

# An Unknown Girl



## SUMMARY

The speaker describes going to a night market in India decorated with bright, fluorescent lights and getting her hand painted with henna, a traditional reddish-brown dye, by a girl she's never met before. The girl squeezes a line of the wet dye out of a nozzle onto the speaker's hand, as though icing a cake. She holds the speaker's hand still on her knee, which is covered with the silky, peach-colored cloth of her clothing. It has cost the speaker only a little bit of money to get her hand painted with henna at this night market by this girl she's never met before. A breeze kicks up the speaker's thinly stitched kameez, a kind of traditional tunic, as the drawing of a peacock begins to take shape on her palm. Colorful balloons float away from the street and mannequins with Western hairstyles tilt their heads and look out of store windows. Above the speaker hang banners advertising the Miss India 1993 beauty pageant as well as fabric for making curtains and couches. The brown lines of henna on the speaker's skin look like a new set of veins. The speaker repeats that she's at the night market, where a girl the speaker has never met before is skillfully painting her hand with henna. The speaker holds tight to the bold lines of the peacock the way people hold tight to the sides of a train on which they've hitched a ride. By this point in the evening, the immensely busy streets have grown quiet. The speaker will peel off the excess dried henna before she goes to bed in order to expose the golden-brown drawing of a bird underneath, its outline as soft as the trail that a snail leaves in its wake. The dye will fade from the speaker's skin in just a few days. But whenever the speaker is reminded of India, she'll reach across the entire country (implicitly, the country in which she lives) out of a desire to connect with the strange girl she met at the brightly colored night market.

temporarily participating. Her henna "will fade in a week," suggesting that when the speaker leaves this place, her connection to India will also fade. But her "longing for the unknown girl" at the bazaar indicates that the speaker will continue to reach for this part of her identity even from afar.

The speaker zeroes in on specific cultural images, such as a breeze lifting her "kameez" (a tunic worn in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), "Banners for Miss India 1993" (a national beauty pageant), and the sight of the hennaed "peacock" taking shape on her palm. All of these details suggest that the speaker, implied to be a tourist, is savoring this moment of being immersed in Indian culture.

The henna gives the speaker "new brown veins," suggesting that reconnecting with her heritage has invigorated her, filled her with new life. She thus "cling[s]" to the image of the peacock the way someone might "cling / to sides of a train." Just as some people might grab onto a train so that they can hitch a ride somewhere they don't have a ticket to go, the speaker is holding on to this feeling of being hennaed with a symbol for India because it's taking her somewhere she wants to be. The peacock on her hand is like a ticket that allows her to access deeper parts of herself and her history.

Yet the speaker understands this connection is temporary; the henna tattoo will disappear soon enough, and she will again be left with a deep longing for this part of her identity. "It will fade in a week," the speaker says of the peacock. And when it does, the speaker imagines she will "lean across a country / With [her] hands outstretched," desiring to once again be close to the "unknown girl" who hennaed her. The speaker's "outstretched [hands]" suggest that she will again feel disconnected from her heritage and long to feel close to it once more.

In the end, it becomes clear that the girl at the bazaar isn't the only "unknown girl" in the poem: the title implies that the speaker is unknown to *herself*, since there is a side to her identity that she has not been able to fully explore or experience.

Note that it's also possible to interpret the speaker here not as Alvi herself but rather as a general tourist who may or may not have an ancestral connection to India. Either way, the poem speaks to the poignant wonder and thrill of being immersed in an unfamiliar world and the deep desire to experience a clear sense of cultural identity and belonging.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17
- Lines 27-48



## THEMES



### CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING

"An Unknown Girl" explores the desire for cultural connection and belonging. Poet Moniza Alvi was born in Pakistan (not long after the 1947 Partition of India) but grew up in England, and her own experience informs the poem's poignant sensation of being split between two worlds. The speaker, who might represent Alvi herself, describes getting henna (a kind of dye) painted on her hand by "an unknown girl" at a night market in India. The art depicts a peacock, India's national bird, and becomes a [symbol](#) of the speaker's longing to feel like a part culture in which she's only



## GLOBALIZATION, TRADITION, AND MODERNITY

"An Unknown Girl" comments on the general tension between Eastern and Western cultures, as well as between tradition and modernity. The speaker's visit to a traditional Indian market dotted with neon lights and "Western perms" illustrates how the increasing globalization of modern life can lead to cross-cultural connections and exchange. At the same time, the poem subtly conveys how such globalization may slowly erode cultural identity and a society's connection to its past.

