in / two, dream in one” (lines 5-6). Because of the amount of dialogue that the poem illustrates, language is an integral part of identity, and the speaker seems to take pride in her knowledge of many
different languages and their utility in her life. The description of the speaker’s trilingual talents follows the assertion of her national and racial identity: “I know the names / Of those in power” (lines 1-2). The speaker ventriloquizes unnamed “others” who order her: “Don’t write in English, they said, / English is not your mother-tongue” (6-7). Not only is the speaker being discouraged from writing in the language of the former colonizing power, she is also discouraged from using it because it is not her “mother-tongue”—in the sense that it is not her native Malayam, but also it is a language inappropriate for the domestic woman. The speaker counters these criticisms by replying,

…Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (8-13)

The above exchange situates the speaker’s language as an extension of the disassembled self. By writing, “Why not leave,” the speaker seems to speak to herself, or perhaps elements of her identity that she finds inappropriate. Because of the line break that follows the word “leave,” the line is a question regarding the speaker’s situation as a housewife—what, after all, is holding her back? This question puts pressure on the poem’s attempt at reconciliation between female subjectivity and the oppressive forces outside of that attempt at agency. Additionally, there is no explicit indication of when the “audience” that the speaker is conversing with have stopped or started their words, a tension that will persist throughout the poem and lends credence to the argument that this
dialogue is more of an internal exchange than a conversation that allows the speaker’s critics to respond. The line “Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins” (9) situates the speaker as both “alone” and a person of multiple identities (friends and cousins, both of which are gender-neutral terms). Even the speaker’s question-answer format doesn’t directly lend itself to a cut-and-dry understanding of who is talking. The speaker’s “answer” that the language she speaks is her own therefore does answer her rhetorical question that the reason she shouldn’t speak in the language she likes is because it belongs to her. The use of the word “distortions” illustrates the distortion that the speaker’s identity must suffer as she attempts to navigate the expectations of others. At this point, the poem is only referencing the speaker’s language, but later on it will also reference her distorted body. Furthermore, repetition of the word “mine” not only emphasizes the speaker’s possessiveness over her language and agency, but also evokes the second meaning of the word “mine,” that is, a deep cave underground in which resources are buried. The intersectionality of gender and nationality is not one-dimensional, and Das’s mention of “mines” suggests that perhaps in order to reconcile conflicting notions of power and subjectivity, the speaker is forced to “bury” some aspects of identity.

The use of dialogue to portray a fragmented self is also a common element of confessional poetry. However, as Raveendran notes, “calling Kamala Das a purely confessional poet means not doing justice to her vision as a poet” (25). However, this confessional style that utilizes dialogue and conversation does not mean that Das is writing in a more “external” direction. The ventriloquism Das utilizes in “An Introduction” serves to explore some themes of gendered social structures. This “mirror”
imagery is evident in the speaker’s assertion that her language takes on its own “human” qualities: “It is as human as I am human” (Das, line 14). Das’s use of the mirror to illustrate the fragmented self and the act of self-reflection is also apparent in her use of the second-person in “An Introduction.” The speaker asks the “critics” to leave her alone, “every one of you” (9), and later asks, “don’t / You see?” (lines 14-15). In a chapter about confessional poetry, Dowson writes that “we see how second-person pronouns present the self/other dialogue that often constitutes female subjectivity and that signals to the reader the most intimate of confidences” (76). This “intimate of confidences” is one that the speaker shares with herself more so than any outside party. It is through the painful recognition and “introduction” of the self that the speaker can access her anxieties, traumas, and experiences. Rather than the confessional form as a tool used for the reader to access the speaker’s deepest ambivalences and suffering, for Das, the confessional form serves as a way for her speaker to establish her identity as an assortment of paradoxical experiences and circumstances.

The speaker of “An Introduction” has her history dictated by fragmented, “external” voices during the poem’s dialogue, further illustrating how the speaker is attempting to disassemble her own identity. The speaker seems in fact to be severed from her own memory, another manifestation of the fragmentation of her identity. The speaker experiences memory as an observer:

…I was a child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door. (22-27)

Even the speaker’s claim that “one or two places sprouted hair” seems unsteady, as though she is unsure about which body parts underwent changes—which were hairless to begin with? Which body parts presently sprout hair? This naiveté continues in the next line, when the speaker claims she wasn’t sure “what else to ask for” besides love.

In an article about Kamala Das’s use of eroticism and love in her autobiography *My Story* (1973), J. Devika’s observations regarding sex in the work of Das are as relevant to her poetry as they are to her prose. Devika notes that Das

…brings back the body—marginalised and de-eroticised in dominant reformist discourse—into her revision of the womanly … The aesthetic female body, adorned, fostered tenderly under the non-objectifying touch/gaze of the loving male beyond patriarchy is contrasted to the domestic female body, imprisoned in self-control, a mere instrument for procreation and domestic labour, objectified by the dominating husband’s lust. (1676)

The speaker’s body in “An Introduction” seems to reflect the latter condition of femininity, and she laments the domestic and objectified identity that has been forced upon her: “He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. / The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me” (Das, lines 28-30). Like the imagery of the funeral pyre earlier in the poem, the speaker is again invoking images of violence done against the female body. The use of the term “woman-body” in place of just “body” indicates fragmentation of identity, as though “body” is too nebulous a term without it being
attached to another descriptor. The treatment of the female body is a topic I will visit later in this chapter when I discuss Das’s poem “The Sensuous Woman” (1984), but in the context of “An Introduction,” Das’s speaker responds the unwanted sexual attention by fashioning a different physical appearance for herself, one that rejects a more “traditional” female image.

The speaker’s identity becomes even further fragmented as she begins to peel back the layers of gendered expectations. In lines 31-33, the speaker dons men’s clothing and “ignored / My womanliness.” In a tone that seems to mock the fragmented English of her “categorizers,” Das lists the orders that her speaker is expected to conform to as a traditional woman: “Dress in saris, be girl, / Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, / Be a quarreller with servants” (33-35). The exclusion of English articles coupled with the brief orders echoes an earlier line in the poem, that the speaker should be discouraged from speaking a language that is not her mother-tongue. Language is yet again associated with gender—and the incorrect English reflects the speaker’s fear that a domestic, more properly feminine existence will limit her language. The “categorizers” continue to heckle the speaker, instructing her not to sit on walls “or peep in through our lace-draped windows” (37). Here the speaker again cast as an observer, although perhaps she is an observer of her own domestic life that the pieces of her displaced identity exist outside of. The act of voyeurism allows the speaker to examine her life, and the window takes the form instead of a mirror. Even the “lace-draped” windows seem indicative of a concealment, much like the hijab that Das would later don towards the last decade of her life, following her conversion to Islam.
The poem’s intensity increases as the speaker “recounts” more of the demands she feels push and pull at her, and at last the identity she struggles with seems to shatter fully. The “categorizers” demand she settle on a name, and the voice(s) demand she cease playing “pretending games. / Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a / Nympho” (40-42). The poem’s confessional style, coupled with the claim dismissal of the speaker as playing “pretending games,” lends credence to the silence imposed on her by others, or even by herself. The fragmented identity is written off as “schizophrenia” and the rhythm of the poem gains speed as Das transcribes more and more demands imposed upon her speaker. The incorrect English is replaced instead by complete, longer sentences, lending more credence to my theory that the speaker is in fact conducting a conversation with herself. This tenseness in the poem shifts and begins to uncoil as we reach a “turn” in the poem’s narrative.

This is the point in which Das casts off the constraining, domestic identity of a feminine housewife entirely and instead begins to gravitate towards a more gender-neutral identity/identities in an attempt to negotiate her subjectivity and the pressure of others. While prior to this part of the poem, the speaker emphasizes the importance of names and how her understanding of power seems to come from names, now the speaker does away with names entirely:

... I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man

Who wants a woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love. In him … the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me … the oceans’ tireless
Waiting. (43-48)

While it might seem as though Das is writing of an idealized masculine figure to replace her speaker’s less passionate partner, instead both the “Him” and the speaker are one in the same. At this point as well there is a “narrowing” of the poem—in the same way that the poem begins with “I” and then “swells” like the speaker’s growing limbs, so too does last line of the poem end with “I,” albeit a much different “I” than the one that began speaking. The ellipses also serve to confuse the rhythm of the poem, and therefore the difference between “Him” and the speaker is confused. This confusion could also be read as indicative of Das’s impending conversion to a monotheistic religion—like the “mono-identity” of the poem that begins and ends with “I.” The declaration “it is I” (49) coupled with the description of the nameless man seems to even invoke the Old Testament declaration of the monotheistic god. Das would directly address deities in later poems, and indeed, even “An Introduction” contains references to monotheism as the poem works towards its conclusion.

By utilizing male pronouns and a declarative, parsed rhythm, the speaker reconciles a fragmented identity by seeing it as encompassing the identities and the atmospheres of those around her. In this way, as other critics have noted, Das seems to communicate a more empathetic tone in her poetry. The “I” of the speaker transgresses her own identity entirely:

…Who are you, I ask each and everyone,

The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,

Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself

If in this world… (48-51)
...I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (56-59)

Whether or not the last lines of “An Introduction” are references to monotheism (or perhaps even Christianity in particular, as the reference to the ‘beloved’ and the ‘betrayed’ may imply), the poem has indeed, as Bijay Kumar Das points out, finished with an attempt at reconciliation. These last lines are a reconciliation with the self, and an attempt to situate female subjectivity within the context of the structures of hegemony.

“An Introduction” posits the female body as a canvas for dialogue, in this case dialogue between two different notions of identity. In later chapters I will explore the implications of the body at the center of discussion in transnational feminist studies, but for the purposes of this first poem I’ve studied, the body seems to take on a “distortion”—not because Das’s lines offer an alternative to traditional femininity, one that rejects cooking and saris, but because the end of the poem calls into question the possession of the body itself. If the speaker has “no /Aches which are not yours” (58-59), are we to read the body as a collective? Or is the line break after “no” before “Aches” indicative of the speaker’s possession of her own aches, aches that she does in fact possess as an autonomous subject? These contradictions surrounding the experience of “owning” a body continue to crop up in Das’s later work.
“THE SENSUOUS WOMAN” (1984)

This problem of reconciliation with forces of hegemony and patriarchy persists in Das’s later work. In “The Sensuous Woman,” Das seems to grapple with issues of patriarchy and internalized misogyny. The poem places pressure on the question of female agency: to what extent is the oppressed female subject responsible for her own objectification? Das ultimately is unable to “reconcile” this issue, instead projecting the movement of the poem into an abyssal eternity where female subjectivity is bound forever by ambivalence.

