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English I

March 6, 2018

An Unknown Girl, The Known Girl

Moniza Alvi is a poet with two identities. She was born in Pakistan from a Pakistani father and a British mother. She however moved to England due to a conflict in Pakistan when she was young, and she has experienced internal conflicts with her identity since. Based on her experience in her childhood, Alvi has written many poems about her identity, and “An Unknown Girl” is one of them. This poem, “An Unknown Girl”, written around 1993, is a poem of the poet receiving a henna tattoo from an unknown girl in an evening bazaar in India. It also includes deep meanings about her feelings of her identity through the symbolism of the henna tattoo and the unknown girl.

This poem consists of only one stanza, without a break. It is also written in free verse without a rhyme scheme. A pause in a poem or an interlude in a song would make it sound like there are multiple points that the speaker wants to talk about. This poem, instead, has one unified stanza to show that there is only one main idea. Not having a rhyme scheme also supports this, because having a rhyme scheme may make the poem too entertaining and not proper; not having a rhyme scheme makes the poem more proper, serious and sincere.

In Moniza Alvi’s other poem “Presents From My Aunts In Pakistan”, the poem is not centralized and has random indentations without a solid pattern. It is because the poem is mainly focused on Alvi’s confusion between her Pakistani and English identity. However, in this poem “An Unknown Girl”, Alvi seems to have made a firm decision about her identity. The poem also

has a centered structure. Regarding the facts, it can be inferred that the structure of the poem is based on the poet's feelings with her identity. Therefore, this poem is centered likely because the poet now has organized thoughts with her identity and is confident with it.

There is a group of lines that are repeated throughout the poem three times: "In the evening bazaar...is hennaing my head." This repetition serves a purpose of providing a clue of small shift in what the poem is focusing. To illustrate, the poem begins with the first repetition and then focuses on the girl. After the second repetition, the speaker focuses on her surroundings, and after the third repetition, she focuses on herself and her henna tattoo.

The title *An Unknown Girl* is literally the topic/subject of this poem. The phrase "unknown girl" is repeated throughout the poem, too. Although she had a good experience with her, she doesn't know anything about her, therefore calling her "unknown". There are some symbolisms that the "unknown girl" has; in this poem, the unknown girl hennas the speaker's hand. It can be interpreted that the unknown girl symbolizes a person, object or experience that gave Alvi something that the henna tattoo represents.

As mentioned in the poem several times, an evening bazaar is where the poem is based on. "Bazaar" is a marketplace or a street where goods and services are exchanged or sold. The word originates from a Persian word 'bāzār' and therefore has an Eastern connotation. Throughout the poem, the poet also mentions the word "neon". Neon may be a chemical element, but in this poem, the word represents neon signs that bright up the markets and stores after sunset. The colors used in the neon signs are usually bright, such as yellow, orange, mint, green and pink. The neon signs are from the west and have a western connotation.

On line 2, the adjective "studded" is used to elaborate on how the evening bazaar is full of neon signs. The word, however, has a negative connotation against the foreign objects in this

poem. It can be inferred that at the beginning of the poem, Alvi has negative feelings about western objects that “invade” the east.

On lines 1-2, the words “bazaar” and “neon” are placed in different lines. In contrast, on the last line of the poem, the two words are right next to each other on the same line. Since the word “bazaar” has an eastern connotation and the word “neon” has a western connotation, the two words joining together as the poem goes on symbolizes the fusion of the two cultures and the phenomenon of westernization.

The word “my”, which is a first-person pronoun, is used in the first half of the poem. The usage of first-person point of view affects the reader to immerse oneself into the poem as if it happened to oneself. It also makes the poem look like an autobiographical poem that is based on a real story, although that may not be true.

Starting from line 27, first-person pronouns “me” and “my” start changing to “I”. This is because the poet is focusing on changes from that point. Before the change, the poet mostly focuses on the unknown girl and her surroundings. However, after the change, the poet focuses on herself and her inner feelings. The change in focus leads to the change in the pronouns used.

Icing a cake is an action that has a western connotation. Cakes originated in the west and are more consumed in the west. In contrast, hennaing a hand is an action of the east. Henna tattoos originated in the east—to be exact, India—and more people in the east get more hennaing than the west. In line 5-7, Moniza Alvi compares icing a cake, which has a western connotation, to the unknown girl hennaing her hand, which has an eastern connotation. This shows the occurrence of westernization in the eastern world, where people feel more familiar with foreign, western culture than their traditional, eastern things.