The speaker visits a "bazaar," a kind of market common in the Middle East and Asia, while dressed in a "kameez," a traditional garment of both South and Central Asia. The speaker also uses words Western readers may not be familiar with, such as "hennaing" (temporarily dyeing the skin with henna, a practice with deep roots in India and other Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African countries) and "rupees" (the official currency of India). All of this emphasizes that the poem takes place in a specific geographic and cultural context.

Yet there are also markers of both modernity and Western influence in this setting. For example, the speaker points out a "Miss India" banner, mannequins with "Western perms," and neon lights. The [juxtaposition](#) between all these details reflects the idea that the modern world has gotten smaller, more interlinked. While this makes it easier for the speaker to connect with her heritage, this also means that it's harder to escape the shadow of Western influence. (It's worth remembering India was colonized and ruled by Britain for nearly a hundred years, so this influence is further a reminder of Western *imperialism*.)

The speaker also says that she gets her hand hennaed for just "a few rupees"—currency worth only a fraction of the British pound or the American dollar. The henna artist is clearly skilled—"very deftly" creating a beautiful, detailed "peacock" and "stead[ying]" the speaker's hand—so mentioning how little the henna costs might subtly nod to the devaluation of traditional culture, not to mention the economic tension between tourists and locals.

The poem doesn't necessarily cast judgment on any of this—at least not explicitly. Instead, it observes the tensions and contradictions of a modern, interconnected planet—and the feelings of longing and displacement that can accompany them.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 10-26



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-6

*In the evening bazaar ...  
... from a nozzle.*

"An Unknown Girl" begins by describing its setting: the speaker is at an "evening bazaar" where "an unknown girl" is painting her hand with henna. A bazaar is a kind of market common throughout Asia and the Middle East, filled with lots of small shops and vendors. The speaker also mentions that the marketplace is "studded with neon," meaning that it is adorned with bright, fluorescent lights. The [imagery](#) suggests the festive atmosphere of the market while also signaling that the poem takes place in the modern day.

Henna, meanwhile, is a natural, reddish-brown dye long used in India (and elsewhere) to paint elaborate, temporary designs on the skin. The girl squeezes the thick, wet dye from a thin nozzle, drawing lines onto the speaker's skin (the henna will later dry down, leaving behind a stain that lasts a few days).

The poem is written in [free verse](#), meaning it doesn't follow any set pattern of [meter](#) or [rhyme](#). Instead, its rhythms feel as natural as thought or speech. The use of the present tense makes the poem feel immediate, plopping readers right there alongside the speaker. A string of [enjambment](#) adds momentum to the poem as well, pulling the reader down the page and sweeping them up in the speaker's experience:

In the evening bazaar  
studded with neon  
an unknown girl  
is [...]

### LINES 7-13

*She is icing ...  
... hennaing my hand.*

The speaker says that the henna artist is "icing [her] hand." The word "icing" highlights the delicate, decorative nature of henna designs; the speaker is decorating the speaker's skin as one might frost a cake.

The girl also "steadies" the speaker's hand with her own, suggesting, perhaps, that the speaker is a bit nervous or uncomfortable. The henna artist herself seems skillful and assured, holding the speaker's hand against "her satin-peach knee." This [imagery](#) refers to the silky, peach-colored cloth of the girl's outfit, which adds another splash of color to the scene.

The speaker goes on to repeat her opening statement:

In the evening bazaar  
for a few rupees  
an unknown girl

is hennaing my hand.

With the exception of line 11 ("for a few rupees"), the [repetition](#) is verbatim, as if the speaker is trying to cement this moment in her mind. The mention of "rupees," meanwhile, confirms that the poem is set in India (where rupees are the official currency). It also reveals that the henna artist's beautiful work costs very little, especially if the speaker is a Western tourist or, more specifically, from the UK, like Moniza Alvi herself; a single British pound is equivalent to about 100 rupees. This line thus implies a stark economic contrast between the speaker and the girl. The speaker's casual tone suggests she won't miss those "few rupees."

### LINES 14-19

*As a little ...  
... up in balloons.*

The speaker goes on to say that a small breeze lifts her "shadow-stitched kameez," a kind of tunic worn by both men and women in Southeast Asia. This detail reveals that the speaker is dressed in the traditional clothing of the place she's visiting, perhaps adding to the sense of connection she feels while there.