Twenty years after “An Introduction” was published in her Summer in Calcutta collection, Das penned “The Sensuous Woman.” Although many of Das’s poems in the past two decades focused on the female body, especially female sexuality, “The Sensuous Woman” provides a more cynical perspective of the female subject. While “An Introduction” presents the body as a site of pressure between female subjectivity and outside cultural and political forces, in “The Sensuous Woman” Das writes the body as a site of total objectification, enveloped and defined by its environment. The poem does not attempt to reconcile the friction between subjectivity and hegemony through a distorted body, rather, it is a cynical perspective of a woman devoid of her agency whose body retreats into the textured language of the poem. Therefore, instead of a distorted or “compromising” subjectivity, Das portrays the female body as an object that is lost within adornment and texture. The reliance on textures and kinesthetic details throughout the poem contribute to its themes of infantilization and immobility. These textures are indicative of a post-colonial anxiety in the poem, as the fine fabrics that conceal the
woman’s body stand in for her subjectivity. The woman’s agency represents a paradox in the poem: is she confined to her present situation? If she “chooses” her illness, as the poem’s first line suggests, does that mean she is using illness as means to a feminine subjectivity?

The poem is only two sentences long, although each line begins with a capitalized letter. It begins by describing a woman who spends her time lounging, and towards the middle of the poem the woman is visited by an unnamed visitor. The room and the woman’s body are both described in splendorous detail, while the visitor is hardly described at all. The woman is not named, but her circumstances might suggest that she is of upper middle class or noble birth, and the visitor is described as kissing her limp hand. The poem’s turn occurs when the narrative suddenly rips away from the image of the woman comfortably relaxing in her luxurious room. In the last six lines of “The Sensuous Woman,” Das writes of a monotonous oblivion that eats away at the woman’s empty existence.

The poem’s treatment of agency and choice is indicative of the sensuous woman’s objectified status and is the foremost contradiction in the text. This contradiction takes the form of the woman’s “choices” as enshrouded in textures and “exotica.” The question of choice and agency is one that consistently reappears in discussions about transnational feminism and global women’s rights campaigns. In the first line, the woman has the ability to “choose her illness as she / Chooses her clothes to suit her own style” (lines 1-2). Her limbs are “flaccid” (line 7) rather than constrained, but the poem’s dramatic conclusion describes her as being “nailed / To the pleasant cross of Being” (lines 20-21). Additionally, the words “illness,” “flaccid,” and “nailed” have morbid connotations, as
though the sensuous woman’s body, in its “idleness” is also lifeless and evokes images of
death. Although Das is writing a paradox about free will into the poem, the question of
agency goes deeper than just the sensuous woman’s predicament. Robert J. C. Young
explains the phenomenon of “free will” and the postcolonial female subject as follows:

> These interventions by the colonial state against social practices that
> oppressed women have been described as ‘colonial feminism,’ that is
> where the colonial government intervened on behalf of women, claiming it
> was doing so on humanitarian grounds. Sometimes these measures
> operated simultaneously as forms of colonial control. (97)

Based on Young’s argument that agency is compromised by patriarchal, colonial forces
that seek to “liberate” the colonized woman, is the sensuous woman’s “choice” of illness
truly a choice at all? Although her illness is meant to “suit her style” (line 2), her “style”
doesn’t reflect personal agency or autonomy, but is described as a “condition” (line 3).
While the word “condition” refers to her illness, it can also mean the “condition” of her
body—relegating her body to a commodity, one that is defined by its “condition” or
quality. Furthermore, the poem describes the candles in the woman’s room as “cotton
wicks / Burning themselves out in lamps” (lines 11-12). Like the woman, the wicks seem
to possess ownership of themselves, as the language of the line connotes choice. The
wicks are burning themselves, not being burned. Therefore, their suffering is a result of
their choices, not because they were set on fire by an outside force. This detail also
evokes the phenomenon of widow-burning in India, known as sati. Postcolonial feminist
critic Gayatri Spivak challenges the question of female agency in the practice of sati in
the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988):
If the oppressed under socialized capital have no necessarily unmediated access to "correct" resistance, can the ideology of *sati*, coming from the history of the periphery, be sublated into any model of interventionist practice? … this essay operates on the notion that all such clear-cut nostalgias for lost origins are suspect, especially as grounds for counterhegemonic ideological production. (103)

While Das writes of her sensuous woman as a victim of her own choices, Spivak’s theory that the subaltern are unable to speak complicates and puts pressure on this tension of agency within the poem. The fire imagery is present throughout the entire first part of the poem, in fact: the sensuous woman possesses a “martyr’s halo / Lighting up her pillowcase” (Das lines 5-6) and her hands are “unused / To chores all except that of kindling love” (lines 15-16). Like the burning widow whose body is at the center of postcolonial feminist debate, the sensuous woman is portrayed as burning quietly. This burning of the woman’s body is indicative of the paralysis that accompanies theories of agency that surround the subaltern—paralyzed, she suffers silently. Her “delicate condition invisible to the eye” (line 3) is also invisible to the “I” as well—she is unable to assert herself as a subject. The sensuous woman fits Spivak’s criteria as subaltern, as she is unable to speak and is at the mercy of the forces that surround her and use her body as a stand-in for female subjectivity.

The poem’s turn occurs at line 17, when the atmosphere exhibits a stark change. This section of the poem demonstrates how the woman’s identity is situated in a liminal space, and her body seems displaced across an endless landscape. By writing the woman as trapped in this environment, devoid of a centralized body, Das illustrates a broader
landscape of the displaced female identity. The language of the poem also makes a drastic change, shifting from the rich descriptions of a boudoir to the gray abyss of infinity. Line 17 is rife with linking words—“And, as day and night as one tide after” [italics mine]—which mince the line, the short words providing a more rapid rhythm. The shift from the drawling descriptions gives this section of the poem a greater sense of urgency and severity. Indeed, this portion of the poem is violent and even morbid: “an ocean’s vast / Languor seizes her blood” (lines 18-19), while the woman’s body is “nailed / To the pleasant cross of Being” (lines 20-21). With respect to the sensuous woman’s labelling as a “martyr” on line 5, Das is putting tremendous pressure on the question of agency by the end of the text. The “seizure” of blood has violent, non-consensual connotations, while the language of crucifixion align the woman with Christ. While Christianity is not one of India’s major religions, this detail echoes the shadow of Western presence on the sensuous woman. Though she is portrayed in “exotic” fabrics and textures, ultimately the woman’s fate is in part “nailed” to the cross of Western religion, reminiscent of India’s colonial era under British rule.

Language of borders further displaces the woman’s body in the poem. Das writes that in this seaside oblivion, “the fences between / The state of life and death fade” (lines 19-20). Fences and the ocean shoreline are indicative of borders, but “The Sensuous Woman” illustrates how binaries between “states” (perhaps political states, as well) seem to “fade”—again, Das is utilizing the language of texture to frame the text. The clock that the sensuous woman is perched upon is “handless” (line 22)—the sensuous woman’s existence is not dictated by time, or borders. Her agency is compromised on all fronts, and deep within the textures she is wrapped in, her subjectivity is lost.

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1 Hinduism is India’s prominent religion and has been for many centuries, followed by Islam.
“The Sensuous Woman” is the most cynical of Das’s poems that I’ve chosen to study. While “An Introduction” seeks compromise with hegemonic forces, “The Sensuous Woman” illustrates how hegemonic and patriarchal forces have more far-reaching consequences when a woman finds herself objectified or typecast as an “Eastern” beauty. The use of textiles in the poem provide the basis for most of its heavily descriptive and even religious language. While the descriptions of candles and “offerings” around the woman position her as a mystical religious object, Das illustrates the intersection of religion and diaspora with the final Christian image. However, while the subject in “The Sensuous Woman” is relegated to a space of oblivion—“nailed to the cross of Being”—Das has yet to chisel out a space in which female subjectivity is fully realized and explored. Some of Das’s later poetry, such as “Alien Territories,” attempts to make this move of beginning to map the landscape of female subjectivity.

“ALIEN TERRITORIES” (2000)

Is there a physical, geographic location in which female subjectivity can be realized? “Alien Territories” reflects a mixed response to this question—Das’s text reflects an ambivalence about the dislocation of the self. Though Das lived in India for all of her life, following her conversion to Islam in 1999, her poetry began to dwell on themes of decay and the dispersal of the self. Writing at the cusp of globalization, Das moves towards a more multi-national “reconciliation” in her poetry.

While “An Introduction” and “The Sensuous Woman” sought reconciliation through figuring the body through distorted dialogue and texture, “Alien Territories”
instead attempts reconciliation by writing the female body not as a site of violence, but as a site of natural resources that exists *between*, rather than within, nations. Additionally, the poem strays from the Indian backdrop featured in much of Das’s earlier poetry, evoking a sense of placelessness in the poem. Themes of anonymity and female agency still pervade within the poem, but Das seems to seek a reconciliation to the diasporic identity rather than portray it as rebellious or detrimental to the sense of female subjectivity in her text.

“Alien Territories” was written only a year after Das’s conversion to Islam, as such, she mentions a relationship with “Allah” in the text. This is already an indication of tension in Das’s corpus as a whole that seeks a “narrowing” of the self. Like the use of “I” in “An Introduction,” Das’s regard for Allah as a monotheistic deity indicates a pressure on the “self” in her poetry to be consolidated; for the multi-voiced female subjectivity to be reconciled into a single entity. While the speaker laments her travels and her desire for a space of her own in the beginning of the poem, the “turn” occurs when Das begins to write of the woman’s body as a resource for Allah. The female body as “natural resource” is Das’s attempt to situate female subjectivity in terms of benefit to a community; however, my reading of the poem situates the body on the borders of national communities.

The first half of the poem serves to describe the speaker’s weariness at the prospect of leaving her friend Merrily’s home in Canada. The speaker’s final destination isn’t mentioned—instead, it’s just described as “a land that’s far away / where I shall not smell the birch leaf and the spruce” (lines 2-3). While “An Introduction” is invested in India and “Indian-ness,” “Alien Territories” is absent of any longing or nostalgia for
Das’s lifetime home. Bijay Kumar Das approaches the concept of “home” in Das’s poetry, writing,

Kamala Das anticipated the diasporic writers when she dealt with the theme of ‘home’ in some of her poems … An immigrant or diasporic writer may accept another country as his home but does that country accept him as its own on par with the natives? Some are torn between the country they left behind and the country they adopt as their own. Hence, they are suspended between two worlds—never at home, here or there.

(244)

“Alien Territories” depicts this ambivalence of the diasporic subject. Both India and Canada have a relationship with the U.K. and its governance, so despite the extreme distance between the two countries and difference in cultures, both are somewhat linked by this shared elements of national history. However, “Alien Territories” also illustrates the difference in economy between the two countries, a difference that is invested in the concept of home and how home can provide for the female subject. The speaker laments the “sunken eyes” that await her in her home country (line 8), eyes that plead “for a roof above her head” (line 10).