In lines 16-17, it is mentioned that “a peacock spreads its lines / across my palm.” Peacock is the national bird of India, which shares a similar culture with Pakistan. Peacock here symbolizes Alvi’s Pakistani identity or her eastern identity in general. As the peacock spreads its lines on her hands, she feels that her eastern Pakistani identity also spreads inside her body.

Lines 18-19 says that “colors leave the street/flow up in balloons.” Although it may differ, henna tattoos are mostly single colored with black. In contrast, most western tattoos are full of color. Colors leaving the streets can symbolize the lack of variety of colors of henna tattoos compared to the western tattoos. The poet used this symbolism to show what some eastern people think as a possible cause of westernization.

Lines 20-22 personify the dummies that the poet notices in the bazaar. Although the dummies are located in a bazaar in India, they have western perms; it can be inferred that the dummies actually symbolize the westernized modern Indian people who have adapted western characteristics and who think of their traditional culture awkward. The dummies tilting and staring at the poet represents the locals in the bazaar who stare at Alvi getting a henna tattoo, which is because of the westernization in not only the outside but in the inside of people. As the dummies are given life through the use of personification, readers can easily interpret what it actually symbolizes and understand the theme of the story.

“Banners for Miss India” in line 23 is a phrase that gives a clue of where and when the poem is placed in. It lets the readers know that the poem is based on 1993 India. Also, it has a deeper meaning too; in a Miss India contest, contestants compete in the contest often with western clothes. Alvi used the Miss India banner to effectively show both the background of the poem and the westernization of the standard of beauty in the eastern world.

There is a single end-stopped sentence on line 27. The poet uses end-stopped lines to give readers the clue of a change in *something*. In lines 1-26, before the end-stopped line, pronoun “me” and “my” is used; in contrast, starting from the end-stopped line in line 27, “I” is used instead. It is also used to emphasize the event that is happening in the end-stopped line, as it is unique from other parts of the poem that are full of enjambments. In line 27, the hennaing is complete—this is an important turning point in the poem, and Alvi uses an end-stopped line to emphasize it.

In lines 34-35, Alvi compares her clinging to firm peacock lines to people who cling to the sides of the train. Since the tattoo symbolizes the poet’s eastern Pakistani identity, it can mean that she wants to keep her Pakistani identity precious and therefore clings onto it. The simile helps the readers understand Alvi’s feelings of how desperately she wants to keep her Pakistani identity.

Lines 36-37 feature two opposite words: “furious” and “hushed.” In this poem, the word “furious” is used a synonym of “noisy” and “crowded”. The word “hushed” is used as a meaning of “now quiet”, “empty”. The two opposite words in one sentence give an emphasis of a shift in the background.

In line 41, there is a simile that compares how the amber bird reveals softly to a snail trail. In lines 43, “it” is used instead of specific terms. It could mean the fade of the henna tattoo, but it could also mean the memory of the poet getting a henna tattoo from the unknown girl. Line 43 “It will fade in a week” means that her joyful experience of getting a tattoo will be forgotten as the hennaing in her hand fades away. It is a really good idea to organize it follow paragraphs!

At the end of the poem, the poet mentions “India appears and reappears...” India is represented by the henna tattoo in this poem. It is also represented by the poet’s joyful memory

of getting a henna tattoo, too. Alvi means by saying lines 44-48 that when she remembers the experience of getting a tattoo, she will wait for the unknown girl.

This poem may seem like the poet actually had an experience with an unknown girl getting henna, but it is likely that the unknown girl is also a symbol. The unknown girl actually symbolizes influences to Moniza Alvi that made her Pakistani identity firm, and the henna tattoo she got from the unknown girl symbolizes her Pakistani identity. The evening bazaar symbolizes where she got these influences, and it is used to elaborate on the phenomenon in this poem. Alvi says that she will wait for the unknown girl in line 47—this means that she wants more influences to make her sure about her eastern identity, and she likes the experience of it.

The poem mainly focuses on Moniza Alvi's feelings of her dual identity and the westernization happening around her home culture. This poem criticizes the east is the west, but at the same time, shows a positive attitude about a fusion of two or more cultures. Furthermore, this poem effectively shows Alvi gaining her Pakistani identity from her nearby influences. It is likely that Alvi wrote this poem to tell the readers about the westernization, her feelings, and her experience of being more firm with her eastern identity. Insightful understanding of this poem, this deserves a good score! Smart word choices and good interpretation, well-organized passage.