These lines also reveal what the girl is actually drawing on the speaker's palm: a peacock. This design isn't random: the peacock is the national bird of India, and here it becomes a [symbol](#) of the speaker's desire to feel like she belongs. If readers take the speaker to Alvi herself, the peacock represents a longing to connect with part of her heritage. The image of the bird stretching its wings suggests a certain freedom and fulfillment, indicating just how much this experience means to the speaker.

These lines are marked by a swirl of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), which intensify the [imagery](#) at hand. Just listen to all the crisp /k/, /t/, /ch/, and /p/ sounds, as well as the [sibilant](#) /s/ and /z/ sounds:

As a little air catches  
my shadow-stitched kameez  
a peacock spreads its lines  
across my palm.

The [enjambment](#) here once again adds momentum to the poem. It also subtly evokes the fluttering of the speaker's tunic and the way the peacock seems to "spread" across the speaker's skin.

The speaker then describes "Colours leav[ing] the street" and drifting into the sky in the form of "balloons." This imagery might reflect the speaker's feelings; perhaps she, too, is "floating" with joy, once again implying that this experience is of great personal significance.

### LINES 20-26

*Dummies in shop-fronts ...  
... canopy me.*

The speaker describes "dummies," or mannequins, staring out from "shop-fronts." Despite being in India, these mannequins have "Western perms"—a mark of the influence of Western culture and beauty standards across the globe. (A "perm" is short for a "permanent wave," and it involves setting curls or waves into the hair.)

The speaker also notes the banners "for Miss India 1993" that hang above her head, alongside advertisements for various kinds of cloth. That these banners create a "canopy" over the speaker makes it sound as though she's been utterly enveloped by the market. The [repetition](#) of the word "cloth" in lines 24 and 25 ("curtain cloth / and sofa cloth") also helps to convey the immense number of objects for sale in the bazaar.

"Miss India" is a national beauty pageant. Modern beauty pageants began in Europe, but the Miss America competition, which first occurred in 1921, helped popularize similar pageants across the globe. With the mention of the pageant and perms, the poem illustrates how Western consumerism and beauty standards have woven their way into Indian culture. There is also a clash between tradition and modernity here, as the age-old beauty practice of henna art is [juxtaposed](#) with the more modern "perm."

### LINES 27-31

*I have new ...  
... hennaing my hand.*

The speaker [metaphorically](#) compares the fine, brown lines of henna on her skin to "new brown veins." This metaphor conveys that the experience in the bazaar has helped the speaker feel more connected to India and, implicitly, her own heritage. She is filled with new life, invigorated.

Though the poem never *explicitly* says the speaker isn't from India herself, all signs point to her being a tourist in this country. Since Alvi herself is biracial (she was born to a Pakistani father and English mother in Pakistan but grew up in England), it's likely that the speaker is visiting the place where her ancestors lived and feeling both connection and disconnection at the same time. The hennaed peacock is a source of validation for the speaker, perhaps, making her feel like less of an outsider.

In lines 28-31, the speaker again repeats the opening lines from the poem, with another slight variation in line 29:

In the evening bazaar  
very deftly  
an unknown girl  
is hennaing my hand.

The [repetition](#) again stresses the importance of this moment,

which the speaker pulls herself back to again and again. The description of the girl's "deft[]" (or skillful) movements suggests the speaker's appreciation and admiration for her talent and this cultural tradition.

### LINES 32-35

*I am clinging ...  
... of a train.*

The speaker is "clinging" to the lines of henna in the way that someone might "cling / to the sides of a train." That is, she desperately wants to hold on to this mark of connection with India, [metaphorically](#) gripping it in the way that someone might grip the sides of a speeding train. The [simile](#) suggests that the image of the peacock on her hands gives her a sense of strength and purpose that she doesn't want to lose.

Lines 32-35 are [enjambéd](#), evoking the speed of that figurative train and the intensity with which the speaker holds on to this experience:

I am clinging  
to these firm peacock lines  
like people who cling  
to the sides of a train.

Notice the use of [repetition](#) in these lines as well. [Polypoton](#) (the repetition of "cling"/"clinging") emphasizes how tightly the speaker is grasping onto her symbolic connection to India. Feeling as if she belongs here is of utmost importance to her.

### LINES 36-43

*Now the furious ...  
... in a week.*

As the speaker finishes up with the henna artist, she describes the "hush" of the once "furious streets." The hustle and bustle of the market had died down, and its shoppers and vendors have started to go home for the evening. The close of the bazaar represents the end of this experience that has meant so much to the speaker.