The speaker later expresses her desire to serve Allah with her body. While much of Das’s Hindu poetry features sexual elements, leading Das to write under a pseudonym so as not to offend her family, her poetry after her Islamic conversion treats Allah as master rather than a lover. The speaker, speaking to Allah, claims:

I shall dampen your toes

with my tears
that seem to flow
from a remote interior
that is perhaps within me
and yet seems alien
a territory bequeathed
a territory unearthed (lines 18-25)

The fashioning of the body as a wellspring positions female subjectivity as a source of service and nourishment to others. The “remote interior” is contradictory, much like the title: How can an “interior” be far away or “remote”? How can an alien, one absent from a homeland, lay claim to a “territory”? These contradictions lay at the heart of Das’s desire to pursue reconciliation within her poetry. Das’s female subjects are consistently caught in liminal spaces, but rather than challenge those forces, Das instead attempts to force female subjectivity to exist alongside hegemony and patriarchy. Like the rolling oceans that characterize the internal existence of the woman in “The Sensuous Woman,” the female subject in “Alien Territories” is also illustrated in water-related language. Thus, the female subject is a fluid subjectivity, one typically in the process of dispersal or flow, but always at the mercy of the surrounding solid forces.

This “territory” within the speaker’s body, however, remains open and vulnerable—in being both “bequeathed” and “unearthed,” Das has situated female subjectivity in the most raw of terms. Its “alien” nature suggests that although the female body is of the earth, a natural resource in its own right, it lays no political claim to the land it inhabits. This “territory,” however, will arise in the poetry of other South Asian poets. My purpose in the coming chapters is to focus on the relationship between the
concepts of nationhood among poets who have immigrated to the U.K., and how their constructions of female subjectivity attempt to challenge—rather than reconcile—the social forces that Das’s poetry complicates.

While my previous chapter is focused on the disassembling and reassembling of individual female subjecthood, this chapter will instead illustrate the implications of the collective female body. In moving from the singular subject to the plural, the poetry indicates social change and a seizing of agency for a collective community. While Kamala Das lived in India for her entire life, the poets I study in the following chapters are Pakistani immigrants to the United Kingdom. My purpose in changing the location of my analysis is to better deconstruct the implications of opposing national and gendered identities, especially in the context of the post-colonial. Do colonial struggles of identity-formation and the agency of the subaltern still persist in the contemporary U.K.? How are the bodies of these South Asian women indicative of a broader discussion and clashing of values?

Here, I look to contemporary poet Imtiaz Dharker and how her poetry seeks to challenge the patriarchal and hegemonic structures found in both the U.K. and Southern Asia, as well as how these structures persist in the imaginary borders between both places. Born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1954, Dharker is a documentary filmmaker as well as a poet, and her independent films follow human rights struggles. Unlike Das, who claims to reject Western feminism, Dharker instead seems to embrace some of the tenants of a feminism that is free from the Muslim practice of purdah. Dharker has thus far published 5 volumes of poetry, including Purdah (1989), Postcards from God (1987), I Speak for the Devil (2001), The Terrorist at My Table (2006), and Leaving Fingerprints (2009).
I examine two poems in this chapter: “Purdah (1)” which was published in 1989, at the beginning of Dharker’s poetic career, and “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country,” published in her 2001 collection, *I Speak for the Devil*. As I noted in my introduction, one of the tenants of this chapter is the focus on the plural female subject. Dharker’s poetry challenges patriarchy and nationalism by utilizing the female body as a site of collective female experience, ultimately rejecting reconciliation with the “borders” that attempt to oppress or confine the female body. “Purdah (1)” challenges these borders by placing tension on the organic and inorganic in the text, ultimately “weaving” femininity into the very fabric of the earth and landscape. “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” attempts to hollow out a new space entirely for female subjectivity, separate from existing, traditional notions of femininity and nationality. Both poems rely on the language of textile (similar to Das’s “A Sensuous Woman,” covered in the previous chapter) and the use of collective pronouns (e.g. “we” and “us”). However, this move neglects the experiences of migrant South Asian women who do not ascribe to a Western feminist perspective. Dharker utilizes the adornment of the female body (often in the form of the hijab) as a means to weave a tapestry of collective female identity, albeit one that has gaps in its intersectional approach.

The theme of “borders” in Dharker’s poetry is already noted in the work of several literary critics. Lee M. Jenkins situates Dharker’s poetry in her larger argument that transnational British and Irish women’s poetry is invested in the liminal spaces of borders. Madhurita Choudhury discusses Dharker’s feminist influence in her chapter about the “victim” role that “Third World Women” are cast into by Western women. Anup Beniwal and Amrita Mehta discuss Dharker in an article about communalism and

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2 Like Kamala Das, Dharker was also in her mid-30s when she began to publish poetry.
the poetic imagination, much like my own argument that is situated around the analysis
of communal voices in Dharker’s poetry. Finally, Abin Chakraborty illustrates the
landscapes on Dharker’s poetry and how these landscapes comprise a “purdah of the
mind.” All of the aforementioned critics have touched on the topics I cover in this
chapter, however, my purpose is to stitch of communalisms—or a communal voice—
with rejection of patriarchy and hegemony. Though Choudhury describes the rejection
of victimhood in Dharker’s poetry, I want to place even greater pressure on Dharker’s
poetry and illustrate how she utilizes multiple voices to not only reject the “Third World
Woman” stereotype, but also to challenge the oppressive spaces surrounding the female
body, particularly by appealing to a Western feminist perspective. I want to further the
theme of “border writing” to argue that Dharker’s poetry utilizes liminal spaces not so
that her subjects might distort their bodies between the spaces, as Das’s subjects attempt
to do, but instead seize their own identity and “push back” by assuming community
through a collective body. Choudhury asserts:

Intiaz Dharker explores difficult facets of Muslim woman’s identity. Her
poetry transcends the personal to voice the problems of a community,
sometimes the diaspora of Muslim women in England … Dharker
surpasses the ego-centric issues of rootedness, belongingness and
marginalization and essentializes all women through pain and suffering. In
a way, she states that, not only the Third World Women but women of all
creeds, countries and colours are united by repression and distress. (177)

My purpose is to take Choudhury’s argument a step further and to look at how Dharker
inscribes female subjectivity and community on to the body through her poetry. I want to
challenge Choudhury’s claim, however, that Dharker attempts to create a space for all women, united by repression and distress, to come together. Dharker’s poetry is still very much invested in the plight of marginalized South Asian women, and does not portray—as Spivak describes it—“white men saving brown women from brown men” (92).

Instead, by integrating the experiences and cultural of a shared national and diasporic identity, Dharker works to create an embodied, shared female voice, one that is explored in the landscape of “Purdah (1)” and the political language in “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country.” However, this collective voice is not altogether an entirely successful approach to pushing back against traditional and cultural ideals of femininity. As Dharker “weaves” these voices together, she also leaves gaps in the construction of this collective voice. Where might diasporic, migrant women fit into this model of a South Asian femininity that has embraced Western feminism? Dharker doesn’t leave much space for women who might object to the lack of intersectionality in her approach, especially since such women are often members of Spivak’s subaltern, and in order to be heard they must situate their voices in a Western context.

“PURDAH (1)” (1989)

While the ambiguities of “Purdah (1)” are similar to the use of anonymity and silence in Das’s poems, my reading of the text is mostly concerned with the tension between the organic and the inorganic, and how this tension is inscribed on the female body. The notion of what is “organic” is linked to questions about both nationality and gender, and in this context I define “organic” as terrestrial, earthy language of landscape
and natural textiles. The poem also features geometric imagery, which serves to put pressure on the “organic” female subjectivity in the poem—quite literally, in fact, as Dharker writes of “the roots as well, / scratching for a hold / between the first and second rib” (lines 30-32). This line is indicative of a major contradiction within the text—what is truly “organic” about the body, and how does the intersection of earth, fabric, and body contribute to a shared female identity and sense of community? Do the soft contours of the covered female body challenge the “angles” within the text? While Das “distorts” the body to better accommodate the angles and harsh lines that seek to impose a specific identity—or lack thereof—on the subjects of her poems, Dharker instead uses the language of shared or communal experience in order to push back against these constricting forces.

“Purdah (1)” is about a young woman who is treated differently in society following her coming-of-age. The young woman is described in terms of her hijab and how the sight of her, now covered as a result of her sexual maturation, affects the behavior of other people. The poem is rife with ambiguities: the identity of the young woman is never given a name, and the location of the poem is also undefined.

Choudhury argues that the poem aligns purdah with an enveloping of the body, similar to the body in the grave. Choudhury writes: “…for Dharker purdah is neither stifling nor an oppressive experience as posited by the colonizing powers. As she says in her opening poem, purdah is ‘a kind of safety / the body finds a place to hide’ (3) but then it is the safety of the tomb. The shackles and levels of oppression are posited in many of Dharker’s poems” (173). Essentially, Choudhury is noting that the practice of purdah need not necessarily be associated with forcing women into particular behaviors. Rather,
purdah is a tool of *internalized* misogyny, one that perpetuates within marginalized communities such as Muslim populations in the U.K. Choudhury also claims,

Dharker’s *Purdah* poems do not subscribe to this Euro-centric view of Islam as patriarchal and oppressive of women, instead they project purdah as a symbol of moral, religious, and social taboo. More than the veiling of the body it is the veiling of the mind that Dharker objects to … More so, in an alien land, these teachings are hailed as superior because they protect the supposedly powerless women from “those alien hands.” (174)

The last line of the above quote is reminiscent of Spivak’s theory of the subaltern, which dictates that the “subaltern” are not only oppressed but also oppressed on multiple fronts. Therefore, these populations are unable to “speak” because of the war being waged over their legal rights, agency, socioeconomic status, and often their bodies. Therein lies some of the tension I have previously noted in Das’s perspectives about feminism and female agency. While Choudhury’s analysis lends some perspective to the prevalence of purdah in Western European countries and how communities might indeed see it as a kind of “safety,” I argue that Dharker complicates the “earth” and landscape to put pressure on how “safe” purdah really is for women, even in places like the U.K.

Dharker figures the female body as linked to the organic properties of the earth. Although the poem’s descriptions are heavily invested in illustrations of the organic versus the inorganic, as I’ve mentioned earlier, the mention of the earth itself leads one to wonder about the poem’s ambiguous location. Ultimately, the poem can be read in a number of ways—“Purdah (1)” even develops this tension between the organic “fabric” of the U.K. versus South Asian silks. Dharker writes that within purdah, “The body finds
a place to hide. / The cloth fans out against the skin / much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in” (lines 5-8). The paradox between the “place to hide” and the “coffin” illustrates the ambiguities and ambivalences surrounding the earth, and by my extension, the female body. Already the poem is beginning the turn “inward” and to “descend”—the words “kind,” “finds,” “skin,” and “in” all incorporate rhyme or slant rhyme and establish the narrowing, somewhat claustrophobic tone of the poem. The “inside” of the earth swallows up dead bodies, specifically dead men. By aligning the female body with the earth, already the possibility of a collective female bodied-landscape emerges. The grave is indicative of a womb, swallowing up the bodies of dead men and returning them back to their organic origins. This process of an earthy, dark descent is challenged by the poem’s descriptions of harsh lines and angles.