After all the excitement of the market, the speaker says she will "scrape off / the dry brown lines" of henna before she goes to bed. (Henna is applied wet and dries on the skin; after a certain amount of time, you wash the crusted dye off to reveal the reddish-brown stain it has left behind.)

Scrubbing away the henna will

reveal soft as a snail trail  
the amber bird beneath.

The [imagery](#) here is beautiful and tender, implying the intense emotions the speaker feels looking at "the amber bird." The "soft[ness]" and newness of the design suggest the softness and newness of the speaker, who has seemingly gone through a

transformative experience. It's like she's been reborn as someone who belongs here, who is part of the traditions of this place.

Note the musicality in lines 40-42 as well:

- Smooth /s/ [alliteration](#) ("sleep," "soft," "snail") evokes the speaker's quiet but intense appreciation, as well as the fact that the henna leaves behind a flat, smooth piece of art on the speaker's skin. The [internal rhyme](#) between "snail" and "trail" in line 41 adds a bit of playfulness to the image as well.
- The firm /b/ [consonance/alliteration](#) of "amber bird beneath," meanwhile, evokes the bold power of this image.

Powerful as that amber bird may seem to the speaker, however, she acknowledges that it "will fade in a week." Henna art is short-lived—as is the speaker's sense of belonging to India. This experience has been deeply meaningful, but also fleeting.

### LINES 44-48

*When India appears ...  
... the neon bazaar.*

The poem's final lines imagine a future in which the speaker has left India and returned home (to England, if the speaker is meant to be Alvi herself). Though this experience of being hennaed will end, and the henna itself will fade, the speaker's longing for cultural connection will endure. "When India appears and reappears," the speaker says, she'll "lean across a country," stretching her hands out to "the unknown girl" from "the neon bazaar."

That is, she will [metaphorically](#) reach out across thousands of miles in an attempt to connect with the girl once more and with this moment. The [repetition](#) of "appears"/"reappears" implies that India is never going to stop popping up in the speaker's mind; she will think of it again and again. No matter how far away she may live in real life, it is always going to be a part of her in some way.

The poem's closing five lines are all [enjambéd](#), adding a rush of intensity and momentum to its final moments. The enjambment also mirrors what the speaker describes, the lines of the poem reaching across the white space of the page just as the speaker will "lean across a country."



## SYMBOLS



### THE PEACOCK

The henna peacock that the "unknown girl" paints on the speaker's hand [symbolizes](#) the speaker's connection to and longing for India. Peacocks are the national bird of India, so it's not a coincidence that the speaker is having

this particular bird painted on her palm while visiting this country. The peacock is clearly significant to the speaker, who says she "cling[s] / to these firm peacock lines" the way someone might "cling / to the sides of a train." In other words, she's hoping the image of the peacock can steady her and bring her closer to a world from which she seems to feel cut off.

The speaker's comparison of the henna ink to "new brown veins" hammers home the idea that this drawing represents a link to the speaker's heritage. Her desire to return to this experience at the end of the poem implies that she yearns for India and the sense of cultural identity and belonging she felt there.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "a peacock spreads its lines / across my palm."
- **Lines 32-33:** "I am clinging / to these firm peacock lines"
- **Lines 41-42:** "reveal soft as a snail trail / the amber bird beneath."



### THE MISS INDIA BANNER AND THE MANNEQUINS

As the speaker gets her hands painted with henna, a banner for "Miss India 1993" hangs above her head. There are also "dummies," or mannequins, staring out of shops with distinctly "Western perms." These objects [symbolize](#) the influence of the Western world on India and its culture.

Miss India is a national beauty pageant that began in 1964, essentially as India's version of Miss America. Miss America, which began in New Jersey in 1921, is the longest-running beauty pageant in the world. It was the first pageant to be considered "respectable," and its popularity played a major part in the rise of similar pageants across the globe.

Perms, meanwhile, involve setting curls into the hair. Indian women's hair is often (but not always) quite thick and straight, meaning these mannequins don't reflect the way locals actually look. The mention of these things thus hints at the way Western values have permeated Indian culture. That the "dummies" wear "Western perms" and women participate in Miss America-style beauty competitions suggests that Western standards have affected Indians' perception of ideal beauty.