By characterizing those outside of the young woman’s body in geometric terms, Dharker also emphasizes figures of “weaving” in the poem. While the poem indeed incorporates “inward-facing” language, it is through the descriptions of weaving—the angles and crossing of the organic—that Dharker places the greatest pressure on the notion of the collective female identity. In lines 19-24, Dharker uses collective pronouns to indicate a shared female experience:

We sit still, letting the cloth grow
a little closer to our skin.
A light filters inward
through our bodies’ walls.
Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the places we have just left.
The cloth “grows” closer to our skin—however, might one read this cloth as the hijab or as the woven, collective female identity characterized by shared experiences and a shared understanding of misogyny and hegemony? The walls “inside” the body, walls that produce echoes of the voices that can never escape, are reminiscent of the coffin imagery Dharker used in earlier lines. The “walls” within the body are those that are imposed by outside structures, such as traditional notions of femininity, purdah, and of course, the national anxiety that comes with living inside a country in which one if a member of a marginalized population. Like Das, who distorts the body to accommodate these walls, borders, and angles, Dharker acknowledges these forces are rigid and capable of putting tremendous pressure on the female body. Jenkins writes that “… for Dharker, the veil operates as a ‘symbolic border,” (122). However, might the veil itself also be indicative of a kind of solidarity amongst women who are pressured into concealing their bodies behind it? Additionally, the lines “echoing in the places we have just left” stresses the poem’s absences and the “lack” within a space. This image illustrates the failure of Dharker’s text to truly negotiate a space for migrant women who leave Pakistan or India and come to the West—what they left behind is a hollow space, not a wellspring of identity and sense of personal culture. South Asia, despite its booming population, is figured as an empty place where women are frankly not able to fashion their own space. This contrasts with Das’s attempt to reconcile her speakers’ bodies and identities alongside patriarchal and hegemonic forces in the region.

The angles and walls that attempt to conceal and judge the female subject are often described in “Purdah (1)” as features that implicate individuals within the community itself. Members of the young woman’s community, people she has
maintained a relationship for a long time, “make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, / a little sly” (lines 11-13). The location of the poem is never revealed by Dharker, so it can be read as either pressure between a Western European community and the South Asian woman, or pressure within the South Asian community itself for women to uphold traditional values. Chakraborty claims that “even within diasporic communities, the domestic space of familiar relationships is seen as the site where the ties of the country of origin must remain uninterrupted” (78). The “angles” of the others’ bodies, as well as the narrowing of their eyes, is again indicative of the “narrowing” nature of the poem that seeks to “close in” the female subject. The act of weaving, on the other hand, which overlaps multiple pieces of fabric, is a re-imagining of the purpose of an otherwise constraining fabric used to conceal the female body.

This “weaving” of identities and experiences in the poem is indicated in the fourth stanza. Whilst Das’s speaker in “An Introduction” has her memories recited to her by the critics around her who recall her sexual development, Dharker instead crafts “links” between memories. These links take the form of collective pronouns, and at once isolating walls around the young woman of “Purdah (1)” begin to crack. This collective memory is indicative of a broader national memory—and while the poem makes its location unclear, the ambiguity lends more credence to the intertwined memories of South Asian women living in diaspora. The aforementioned stanza reads:

She half-remembers things
from someone else’s life,
perhaps from yours, or mine—
carefully carrying what we do not own:

between the thighs a sense of sin. (lines 14-18)

While Das’s fragmented female subjectivity seeks reconciliation and a re-construction of identity along power and value systems already in place, Dharker’s female subject relies on the memories and experiences of other women to weave a sense of self. By incorporating the words “yours, or mine” and “we” on the following line, Dharker is pulling the reader into the poem, forcing the reader to confront their own perspectives of national and gender identity. What is the substance of the subject’s memories, and if they are borrowed elsewhere, how might they be applicable to her life? Dharker attempts to answer these contradictions in the poem in the last line, yet again “narrowing” the poem down to focus on the sexual space between the thighs. In writing, “carefully carrying what we do not own” in line 17, Dharker puts pressure on the question of ownership of one’s sexuality. I read this line as an assertion of bodily autonomy: while collective female experience can be woven together to advocate for a kind of solidarity, ultimately only the owner of one’s own body can struggle with the guilt or pleasure that the body itself is associated with. In other words, while Dharker invokes the question of sharing experiences and memories, the shame of possessing a woman’s body is an isolating experience. That being said, while Dharker does acknowledge this shame and the sense of an isolated responsibility, my reading of the poem lends me to believe that Dharker is also emphasizing the danger in perceiving the body as an isolated possession, one separate from other women’s.

“Purdah (1)” also reflects ambivalence about living as a South Asian woman in a Western European country. The question of what is “organic” in the poem is not such a
simple binary as earth versus constructed space. In fact, while language of weaving identities is present in the poem, these identities are not limited to South Asian fabrics—e.g., the hijab, or Indian silk. Considering the poem’s reliance on earth and organic materials to put pressure on the tension between the female body and collective female subjectivity, one might also read the “earth” as a reference to the pastoral earth of the U.K. Even the question of fabric can be called into question, as Richard Wilson discusses in an article about the presence of the hijab in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1605). Wilson highlights the tension between East and West from an economic standpoint, claiming that the rise of trade with India and other Asian countries resulted in an increase in the demand for fine silks and a decrease in demand for the U.K.’s own wool. This tension is still evident even in “Purdah (1),” when taking into consideration the poem’s placelessness and the friction between the traditional Muslim practice of purdah and Western European politics and culture. I also want to briefly call attention to the word “passing,” which appears in line 33: “Passing constantly out of her own hands / into the corner of someone else’s eyes…” While the word “passing” is typically aligned with the idea of race and “passing” as a member of another race, here it can be understood also as a “passing” back-and-forth between the traditional notions of femininity in a diasporic community, as Choudhury has argued, and the demands of Western European feminism, misogyny, and hegemony. Her identity is limited to the “corner” of someone else’s eyes, as Dharker again invokes the language of lines and angles, which seems to conflict with the language of earth and the ability to pass through “her own hands” like sand or dirt. The ellipses the follow the word “eyes” on line 34 even

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3 Often this is attributed to “colorism”—a form of racism that relies on the darkness of one’s skin to determine the proximity of one’s “closeness” to the white race.
seem to resemble the mounds of earth or sand. While Das’s female subjects are distorted, Dharker’s comprise an entire landscape and push back against the corners and angles within the text.

The “turn” in the poem occurs after line 24, at the end of the collective language. Dharker has shifted back to focusing entirely on her female subject again, and it is in this sixth stanza that the tension between the organic and the inorganic really begins to unfold. I want to clarify that I am not attempting to necessarily establish a binary between these two types of languages—the “weaving” in the poem comprises both the organic and the inorganic—but I do want to demonstrate how Dharker attempts to put pressure on these forces rather than reconcile with them. The female subject “stands outside herself, / sometimes in all four corners of a room” (line 25-26). Her body is disassembled and scattered amongst the angles that attempt to enclose her. However, “…she is always / inching past herself, / as if she were a clod of earth” (lines 27-29). The simile Dharker uses to compare the woman’s body to the earth is invested in the notion of the landscape as fully surrounding, and fully consuming, the body. Like the poem’s beginning, when the earth is described as a swallowing womb, the woman inches past herself always because she is constantly confronted with her own body, and with the body of others. While the walls and angles close in around her, she pushes back: “and the roots as well, / scratching for a hold / between the first and second rib” (lines 30-32). When considering the woman’s “roots” as extensions of her South Asian, Muslim heritage, might her scratching for a hold between the “first and second rib” be read as her attempt to access a strong community that is less concerned with her concealment or sexuality? Give the implications of the woman’s genesis from the rib of the man (a mythos found in
monotheistic religions derived from the Abrahamic tradition), this line might also attempt on the woman’s part to liberate herself from misogyny. The “dead men” return to the womb of the earth, while the young woman attempts to reunite with her own origins associated with the male body.

The poem’s final lines echo the language of “ins” that I mentioned in the second stanza. Elsewhere in the poem, Dharker uses the words “sin,” “skin,” and “inward,” perpetuating the poem, as I’ve argued, towards narrowing descent into the earth. The poem’s final lines read: “while the doors keep opening / inward and again / inward” (35-7). Though this descent into the earth, or the repetition of the overlaying fabric during the weaving process, seems to offer a landscape for a collective female subjectivity, Dharker has yet to fully push back against the forces that attempt to police the female body. For Chakraborty’s, “the last two lines [of “Purdah (1)”] explicitly highlight how the enforced use of the purdah can often be a deadly blow to one’s sense of selfhood which seems to wither under the burden of the burqa or hijab … There is therefore a general sense of choicelessness which engulfs the lives of women” (78). Based on my understanding of Dharker’s poetry as “descending” into the “cracks” between borders, this inwardness allows for a landscape to develop that is neither dictated by hegemony nor by misogyny.

However, this landscape is also one fraught with contradictions. Dharker’s “Purdah (1)” attempts to push back by using Western feminism and Western notions of female agency (such as liberation from the concealment of the hijab). Indeed, Dharker’s poem seems to use Sylvia Plath’s 1963 poem “Purdah” as a lens for its own attempt to assert subjectivity and agency. In Plath’s poem, the speaker describes an “undoing” of the shining, solid forces that bind and conceal women: the “Shattering / The chandelier”
(lines 43-44), and says she will “unloose— / From the small jeweled / Doll he guards like a heart— / The lioness” (lines 52-55). Plath illustrates a subject who aggressively rejects the forces around her body, unleashing the primal “lioness” within. Dharker attempts a similar move in her own “Purdah (1)” poem, and both she and Plath rely heavily on the inherent oppressiveness of purdah. However, this critique of purdah and the misogyny associated with it is invested in Western feminism and by extension, Western landscapes.

Plath and Dharker both champion the female subject who can shatter or break free of purdah, but to what end? Such a “liberation” is not necessarily possible in the diasporic context. Additionally, Dharker is re-producing the literary landscape that has already been forged by the white, Western precedent of Plath⁴.

Can the white, Western subject be aligned with the South Asian subject? Perhaps, but it seems as though Western feminism is the necessary lens to realize this South Asian identity. The South Asian woman’s body as a “site” of discourse is fraught with contradictions regarding the recognition/misrecognition of the body. Dharker maps this misrecognition in her poem “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” as she continues to put pressure on the forces surrounding the female body. While “Purdah (1)” is a more ambivalent poem regarding the treatment of nationality and postcolonial effects on the female body, “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” is more direct in its criticism of nationalism. “They’ll Say…” still features an undercurrent of South Asian subjectivity as challenging the Western “monoculture” of the U.K.—but suffers from assigning a collective voice to South Asian women that may not wholly succeed at integrating the intersections of gender and nationalism.