Note, too, that these objects exist alongside banners advertising "curtain cloth" and "sofa cloth" as well as the ancient practice of henna art, illustrating the surreal [juxtaposition](#) of East and West, tradition and modernity, in this market.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-26:** "Dummies in shop-fronts / tilt and stare / with their Western perms. / Banners for Miss India 1993, / for curtain cloth / and sofa cloth / canopy me."



## POETIC DEVICES

### REPETITION

"An Unknown Girl" is filled with [repetition](#) that makes certain words and images pop out at the reader. For example, the speaker repeats the lines "In the evening bazaar" and "an unknown girl / is hennaing my hand" multiple times throughout the poem. Each repetition is interspersed with slightly different details: "studded with neon" in lines 1-4, "for a few rupees" in lines 10-13, and "very deftly" in lines 28-31. These repetitions become hypnotic, almost like a mantra, as though the speaker is trying to remain present in (or recall) this tender moment of connection with India. The speaker then repeats elements of these lines in the poem's final moments, though not verbatim:

longing for the unknown girl  
in the neon bazaar.

The key words "unknown girl," "neon," and "bazaar" all suggest the way this experience will continue to haunt the speaker when she returns home.

There are other important repetitions throughout the poem as well. The word "peacock" also appears in lines 16 and 33, for example, highlighting the importance of this [symbolic](#) connection to India. The words "brown" and "line[s]" also appear more than once:

- "She squeezes a wet **brown line**" (line 5)
- "a peacock spreads its **lines**" (line 16)
- "I have new **brown veins**" (line 27)
- "to these firm peacock **lines**" (line 33)
- "the dry **brown lines**" (line 39)

The "brown lines" of the speaker's peacock drawing spread not just across the speaker's palm but through the poem itself.

There are also more specific types of repetition throughout the poem, such as the [anaphora](#) in lines 5-7:

She squeezes a wet brown line  
from a nozzle.  
She is icing my hand.

In addition to creating a steady, hypnotic rhythm, this anaphora emphasizes the importance of this stranger who is making the speaker feel more at home in India. The repetition of "cloth" at the ends of lines 24-25, meanwhile, suggests the dizzying array

of banners that "canopy" the speaker.

[Polypotton](#), another kind of repetition, plays an important role in the simile of lines 32-25:

I am clinging  
to these firm peacock lines  
like people who cling  
to the sides of a train.

The repetition of the word "cling" conveys the speaker's desperate desire to hold onto this link to India, a feeling the speaker compares to way the people might desperately grip the side of a moving train.

Finally, the speaker says that after they leave this place, India will continue to "appear[]" and reappear[]" to them. The repetition of the root word "appears" suggests that this experience hasn't satisfied the speaker's need for this place but has rather stoked it; the speaker will continue to long for this land and its people and culture long after she's left it.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "In the evening bazaar"
- **Line 2:** "neon"
- **Lines 3-4:** "an unknown girl / is hennaing my hand."
- **Line 5:** "She," "brown," "line"
- **Line 7:** "She," "hand"
- **Line 10:** "In the evening bazaar"
- **Lines 12-13:** "an unknown girl / is hennaing my hand."
- **Line 16:** "peacock," "lines"
- **Line 24:** "cloth"
- **Line 25:** "cloth"
- **Line 27:** "brown"
- **Line 28:** "In the evening bazaar"
- **Lines 30-31:** "an unknown girl / is hennaing my hand."
- **Line 32:** "clinging"
- **Line 33:** "peacock," "lines"
- **Line 34:** "cling"
- **Line 39:** "brown," "lines"
- **Line 44:** "appears," "reappears"
- **Line 46:** "hands"
- **Lines 47-48:** "the unknown girl / in the neon bazaar."

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) makes the poem sound more lyrical and intensifies certain images. For example, the lines describing the henna drawing the speaker receives are rich with consonance that brings their [imagery](#) to life. Listen to the spiky /c/, /ch/, and /p/ sounds in lines 14-17:

As a little air catches  
my shadow-stitched kameez  
a peacock spreads its lines

across my palm.

The language evokes the crisp, clear lines of the henna. There's [assonance](#), a device related to consonance, here as well: "catches"/"shadow," "kameez"/"peacock." Together, these sonic devices create a rich and lyrical passage that helps to convey the beauty and complexity of this drawing.

Lines 41-42, which again describe the peacock, are filled with more evocative consonance and assonance:

reveal soft as a snail trail  
the amber bird beneath.

The gentle /s/ consonance (more specifically, [alliteration](#)) of "soft"/"snail" mimics the smoothness of the image itself, while the internal rhyme of "snail trail" adds a hint of playfulness to the moment. In the next line, the firm, bold /b/ sounds suggest the vibrancy of that bird—a [symbol](#) of the speaker's connection to India.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "hennaing," "hand"
- **Line 5:** "squeezes"
- **Line 6:** "nozzle"
- **Line 11:** "for," "few"
- **Line 13:** "hennaing," "hand"
- **Line 14:** "catches"
- **Line 15:** "shadow-stitched kameez"
- **Line 16:** "peacock spreads its"
- **Line 17:** "across," "palm"
- **Line 21:** "tilt," "stare"
- **Line 22:** "with," "Western"
- **Line 24:** "curtain cloth"
- **Lines 25-26:** "cloth / canopy"
- **Line 27:** "new brown veins"
- **Line 28:** "evening"
- **Line 29:** "very"
- **Line 31:** "hennaing," "hand"
- **Line 41:** "soft," "snail trail"
- **Line 42:** "amber bird beneath"
- **Line 45:** "across," "country"

## IMAGERY

"An Unknown Girl" uses vibrant, evocative [imagery](#) in its descriptions of the Indian marketplace where the speaker is having her hand painted with henna. A "bazaar" is a market filled with lots of small shops and stalls. This one is also "studded with neon" lights that presumably glow against the night sky. There are colorful balloons floating up, mannequins staring out from shop windows, and advertisements draped above the speaker's head that form a kind of "canopy." The henna artist is dressed in peach-colored satin, and the speaker

describes a breeze kicking up her "kameez," a traditional tunic worn in Southeast Asia, as she sits below an advertisement for "Miss India 1993."

Such imagery conveys a busy scene bursting with life and color, where tradition and modernity exist side by side. In addition to [juxtaposing](#) the past against the present, such imagery also reveals the influence of Western culture on India. Those mannequins have distinctly "Western perms," for example; beauty pageants became popular across the globe largely thanks to the popularity of the Miss America pageant, which remains the longest-running contest.

The poem also features tender imagery when describing the henna artist's work. She "squeezes a wet brown line / from a nozzle," a vivid description of the way the thick, wet henna dye is applied to the skin. The speaker [metaphorically](#) compares this process to "icing [her] hand," the girl gently decorating her skin as though it were a fancy cake.

That she paints a "peacock," India's national bird, on the speaker's hand reflects the speaker's desire to connect with this country. The speaker also describes the henna artist holding the speaker's hand against her "satin-peach knee": this young girl is steadying the speaker, grounding her. And once the henna artist is done painting, the speaker describes the lines of henna across her skin as "new brown veins," a metaphorical image suggesting that this experience has breathed new life into the speaker and made her feel more connected to her heritage.

Finally, the speaker describes later how she will later "scrape off" the stiff, dried layer of henna to "reveal" the beautiful "amber bird beneath." (Henna is left on the skin for a few hours to create a stain that stays behind after the excess dye is washed off.) This design will be "soft as a snail trail": a description that suggests both the delicate beauty and fleeting nature of this experience.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 14-17
- Lines 18-22
- Lines 23-27
- Lines 32-37
- Lines 38-42

## SIMILE

The speaker uses a [simile](#) in lines 32-34:

I am clinging  
to these firm peacock lines  
like people who cling

to the sides of a train.

The peacock is the national bird of India, and thus a [symbol](#) of the speaker's connection to India. The simile suggests that the speaker feels like the henna peacock is bringing her closer to her heritage and to a shared cultural identity. The speaker holds fast to this connection much like people hitching a ride tightly grip the side of the train to keep from falling off.

The word "cling" makes it sound like there's something almost desperate about this attempt. The speaker, apparently, fears losing this connection and isn't sure when another connection like it will come along. The simile suggests that the speaker's connection feels tenuous; like those who lack a ticket or are too late to board a train, the speaker can't just sit back and calmly enjoy the ride; instead, she must hold on for dear life.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-35:** "I am clinging / to these firm peacock lines / like people who cling / to the sides of a train."

## ENJAMBMENT

The majority of the poem's 48 lines are [enjambéd](#). These lines are also quite short, resulting in a poem that flows swiftly and smoothly down the page. The poem sounds like a lyrical prose story, especially when read aloud. For example, the first sentence of the poem is broken across four lines:

In the evening bazaar  
studded with neon  
an unknown girl  
is hennaing my hand.

These enjambments push the reader quickly and seamlessly from one to the next, pulling them deeper into the bazaar alongside the speaker.