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⁴ The caveat here is that Plath herself is also a displaced, “migrant” subject, writing as an American immigrant to the U.K. However, Plath’s poem “Purdah” is still appropriating a South Asian or Muslim female experience.
“THEY’LL SAY: SHE MUST BE FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY” (2001)

Dharker attempts to construct a space of liberated female subjectivity in her poem “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country,” however, she never fully illustrates what “another country” is. Is “another country” indicative of a diasporic background, an ever-shifting “country” that is always diverged into the category of “another”? Are the actions her speaker claims to perform in the poem rejecting the gendered and national norms of “another country’s” culture, or rather, are the actions of the speaker only meant as reactionary against her Western environment? While Dharker uses a displaced female subject to push back against Western hegemony, her subject is still ultimately plagued with the same contradictions in “Purdah (1),” scratching for a solid hold in a shifting landscape.

Published in her 2001 collection *I Speak for the Devil*, “They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” returns to many of the themes presented earlier in “Purdah (1).” Her later collections of poetry (including the 2006 collection *Terrorist at my Table*) are more critical of the nationalist attitudes in the U.K. and the growing Islamophobia following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the London subway bombing of 2005. Jenkins notes that “Dharker’s 2006 collection examines the operation of language in a time of conflict and crisis, giving new life to the cliché that one person’s ‘terrorist’ is another’s ‘freedom-fighter’,” (123). As a result of the stigma attached to Islam as well as the ambivalences associated with South Asian diaspora, Dharker forges a new landscape (albeit an unsteady one) for a collective female identity while also specifically
denouncing the forces that attempt to police her body and the bodies of other women.

“They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” relies on tension between both the female body and the body of her nationalist oppressor. This tension is expressed through the use of “interruptions” in the poem’s language. Dharker’s poem attempts to forge a female identity that opposes some of the stereotypes of a “victimized” South Asian woman, and by “interrupting” her the environment with a critique of censorship and by revealing her body, her speaker attempts to seize agency and political power.

“They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” tracks the speaker’s frustration with the people around her who write off her identity as merely “foreign.” The poem begins by describing how the people around the speaker are willing to censor plays, books, and art. When the speaker objects to this, her concerns are written off as merely foreign. The speaker also describes how her accent, expressions, choice of dress, and manners are received by an anonymous “they” who again, make no attempt to understand her but ultimately assign no threat to her presence. The poem’s turn occurs when the speaker details how she thinks about inhabiting a country very different from her current one, and criticizes the country as full of violent, nationalist hypocrites. The final stanza ends the poem on a gentler, more hopeful note than the penultimate stanza, and ultimately rejects postcolonialism as a tenant of her identity, which she invests in the broader collective identity of those who share the same perspectives as she.

I want to begin by clarifying what I mean by an “interruption” in the poetry. Several times throughout the poem, Dharker establishes a certain point in time—typically written as a “when”—the speaker’s South Asian or Muslim identity is concealed. Another example of the use of “interruptions” in the poem is Dharker’s rhyme scheme,
which typically limits her stanzas to three rhyming couples per stanza. The poem’s turn, occurring within the fifth stanza, is itself an interruption. By using these interruptions, Dharker is essentially rejecting the rigid hegemony she criticizes in “Purdah (1).” The interruptions also exemplify how a female subjectivity must be crafted: like the echo of Plath in Dharker’s “Purdah (1),” Dharker establishes these new landscapes *through* existing ones. As a result, Dharker’s seizure of female agency and subjectivity is entrenched in a back-and-forth between Western notions of South Asian female identity and the Western feminist ideal of a subject who can successfully rebel against patriarchal forces. The landscape of “another country” is only explained in relation to the landscape of the U.K. in which the South Asian community does not conform. Thus, the U.K. landscape and culture still retains power over minority communities. Critics Beniwal and Mehta write:

The poetry [of Imtiaz Dharker] circumvents polemics to zoom into the human condition, which is viewed not through a binary lens of clashing convictions, but as inevitably structured by power and powerlessness. The nuances are subtle and where religious markers are inserted into the poetic vision; they serve only to highlight a shared vulnerability and fragility. (“Communalism and the Poetic Imagination: A Study of Indian English Women's Poetry”)

While “religious markers” aren’t as explicit in this poem as they were in “Purdah (1),” the criticisms of female behavior are still indicative of a clash in national and diasporic values. Dharker’s subject in “They’ll Say…” conforms neither to the traditional notions of South Asian femininity (like those in “Purdah (1)”) nor to the Western monoculture.
While Kamala Das’s “An Introduction” responds to criticisms by asking why her identity cannot exist alongside the traditional models of South Asian femininity, Dharker characterizes criticisms from others as an opportunity for her to mock them and indeed, make the case for her own “country.” However, the poem never successfully locates this country outside of its relation to the U.K.

“They’ll Say: She Must Be From Another Country” is a poem rife with answers to unasked questions. Unlike Das’s “An Introduction,” Dharker doesn’t describe a dialogue between her speaker and anonymous critics. Although her critics are anonymous like Das’s, Dharker in fact assumes a certain degree of power or control over those who disapprove of her speaker’s behavior. The first two stanzas are invested in the speaker’s speech and what she says, rather than her body and the threat her South Asian female subjectivity poses to those around her. However, the text implies that her body alone is all that is “required” of her—while what she says is dismissed or considered problematic by her critics. Vicki Squire describes how this phenomenon works in the context of the U.K.’s attempt to encourage diversity and multiculturalism under the New Labour government in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Squire notes that the marginalized person is only valued because of their presence5, or their non-threatening contributions to a Western monoculture: “the migrant, as ‘supplementary other’ to an essentialist conception of the nation, becomes divided into its harmless or necessary (wanted) and threatening (unwanted) varieties” (59). As the poem progresses, Dharker’s speaker becomes more and more threatening or challenging to this concept of nationhood.

While Dharker’s speaker herself is being disregarded, those who criticize her actions ascribe them to an unknown foreign location, thereby doing the work for her of

5 This is also known as “tokenism.”
constructing a landscape for the dispossessed, subaltern, and powerless. Dharker’s speaker is not crafting a landscape or weaving a collective female identity for herself like the language of “Purdah (1)” does—rather, Dharker is letting the very forces that she writes against set up a “border” within which the collective female subject can occupy. Chakraborty writes,

...through Imtiaz Dharker’s poetry, the familiar dialectics of belonging and unbelonging or assimilation and alienation are endowed with a different gendered dimension which not only moves beyond familiar binaries but differs from the logic of celebratory hybridity. Otherized on account of both her race and gender, Dharker, through the foregrounding of this gendered self moves towards these horizons of self-fashioning which question the very logic of such otherizing modes of identity-formation. (81-2)

The self-fashioning that Chakraborty mentions is not limited only to the self and the isolated body, however. Dharker’s poetry is more invested in the formation and the empowerment of the collective, a particular community of people, than the development of the isolated self-identity.

In contrast with “Purdah (1),” “They’ll Say…” also fashions a female body that is revealed, not concealed, thus rejecting stereotypes about traditional South Asian communities. In fact, the speaker’s sexuality and exposed body is crafted into a kind of “deviance” within the context of the poem. The speaker hears rumors that she’s “gay” (line 29), and urinates publicly, “flaunting my bare ass / covering my face / laughing through my hands” (41-43). Here, the speaker re-appropriates the Western notion of a
concealed South Asian woman, covered in her veil—her body is exposed under crude circumstances, but she still “veils” her smiling face with her hands.

The penultimate stanza shifts the pressure that the South Asian female body suffers onto her oppressor and the nation attempting to re-colonize her own body and dismiss her subjectivity. Dharker writes, “Maybe there is a country / where all of us live / all of us freaks” (lines 50-52). Because of the heavy emphasis on interruption and time within the poem, Dharker’s use of present tense suggests that this landscape inhabited by a collective female identity is in fact already in existence. By nature of being outcast of subaltern, Dharker’s text asserts that these powerless peoples still have a right to lay claim to a country of their own, even if it is a country of diaspora and exile.

In the final stanza, the speaker can assert the location of her own country, claiming “it’s more like the cracks / that grow between borders / behind their backs” (lines 64-66). Again, by claiming that the formation of a country comprised of people who share a collective experience of marginalization is the result of the oppressor’s body, Dharker successfully shifts the pressure away from the body of the female subject. While Kamala Das sees distorting the body as an answer to hegemony and patriarchy, Dharker instead mocks these systems of power by positing them as the source of solidarity for a collective female subject.

Both “Purdah (1)” and “They’ll Say…” ascribe to a feminism that rejects many of the tenants of a traditional, oppressive culture. However, Dharker also writes of a seizure of subjectivity and agency as a move that is still filtered through a Western lens, and Western feminism often fails to account for intersectionality. “Purdah (1)” might attempt to unify South Asian female experience under the banner of a shared oppression, but that
experience isn’t one necessarily shared by all women. Robert J.C. Young describes how “…reading the veil amounts to how the veil looks out of its own social context, to what the exterior viewer puts into his or her interpretation, and has very little to do with what the veil means for the actual woman who is wearing it” (92). Therein lies the contradiction in Dharker’s work—her poems describe oppression and concealment, without acknowledging how markers of “difference” such as the hijab can in fact be re-assigned new meaning by the women who prefer to wear it. Dharker is too invested in a Western feminist perspective to successfully offer a solution to the problem of female subjectivity in a shifting global context.
“THE RECEDING EAST / THE RECEDING WEST”: DISPERSING FEMALE
SUBJECTIVITIES IN THE POETRY OF MONIZA ALVI

In this final chapter, I turn to the poetry of Moniza Alvi. Although Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker are ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts to seize female subjectivity by negotiating with or rebelling against the forces of hegemony and patriarchy, in this chapter I focus on how Alvi attempts to complicate these themes in the twenty-first century context of the New Labour government in the U.K. Alvi’s poetry asks, how might a marginalized population assert its own voice and power in the context of an increasingly Islamophobic political atmosphere? If the New Labour, twenty-first century concept of “multiculturalism” is an attempt to equalize social and racial groups in the U.K., might that attempt still be limited by hegemonic notions of nationality and Western feminism? Like Dharker’s work, Alvi’s poetry is heavily invested in the notions of spaces, landscapes, and communities. However, while Dharker’s female subjectivities settle deep into the “cracks” of these borders, pushing back against the forces that constrain them there, Alvi’s poetry instead proliferates female subjectivities across a Western landscape, crafting a worldwide diaspora that navigates the U.K.’s move towards a globalized, “post-racial” society. Alvi is more of a “global” poet for this reason, whose border-writing and themes of diaspora emphasize how so many parts of the world are occupied by immigrant populations. Jenkins notes this shift towards the “global” in postcolonial, writing that

While a transnational feminism surveys the “grounds” for differences and similarities, postcolonial theory posits a “third space” in which the
negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences … However, such homogenizing theories of diaspora have proved problematic for those feminists who argue that location is still an important category that influences the specific manifestations of transnational formations. (120)

My chapter attempts to expand on the “transnational formations” in Alvi’s poetry, and how these formations are indicative of the female body. However, that isn’t to say that Alvi’s poetry does not feature a critique of how marginalized populations, such as immigrant women of color, treated in the context of New Labour policies. Alvi’s poetry instead posits how the problems of hegemony and patriarchy are global problems, affecting South Asian communities in the U.K. in the same way that they affect India and Pakistan. In terms of New Labour’s contribution to the shift to a more cosmopolitan Britain, “at the heart of what has become the New Labour project lies an uncertainty about the challenge contemporary multiculturalism poses to the very constitution of the polity of nation” (Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra, and Solomos 447).