Towards the poem's end, a string of enjambments mirrors the poem's content. Notice how these lines reach across the line breaks, much like the speaker imagines stretching her hands out toward India and the henna artist:

When India appears and reappears  
I'll lean across a country  
with my hands outstretched  
longing for the unknown girl  
in the neon bazaar.

Using so many enjambéd lines in a row also adds momentum to the poem's final moments and evokes the intensity of the speaker's "longing."

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "bazaar / studded"
- **Lines 2-3:** "neon / an"
- **Lines 3-4:** "girl / is"
- **Lines 5-6:** "line / from"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hers / on"
- **Lines 10-11:** "bazaar / for"
- **Lines 11-12:** "rupees / an"
- **Lines 12-13:** "girl / is"
- **Lines 14-15:** "catches / my"
- **Lines 15-16:** "kameez / a"
- **Lines 16-17:** "lines / across"
- **Lines 18-19:** "street / float"
- **Lines 20-21:** "shop-fronts / tilt"
- **Lines 21-22:** "stare / with"
- **Lines 24-25:** "cloth / and"
- **Lines 25-26:** "cloth / canopy"
- **Lines 28-29:** "bazaar / very"
- **Lines 29-30:** "deftly / an"
- **Lines 30-31:** "girl / is"
- **Lines 32-33:** "clinging / to"
- **Lines 33-34:** "lines / like"
- **Lines 34-35:** "cling / to"
- **Lines 36-37:** "streets / are"
- **Lines 38-39:** "off / the"
- **Lines 39-40:** "lines / before"
- **Lines 41-42:** "trail / the"
- **Lines 44-45:** "reappears / I'll"
- **Lines 45-46:** "country / with"
- **Lines 46-47:** "outstretched / longing"
- **Lines 47-48:** "girl / in"

design looks like a shadow from the front.

**Kameez** (Line 15) - A traditional tunic worn in parts of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

**Dummies** (Line 20) - Mannequins.

**Canopy** (Lines 23-26) - Cover with a cloth.

**Miss India** (Line 23) - A national beauty pageant.

**Deftly** (Line 29) - Skillfully.

**Snail trail** (Line 41) - The shiny, slimy mark a snail leaves behind as it moves.

**Amber** (Line 42) - A golden or brownish red color.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"An Unknown Girl" is a 48-line, [free verse](#) poem. The use of free verse allows the poem to sound intimate and conversational, as if the speaker is simply thinking or speaking her thoughts aloud rather than performing them for an audience. Yet the poem is still elevated by musical devices such as [repetition](#) and [consonance](#), which make its language more lyrical and emphasize the significance of this experience for the speaker.

The poem's lines are generally quite short and frequently [enjambéd](#), giving it a smooth, propulsive rhythm that carries the speaker along. The poem's swift movement down the page might further evoke the speaker's feelings of being swept up in this moment of connection.

### METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't follow a set [meter](#). Free verse is the norm for the vast majority of modern poetry. It allows for a less controlled, more free-flowing rhythm that mimics the natural movements of thought and speech.

When the poet wants to create emphasis, she uses [repetition](#), [alliteration](#), or [enjambment](#). The poem as a whole feels relaxed and intimate, however, like someone sharing a memory with a friend.

### RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "An Unknown Girl" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). The absence of a rhyme scheme keeps the poem feeling loose and modern. When the poem is read out loud, the poem sounds more conversational than musical (although it is still more lyrical than everyday speech due to the poet's careful word choice, syntax, and sonic devices like [consonance](#) and [assonance](#)).



## VOCABULARY

**Bazaar** (Line 1, Line 10, Line 28, Line 48) - A market with lots of different small vendors and stalls, typically found in India and the Middle East.

**Studded** (Line 2) - Adorned or ornamented.

**Neon** (Line 2, Line 48) - Bright, fluorescent lights.

**Hennaing** (Lines 3-4, Lines 12-13, Lines 30-31) - *Henna* is a reddish brown dye created from leaves; henna artists use the dye to paint temporary designs on people's skin.

**Nozzle** (Lines 5-6) - Here, the thin end of a tube through which the liquid henna dye is squeezed.

**Satin-peach** (Line 9) - The speaker is saying the garment over the girl's knee is soft as satin (a kind of fabric) and peach-colored.