To illustrate these issues of a dispersing, or mobile, female subjectivity, I analyze two of Alvi’s poems that are heavily invested in global issues and mobility, “The Veil” and “Better By Far.” Effectively, female identity is inherently diasporic, like the Pakistani diaspora. The intersections of history and geography craft a landscape of subjectivity that transcends the female body—but in transcending the corporeal female body, the landscape itself takes on female attributes. By focusing on the mobility and diaspora of the female body and by extending this issue to encompass a more global perspective, Alvi’s poetry maps out a transcendent female subjectivity. Her poetry does
not reside in the cracks of the borders: in Alvi’s poetry, female South Asian identity cannot be classified in an essentializing context as one neatly woven voice.

Like Imtiaz Dharker, Moniza Alvi was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1954. She immigrated to the U.K. as an infant with her parents. As a result, her poetry often describes Pakistan as a far-off, idealized landscape. Muneeza Shamsie makes note of this tendency in Alvi’s writing, claiming:

In her first collection … Pakistan appears as a distant place evoked by stories, anecdotes, culture and imagery. In her second [collection] … Pakistan becomes a place she visits but where she remains an observer. In subsequent volumes … her Asian background comes in, but is incidental. (259).

In the poems I analyze in this chapter (both of which come after Alvi’s first two collections mentioned in the above quote), Alvi’s Asian background is more than just “incidental.” Rather, this background enables the poet to construct a diasporic narrative that spreads into many parts of British identity. Like both Dharker and Das, Alvi’s poems often utilize anonymity and refrain from naming specific places. But while the poems of Dharker and Das equate naming with power, Alvi’s poetry instead indicates that names are ultimately unable to contain the spread and the ebb and flow of diasporic populations. Vijay Mishra argues that “it is thus the creation of its own political myths rather than of the real possibilities of a return to a homeland which is the defining characteristic of these diasporas” (6). Alvi’s poetry is not invested in forging a new landscape for the South Asian female identity under its own terms; rather, she illustrates how these identities are
replicated from place to place, forming a mobile landscape that lacks beginning and end
points.

Little academic scholarship has been written about Moniza Alvi and her work. Although she has published nine collections of poetry since her 1993 debut collection, *The Country at My Shoulder*, most criticism about Alvi is limited to minor descriptions of her work in anthologies. In a rare analysis of Alvi’s writing, Susan Bassnett writes:

> [Alvi] writes from her own experience as being an in-between, a woman with a place in two cultures and consequently perhaps not entirely located in either. Her writing is therefore emblematic of the position occupied by millions in today’s world. A theme to which she returns in many poems is that of belonging and not-belonging. (61)

Bassnett’s assertion that Alvi writes of a condition that is currently experienced by millions of people worldwide lends credence to my overall argument that Alvi’s work seeks to disperse issues of female subjectivity rather than confine them to an individual subject or a woven collection of voices. Alvi’s other collections are also heavily invested in shifting, global perspectives on South Asian identity and history, and how myths are reproduced in political ways. Her collections *Souls* (2002), *How the Stone Found Its Voice* (2005), and *Split World: Poems 1990-2005* (2008) are all invested in the tearing at borders and communities. This splitting, receding, and tearing is all the result of the dispersal of communities, a phenomenon that has been occurring for thousands of years. Alvi highlights the ancient diasporas by heavily drawing from myths, Greek and otherwise, in her work.
Both of the poems featured in this chapter are very recent, this despite my choice to focus on the older poems of Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker. My reason for choosing such recent poems of Alvi’s is to unpack the contemporary implications of the issues that her poetry explores. Ultimately, my hope is that Alvi’s poetry can better illustrate the globalized critiques of poetry invested in questions of diaspora and merging communities, especially with respect to the Western influence on globalization. Alvi uses the veil as a catalyst for this criticism, indicating that beyond “the veil” South Asian women harbor subjecthoods complicated by diaspora, history, and national identity.

“The Veil”

Featured in Moniza Alvi’s 2008 collection *Europa*, a collection that details the Greek myth of rape of Europa and provides commentary on the frictions between the East and the West, “The Veil” is about how the marginalization of women affects more than just closed communities. Alvi chooses not to specifically name a location where the poem is taking place. Also, like I mentioned in my analysis of Dharker’s choice to omit specific places, this lends the poem a transnational quality that is indicative not only of Alvi’s own diasporic imagination, but also of the blurring between borders—particularly the borders between the U.K. and Pakistan.

In “The Veil,” the speaker describes how so many aspects of the world have become veiled, such as the sky, newspapers, and a rose. The speaker describes the veil in vague terms: “light as a gossamer / or dark as the River Styx” (lines 9-10). The speaker also describes the veil as a “window” (line 14), listing what she might she out of it. The
veil itself is sexualized, rather than the body it conceals, and the speaker ends the poem by suggesting that the veiling of the world is in fact a movement itself, as both the east and west⁶ are “receding.” (lines 25-26).

While equating the female body with landscapes is nothing new, “The Veil” suggests that the inscription of the female body on top of a landscape, a landscape invested in the intersection of history and geography, is in fact Alvi’s illustration of female subjectivity. Within the poem, the mobility and spreading of the veil and its ability to conceal are offered as kinds of power. This “spreading” movement is also indicative of the dispersal of diasporic identities. The central tension in the poem arises from the contradictory nature of veiling absolutely everything. If “The world itself / is veiled” (lines 23-24), does that mean that the world is hidden from something outside of itself? Are its landscapes all enveloped under the same concealing veil? Or, is the poem making the case that individual objects and bodies are all veiled and hidden from one another? Even still, is the speaker only describing the world around her as veiled by nature of the fact that her own veil casts everything else in shadow and mystery?

“The Veil” offers a view of veiling and concealment as a form of power. The speaker describes how behind the veil, “eggs are cracked open / and the yolks run everywhere” (lines 11-12). While the “cracking eggs” could be read as indicative of violence, particularly violence towards women and an expectation that they will produce children, the yolks that “run everywhere” seem to offer an element of agency in the line. Because the poem puts so much emphasis on “spreading,” a spreading that moves across geography and across borders, the “running yolks” are therefore indicative of this dispersing movement. In fact, the “cracking open” of the eggs frees the female body from

⁶ Neither direction is capitalized in the original text.
its reproductive restraints. From behind the veil, female subjectivity is seized through this mobility.

The power of anonymity is what makes this veiled mobility possible. In Alvi’s poem, unlike Dharker’s work, the veil is a site of ambivalence rather than a site of oppression. Its imposition does not necessarily hinder female subjectivity, but rather, changes the landscape in which that subjectivity can be expressed. The hijab itself has become a site of controversy for this very reason, with some arguing that it is inherently misogynistic, while others claim that policing the hijab is an extension of Islamophobic hegemony in Western countries. Young describes the veil in this disputed context, but notes that “the veil itself is a fluid, ambivalent garment” (85). The fluidity of the veil is what Alvi illustrates as the “spreading” throughout the poem. Additionally, Young notes how “the very uniformity that the veil appears to impose on the woman here increases the masculine subversive resonance. The male veil is assertive” (88). Indeed, the man with a hidden face seizes power in his anonymity—a veiled man is typically associated with crime and violence. “The Veil” seems to also put pressure on this question of power in anonymity—the speaker describes how “The rose wears a veil though / it cannot shield us from its thorns” (lines 5-6). While flowers, like the rose, are typically associated with landscaping the female body, in this context Alvi draws attention to the power that the rose possesses. Because its veil cannot shield others from being pricked, the veil is therefore reduced merely to a concealing garment—unlike Dharker’s poetry, which argues that the veil is more constraining, though it does inspire female solidarity.

“The Veil,” like Dharker’s “Purdah (1),” uses second-person language to craft a shared narrative between the reader and the marginalized, misunderstood group of
diasporic South Asian women living in Europe. In lines 1, 3, 6, and 13, the speaker uses collective second-person language such as “we” or “us.” Again, like Dharker, Alvi is crafting a subjectivity that can be shared between many people. Unlike Dharker, however, Alvi’s approach is one that blurs the lines of borders and forces readers to consider how a shared national identity inscribed into a landscape can be shifted and deconstructed when considering the spread of diasporic populations. Alvi’s poetry as a whole seems to question the stability of national identity, and by writing of a veiled world—rather than a veiled community—she is better able to push these questions on the “multicultural” or “diverse” communities in the U.K. In terms of female subjectivity, Alvi’s use of second-person in “The Veil” encourages identification with the women who live behind the veil. Like Das, Alvi utilizes empathy to argue against patriarchy and make the case for female agency. This empathy—especially in a contemporary, globalized context—puts pressure on readers to consider not only what life behind the veil is like for a South Asian woman, but also to consider how one’s identity is affected by diaspora. By displacing the reader’s own identity through use of the second-person collective pronouns, Alvi is “spreading” the reader’s own identity into a diasporic state.

“The Veil” makes a curious move by incorporating Greek history and mythology in its otherwise contemporary lines. The poem’s chronology is unsteady, invoking images of “newspapers” (line 3), and a “skating rink” (line 16) alongside its mention of the “River Styx” (line 10). The entirety of the Europa collection features references to Greek myths and history, but this move seems to suggest a shared history between cultures. However, while the poem might indicate this “shared” history, it also indicates that South Asian literature has to be filtered through the lens of Western influence. This parallels the
arguments surrounding Western feminism—that Western feminism is a “global” feminism, seeking to “liberate” South Asian women.

By blurring ancient mythology with contemporary references, Alvi increases the pressure on the movements of different populations, and how Greece’s ancient culture has displaced its contemporary one. Though “The Veil” reads “The receding east. / The receding west.” (lines 25-26) in its final lines, historically and geographically speaking, Greece and the eastern Mediterranean function as a “veil” between the Western and Eastern world. Like the egg yolks that spread across a surface area, the dispersal of this East/West border ultimately indicates that such borders will eventually overtake classic, hegemonic notions of East and West. The poem’s first line reads, “We thought we knew the sky spread out above us,” essentially flipping the poem’s geography to the stratospheric before descending down into the “River Styx” of the underworld. Like the receding East and West (east and west?) of the final lines, this movement between the sky and the underworld stretches the poem across Earth, using it as a liminal border. Indeed, the inclusion of the River Styx doesn’t even indicate a “stopping point” of the poem’s spread, as the River Styx is in fact the border between the underworld and Earth. Both the sky and the River are vague, liminal spaces themselves, further illustrating the poem’s unsteady movement across geography. Because the River Styx is the entrance to the underworld, it functions as a barrier to the past and to people who have died. Therefore, the poem’s chronology is even more stretched, encompassing not only an ancient myth, but the long-dead that reside within the myth itself.

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7 This is especially true when considering Greece’s current political and economic climate. *Europa* was published in 2008, during the middle of a late-2000s economic recession that would parts of Europe, particularly Greece, especially hard. At the time of this writing, some economists suggest that Greece should be exiled from the Eurozone.
“The Veil” invokes more recent history as well to inscribe a shared national identity on the veil. This shared national identity is one of schism, however, rather than reconciliation. Alvi writes, “What is a veil but a kind of / partition / light as a gossamer / or dark as the River Styx.” (lines 7-10). The word “partition” is likely a reference to the Indian Partition that split India and Pakistan into separate countries partly as a result of religious differences. The “veil” between both countries is the border between them. Like Dharker’s poetry, in Alvi’s poem the veil functions as a border—however, Alvi goes on to describe the variance in concealment that the veil provides. For instance, the veil can be light as a “gossamer,” a finely-knit, sheer textile. A veil that is as “dark as the River Styx” may not provide the wearer—the female subject—with much visibility, but a dark veil also makes it impossible for others to see the body underneath. Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor explains that “it is important to interrogate what determines this visibility of some Muslim women and why some women are more visible than others. The simple answer would be their hijabs” (5). Therefore, a “border” exists between the visible versus the invisible female Muslim (“Muslimah”) identity: the hijab itself, severing this community, forging a partition. Some feminist arguments are emerging within the general political sphere that call into question the patriarchal function of the hijab, criticizing how discussions around the hijab tend to split South Asian and Muslim communities. Young notes that prior to Western colonialism and globalization, “veiling for a woman was generally a mark of status, and in that sense was therefore regarded as empowering rather than disempowering” (90). If the hijab functions as a status symbol, then the type of hijab worn also communicates a socioeconomic element—another boundary between women. What Alvi’s poem does is unite women under the guise of the
veil, transcending the boundaries of class or location. Under the hijab, the landscape of female subjectivity is consistently moving outward.

While the “yolks run everywhere” under the veil, Alvi also describes how the veil functions as a “window” or a way of looking at history and geography beyond the cover of the veil. Melanie Pitch describes the function of the window in poetry, noting that “affirmation is sometimes the mood of the traveler or it can empathetically compensate for a keen sense of loss” (87). Later, Pitch describes how the window represents a boundary between inside and outside, and that this boundary can also “split” cultural selves—the observer and the observed (93). If the veil in “The Veil” is a window—a partition, a separator—then it allows the female subject concealed under it to see not only the landscape around her, but also how her body fits into this landscape. Alvi writes,

All we’d ever wanted to see
flickers across its window:
A boulevard
A skating rink
Novelty
Gorgeousness
Lament. (lines 13-19)

The description of the landscape is not punctuated, and it shifts suddenly from manmade locations to more abstract language, dropped in without any article usage. The word “boulevard” indicates a road, or a path by which on travels. A skating rink is also indicative of mobility and movement, especially a displaced movement. A skating rink is a cold environment confined to an interior space where it would not otherwise “belong.”
The skating rink mirrors the diasporic identity of populations that move to different landscapes, spreading across the globe. Additionally, the words that follow—“Novelty / Gorgeousness” are thrown into question when followed by the word “Lament.” Is it novelty and gorgeousness themselves that lament? Or is the speaker encouraging the reader to lament? The unsteadiness of the language is another extension of the theme of displacement. The poem itself is drawing equivalences not amongst binaries, but amongst all spaces that intersect: a skating rink and a boulevard are not inherently linked, despite the implication of mobility and movement in their purpose. While the words “Novelty” and “Gorgeousness” seem somewhat related, their meaning is thrown off-balance by the inclusion of the command—or verb—“Lament.”

While Alvi’s word choice can be somewhat enigmatic, the form of the entire poem seems structured around sudden stops and fragments. These “interruptions” in form are indicative of the interrupting power of the concealing hijab. When Alvi asks, “What is a veil but a kid of / partition / light as a gossamer / or dark as the River Styx.” (lines 7-10), the question format ends with a period rather than a question mark. The words I mentioned earlier that appear in increasingly abstract succession—“A boulevard/ A skating rink / Novelty / Gorgeousness” (lines 15-18)—are not punctuated at all, and instead are dropped into their own lines. “Lament” (line 19) ends with a period, despite its mysterious purpose as a line. The lack of commas, despite the capitalization that indicates the start of a new line, displaces the words. They float along on their own, like the identities of displaced people, lacking clear pauses and stops in their journey. The same could be said for the sentence fragments in the poem, which populate the last six lines of the poem. Alvi writes, “The veil with its hidden waist and hips / Its energies, its
limitations.” (lines 20-21). By defining the veil as the subject and detailing its properties, Alvi stresses the anticipation in the lines. The verb itself is concealed from the reader. Beyond the veil, its energies and limitations do something—but what? Alvi seems to tease the reader by following those lines with the line, “The capacious veiled veil.” (line 22). The space under or within the veil is spacious and mysterious, but the reader is not privy to the knowledge of what the “hidden waist and hips”—areas of the female body associated with sexuality—look like. The interruptions in the lines and the mysterious choice of language suggest that the landscape of female subjectivity is a shrouded one, but that shrouding is a source of power, not oppression. Her final lines are fragments: “The receding east. / The receding west.” (lines 25-6). The lines themselves are interrupted by the abrupt placement of periods, but in writing the lines without a verb (which would read “The east recedes. / The west recedes.”), Alvi puts pressure on the spread of diasporic populations, populations that disrupt the East/West division. Indeed, by neglecting to capitalize “East” and “West,” Alvi seems to expel their definitive locality and history. Landscapes are inscribed on the bodies of diasporic people—such as marginalized, veiled South Asian women—and not on geography itself anymore.

Finally, I want to end my analysis of “The Veil” by pointing out the double-meaning associated with the word “veil” itself. In spoken language, “veil” could also be written as “vale,” a word that encompasses the world and life on earth. When Alvi writes that “The world itself / is veiled.” (lines 23-24), the lines are doubling back on themselves—the world itself is the world, and a “veil” around the world conceals its intricate histories and diasporas. While the East and West may be receding and losing their geographic significance, issues of subjectivity and community must increasingly be
discussed in terms of a global context, rather than just a postcolonial one. Additionally, by writing that the world is veiled as a whole, Alvi suggests perhaps other forms of “veiling” exist besides just the veiling of South Asian women who wear the hijab. Ultimately, by equating the female body with the South Asian diaspora to the U.K., Alvi attempts to craft a female identity constantly at odds with the Western attempts at “liberating” the woman from the veil. Alvi highlights how communities in diaspora still retain their own cultures and histories, and those elements of national identity do not merely disappear once they enter the diaspora and immigrate to the U.K. The themes of movement and mobility are explored in Alvi’s other texts, such as the next poem I analyze, “Better By Far.”

“BETTER BY FAR” (2013)

Written in Moniza Alvi’s 2013 collection *At the Time of Partition*, “Better By Far” describes a family in motion, diasporic subjects in the process of displacement. *At the Time of Partition* as a whole features poems invoking the bloody Indian Partition that tore many communities apart following the British withdrawal from India and the end of the formal colonial period in the region. The poem begins by describing how the family is being transported, then describes the landscape that they’re travelling through. The last third of the poem describes family members and how they make the journey. The actual identity of the mentioned family members isn’t clear—“Better By Far” could be depicting either a fictional or a real family. Most of its descriptions of family members involve women, though at one point two little boys are also mentioned.
I want to examine Alvi’s 2013 poem, “Better By Far,” because my reading of it situates female subjectivities as entangled and knotted together, similar to the even layering of the communal voices in Dharker’s poetry. These bodies drift throughout the poem, becoming more and more tangled up in other another, transcending the boundaries that attempt to limit their movement. While “The Veil” struggles with the friction between the world and the veil—what is concealed and what is revealed—this poem instead puts pressure on subjectivities that become tangled in the process of moving across the landscape. However, like “The Veil,” the tension in the poem arises from how female bodies attempt to stress geographic and historical borders by dispersing across multiple landscapes. The poem is about a linked female subjectivity, again, like Dharker’s poetry, but while Dharker layers female voices to push back against hegemony and patriarchy, “Better By Far” attempts to filter those issues through a particular national history. Alvi attempts to craft a mobile female subjectivity in order to escape from these inflexible, constraining forces, but while a more globalized perspective might highlight the ambivalences of diaspora, it ultimately fails to adequately break down the traditional forces that limit female agency.

The question that begins the poem helps to put pressure on each and every brief stanza. The first line—the only question in the poem—reads, “By bus?” While it is followed up with an alternative kind of transportation, the question of travelling by bus persists throughout the poem. Although the question is perhaps rhetorical, the speaker never answers it or returns to it, though it lingers over the top of the poem, the only single-line stanza. The question “By bus?” is at the heart of the poem’s depiction of diaspora in action. In order for communities to move and shift, they have to have
transportation, after all. There is a certain agency associated with mobility, and in this poem that agency is aligned with the matriarch:

my grandmother, her pots and pans,
her lamp close by,

her parcels of layered clothes,
like mattresses, (lines 18-21)

No other adult is mentioned in the poem. The “pots and pans,” “lamp,” and “parcels of layered clothes / likes mattresses” circle back to the poem’s first line. The grandmother’s domestic life is displaced, and her folded clothing resembles the mattress she cannot bring with her. The displaced objects take the place of her furniture. The descriptions of her belongings circle back to the question, “By bus?”—the family is likely sharing the bus with other people, so their options to bring their belongings is limited to utilitarian essentials.