**Rupees** (Line 11) - India's official currency.

**Shadow-stitched** (Line 15) - A kind of embroidery where a herringbone stitch is made on the back of a fabric so that the



## SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is someone visiting an evening market



in India, where she's having her hand painted with "henna" (a natural, reddish-brown dye that stains the skin for a few days). The design the girl is painting on her is that of a peacock—the national bird of India and a [symbol](#) of the speaker's desire to feel like a part of this country.

The fact that the speaker doesn't know the henna artist implies that she's a tourist. The fact that she feels such a deep longing for India, meanwhile, implies that the speaker is of Indian descent. The speaker views the henna lines as "new brown veins," the drawing a marker of a heritage to which she "cling[s]."

The speaker can be read as an extension of the poet herself (which is why we've used female pronouns throughout this guide). Moniza Alvi was born in Pakistan (which split from India shortly before Alvi's birth) but grew up in England. The poem's final lines might refer to Alvi yearning for India from England, [metaphorically](#) reaching "across" that "country" toward this girl and the world she came from.



## SETTING

The poem takes place inside a "bazaar," a kind of bustling traditional market popular in India (and elsewhere) filled with lots of small stalls and vendors. It's "evening," and the market is dotted with bright, modern "neon" lights. The speaker is sitting with a henna artist, who holds the speaker's hand "on her satin-peach knee" while she paints a "peacock" on her palm.

The speaker describes a slight breeze rifling her "shadow-stitched kameez" (a traditional tunic worn in India) and colorful "balloons" drifting up into the air. She also mentions mannequins in store windows that have "Western perms" and "Banners" for the "Miss India 1993" beauty pageant. Above her hang advertisements "for curtain cloth / and sofa cloth." The market thus reflects both Eastern tradition and the spread of Western culture and values.

As the girl finishes with the speaker's hand, the streets grow quiet and the speaker imagines later rubbing away the dried dye to "reveal [...] the amber bird beneath." She says that this bird "will fade in a week." In other words, her connection to India, to this time and place, won't last. When she's back home (for Alvi, in England), she will long to reach across the globe to connect with this girl, and India, once again.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Moniza Alvi (1954-present) is a Pakistani-British poet whose writing often touches on themes of cultural identity and belonging. Alvi was born in Lahore to a Pakistani father and British mother, but the family moved to England shortly

thereafter. This move had a major impact on Alvi's work, which she has characterized as focusing on a kind of "split, a split I try to mend, it could be between England and Pakistan, body and soul, or husband and wife." Alvi published "An Unknown Girl" in her second poetry collection, *A Bowl of Warm Air*, in 1996. She has since written six other collections and has won numerous awards for her work.

Some other notable writers of the Pakistani diaspora include poet and screenwriter [Fatimah Asghar](#); poet [Umeed Ali](#); memoirist [Sara Suleri Goodyear](#); novelist, poet, and essayist [Zulfiqar Ghose](#); and playwright, screenwriter, filmmaker, and novelist [Hanif Qureshi](#).

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Moniza Alvi was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1954. She moved with her Pakistani father and British mother to Hertfordshire, England when she was only a few months old and did not return to Pakistan until after her first full-length poetry collection, *The Country at My Shoulder*, was published in 1993. Her experiences of being mixed-race and growing up outside her ancestral home inform much of her work, and this poem specifically.

More broadly, Alvi's work is contextualized by the 1947 partition of British India into a newly independent India and a newly created Pakistan. Partition displaced roughly 15 million people, who suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the newly created religious borders. People fled their ancestral homes as massacres broke out, and more than a million people lost their lives.

Although Alvi wasn't born until seven years after Partition, India and Pakistan were still reeling from the massive ripple of changes it wrought, and Alvi's family was only one of countless many who emigrated from the continent in its wake. "An Unknown Girl" doesn't refer to these events directly, but it does hint at India's history of British colonial rule and the breakdown of traditional Indian culture that has occurred as a result of Western influence and globalization.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Moniza Alvi's Website](#) — Read a short biography and reviews of Alvi's various books, including *A Bowl of Warm Air*, in which "An Unknown Girl" was published. (<https://moniza.uk/poetry-collections/>)
- [The Poet's Life](#) — Check out an in-depth look at Alvi's life and work via the Poetry Archive. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/moniza-alvi/>)
- [What Is Henna?](#) — Dig into the history of this "ancient art." (<https://people.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/>)

[body-art/henna-tattoo.htm](http://body-art/henna-tattoo.htm))

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER MONIZA ALVI POEMS

- [The Wedding](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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