Although the poem’s matriarch is surrounded by relics of a domestic life and the descriptions of the little girls emphasizes their entanglement, the little boys in the poem—“Ahmed and Athar jostling for space”—seem to push back against an enveloping landscape. Herein lies the difference between the poem’s female subjectivities and the motivation of its male subjects. Though both are embarking on a diasporic journey via a bus, with only their easily-transported belongings, the boys seek to define their own individual spaces. Even if it’s just room on the bus, the boys fight for a space of their own, while the girls happily share their personal space with one another.
This “tangling” of female subjectivities in diaspora is key to how “Better By Far” illustrates a diasporic landscape, a landscape inherently affected by those who travel through it. Alvi writes,

Rahila, Jamila, Shehana,

the ‘little’ sisters,
a conspiracy of three,

with names, like mine
all ending in ‘a’, young girls,

cross-legged, daydreaming,
disentangling hello from goodbye. (lines 23-9)

Though their voices are combined and tangled like their crossed legs, the little girls find solidarity in diaspora by combining their identities. While Alvi’s poem “The Veil” details a spreading of female subjectivities as they forge a new landscape, “Better By Far” illustrates female subjectivities that twist themselves together to tighten a communal bond. The little girls are a “conspiracy” of three—Alvi’s word choice is somewhat humorous, but upon closer inspection, it actually indicates significant political power. By putting quotations around their “little” description, Alvi also puts pressure on the hidden power the young girls possess, especially as a group. The girls—and the speaker—share language as a medium for this tangling. Like the poem itself, complicated and “tangled”
by the question, “By bus?”, the “names like mine” unite the speaker and the girls under a shared, mobile subjectivity.

These bonds that unite the girls in the poem keep them linked in a landscape that is segmented and broken apart. Like the veil in “The Veil,” that envelops entire geographies and histories, the bonds between female subjects and their agency through mobility helps them to navigate the segmented, bordered landscape. “Better By Far” describes a “magic carpet, / finely knotted, richer / that blood, broad enough / to keep the family together” as a means of travel. The lines describing this magic carpet are in fact curiously segmented, with commas dropped in the middle of the lines instead of between the line breaks. The woven fabric, like the textile of the veil, constitutes a shared subjectivity. The “magic carpet,” a domestic object appropriated for a fantastical purpose, would also allow the family travel globally, no longer confined to a bus. The woven, mythical carpet and the tangled female subjectivities traverse through the landscape, “islanded, apart / from every danger, / journeying swiftly / across the unsegmented sky—” (lines 6-9). Like the veil that spreads across the expanse of the sky in “The Veil,” the air provides a borderless space for the family to navigate.

Both “The Veil” and “Better By Far” attempt to separate communities of female subjects from the hegemonic and patriarchal forces that seek to constrain them. The poems celebrate mobility, and in diaspora the women are able to forge a flexible space for themselves. Alvi’s use of “binding” language—what spreads/disperses, what is islanded, what is segmented—suggests a shifting landscape hidden from view. In order to better approach poetry from a global, rather than just a postcolonial or feminist context alone, Alvi illustrates the ambivalences associated with living in diaspora versus living in
a “home” community. However, these poems also demonstrate the complications and contradictions imposed upon South Asian communities currently residing in the U.K. By writing of communities that are flexible and mobile, Alvi illustrates how South Asian communities cannot neatly fit into the “designated” spaces in a faux-multicultural community. Such a community must acknowledge the literature and political power of its marginalized subjects, such as women or immigrants, as valid and powerful. These are not “temporary” diversions into “other” cultures—these communities comprise the existing British culture, and should be acknowledged as such.

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8 One might argue that a “home” or “native” community doesn’t exist—especially in the context of the Pakistani diaspora, which is an extension of Indian diaspora following the collapse of British colonial rule in South Asia.
CONCLUSION

One thing that links all three of the poets I’ve examined is the element of duality within their poetry. This duality indicates the problematic task of attempting to conform or rebel against multiple influences on culture, community, and identity. Kamala Das’s poetry wrestles with the duality between a traditional feminine ideal and an intellectual, sexually liberated poet. In a post-colonial British society, Das is unsuccessful in fully integrating both identities into an assembled, complete subjecthood. Imtiaz Dharker writes of identity in terms of how it rejects, rather than conforms to, the forces of hegemony and patriarchy in both a traditional, minority community and in the larger scope of British culture. However, Dharker’s poetry attempts to straddle the divisions between Western feminism and a collective experience of the immigrant woman, forging an identity that is situated in both spheres. Moniza Alvi, like Dharker, also situates her poetry in a transnational space. Alvi’s poetry as a whole is invested in a mythical homeland, a Pakistan of the past and perhaps a Pakistan that never even existed. Alvi’s poetry reveals the tensions between multiple, conflicting histories. While her poetry does not seem to outright reject the more oppressive tenants of South Asian immigrant culture, Alvi still seems to present a duality of identity as it pertains to history and political landscape. To which version of the past does one ascribe?

The poems I’ve studied all put pressure on the body as a site for tensions of gender and national identity to play out. The hijab is an especially prevalent image in some of the poems I’ve looked to, as it is the most hotly contested garment on the
Western European political and social sphere. Even politicians, such as Jack Straw, seem wary of the subject. The concealment of the South Asian female body works doubly to both hide the body itself, cloaking the body in anonymity, and reveal the gendered and religious identity of the body. Das, Dharker, and Alvi all also seem to incorporate this divide of conceal/reveal in their poetry. Much of Das’s work is in fact erotic love poetry, which celebrates the female body and its sexuality, but she often writes of these sexual encounters as occurring between her female subjects and the Hindu god Krishna. After her conversion to Islam in 1999, Das’s poetry in the twenty-first century still seems to cling to an outlet in which the body can express itself sexually, perhaps outside of the borders of a “territory.” Dharker juxtaposes the oppressive constraints of the hijab with an outright rejection of this concealment. Her poetry seems to seek a place in which South Asian female subjectivity can be recognized outside of the constraints of the hijab. In her poem “They’ll Say: She Much Be From Another Country,” Dharker positions a South Asian female subject as one inherently different from the British monoculture around her, and such a subject is identifiable not by her concealment but instead by her open behavior and willingness to question hegemony. Moniza Alvi also fashions the body as a site for doubling and as a site for political and historical discourse. Her poem “The Veil” demonstrates how the presence of the hijab affects not only the conflict between concealing and revealing the body, but also the conflict between national identities in diaspora. If the world is experienced “through” the veil, then the subjecthood of the person wearing the veil is split: what kind of landscape exists behind the veil, and what landscape exists beyond it?
Each of the poets I’ve studied offers a more ambivalent approach to national and gender identity than what Western stereotypes might promote. These poets complicate even their use of language by using Western forms in the poetry itself. The confessional format, perhaps exemplified best by the American poet Sylvia Plath, provides Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker with frameworks for poems about the disassembled self and the crisis of identity-formation. Alvi’s poetry, particularly within her Europa collection, goes back even further to illustrate how Greek myth and twentieth-century South Asian history intersect to illustrate diaspora and a displaced, dispersed identity. All three of the poets utilize a free verse format in much of their work, allowing them to push the boundaries of language and rhythm. By both working within the Western, English conventions of poetry, these poets are able to explore issues of duality in gender and national identities.

The combination of Western poetic conventions as a means to explore South Asian national identity raises the question: how are these poets forging a space for themselves—and for South Asian poetry in general—in a British literary landscape? Often reduced to the margins of poetic study, the compartmentalization of minority and immigrant literature limits a broader understanding of those issues that these groups face. Statements like those made by Jack Straw betray unease around a veiled woman but also point to a broader lack of understanding of the variety of South Asian female experiences, and how those experiences are complicated by community and mobility. Additionally, the body is not the only place on which one’s gender and national identity can be inscribed. The poetry of Das, Dharker, and Alvi illustrates how language can be another outlet for one’s identity, a medium through which one can explore the contradictions and ambivalences associated with gender and nationality.
If, as Spivak argues, the subaltern are inherently silent and are therefore unable to participate in a revisionist history, might the narratives woven into the poetry of minority writers lend more insight regarding the hijab and the concealment and policing of the female body? After all, is a government-mandated policing any better than policing as the result of a traditional community seeking to enclose itself behind the hijab? If South Asian poets were more widely taught, studied, and celebrated, perhaps what lies behind the veil might not inspire so much unease amongst people on the other side of it. Vijay Mishra argues: “…this ‘freeing’ can only happen when diasporas become full participants in a nation-state’s collective history or when they write their great books and critiques, which as ‘minor literature’ would have embedded in them the possibilities of greatness precisely because their subject matter is not a pre-given” (10). This concept of the “freeing” of the South Asian woman is inherently problematic. Might discourse surrounding the South Asian female subject also look to the “freeing” of the South Asian voice? Or, rather, is there anything at all that necessarily must be “freed” by an outside force? Perhaps the South Asian female subject should instead be assigned more agency of her own so as to conceal or reveal herself or her body under her own terms.

The duality of identity and the friction between conflicting national identities isn’t the only element of duality in the poems I’ve studied. As the poetry of Alvi illustrates, while her language encompasses a more cosmopolitan and global perspective of the South Asian experience of femininity, the British government is also responsible for setting a precedent regarding the treatment of immigrant and minority populations.

However, under the New Labour government on the late 1990s and early 2000s, the rhetoric of inclusion clashed with the statistics that illustrated a persistent inequality in
the country. “New Labour has adopted the language of diversity and racial justice, [but] it has also presided over some of the most authoritarian initiatives directed against young people and an extremely stringent immigration policy” (Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra, and Solomos 450-1). The discrepancy between what the New Labour government claimed and how it followed through on its promises is indicative of this other form of concealment, albeit a political one. Again, Jack Straw’s comments illustrate a broader attitude about veiled women living in the U.K.: Straw explained that he felt uncomfortable talking to someone with a hidden face. Exchanging dialogue, engaging in the English language, now comes with a specific requirement that the face be visible.

While the New Labour government might have attempted to encourage multiculturalism in Britain, its rhetoric only succeeds in pressuring the people in minority communities to assimilate into a white, British culture.

Very little has been written about the hijab in contemporary women’s poetry, especially English poetry, but as studies in multicultural literature begins to grow, so too might the scholarship regarding South Asian women’s poetry. While the United States has its own complicated relationship with South Asian immigrants and the problem of Islamophobia in a political climate that was overcome with nationalism in the early 2000s, the experiences of South Asians in the U.K. is somewhat different. My purpose in focusing mostly on British poetry in particular is to “trace” the shifting layers of identity from Indian, to Pakistani, to British subjecthood. Indeed, Western Europe is deeply immersed in a cultural divide that has political, economic, and social implications not only for South Asian communities but also for the general population. Some of these tensions have already resulted in extreme violence, such as the Charlie Hebdo attack in
France in January 2015, which resulted in the death of twelve people.

The Islamophobia and extreme violence experienced in these communities leads to yet another question: how might the female body also be fashioned as a site of trauma as a result of its function as a site for political discourse and perhaps as a vessel for community expression? The poets I’ve looked to have all written about how gender and nationality is complicated by the concealing or revealing of the female body. Might these bodies— and by extension, these voices and narratives— also to some extent indicate the national trauma experienced by some women? I could expand this project in the future by unpacking how violence and war further complicate the assembling of the female identity. While I’ve discussed the effects of national divisions and tensions here, I think that the association of the veiled female body with radical jihad violence in the context of British poetry is also worth extensive study.
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