The Wedding

SUMMARY

The speaker recalls expecting her wedding to be a low-key affair, held somewhere overlooking a forgotten city. She thought this marriage would be something sturdy to balance on her head, like a bundle of sticks or a jug of water.

But when it came along, the ceremony itself was bland—flavorless and colorless. The guests showed up sneakily, like smugglers of precious wood. Their suitcases seemed to unleash England itself.

They grabbed at the speaker's veil as though they were beggars asking drivers for money. As her dowry (a payment made from the bride's family to her husband's upon marriage), the speaker could only offer intangible things—her smile, shadow, whisper—and her house, a remarkable building made from strips of cloth and bamboo.

The speaker and her groom rode down streets that had English names, and people said that their eyes were shifting in color like traffic lights. It was still too early for the speaker and her groom to look at each other.

Instead, they looked directly in front of themselves, as if they had the power to look straight through mountains or to make new cities come to life with their breath.

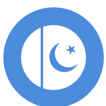
The speaker would have preferred to marry Pakistan itself. She wanted a Pakistani river to be her bridal veil, and she longed to sing in the botanical gardens of the capital.

She wanted to hang onto her dreams about Pakistan, but it was a difficult task, like charming a snake.

The speaker and her groom pushed their thoughts deep into their minds, where those thoughts swim around like water buffalos. As the bride and groom faced each other, they felt shaky.

The markings on their hands looked like maps.

THEMES



CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The speaker of "The Wedding" says she longed for a "quiet" wedding in an idyllic version of Pakistan and a "balance[d]" marriage, yet is jolted by the disorienting reality of her union: the Englishness of the ceremony overwhelms her, and she feels exploited and disappointed by this very different culture. It's possible to read this as an *actual* wedding between a Pakistani woman and a British (or Pakistani-British) man or as an extended metaphor for the difficulties of immigration and assimilation (with the speaker having moved from Pakistan to England). Either way, the poem illustrates the difficulty of finding a stable cultural identity when one's life feels split between two worlds.

The "wedding" of the poem's title is essentially a marriage between two countries: Pakistan and England. There is immediately a kind of cultural disconnect, however, between the speaker and the English world soon to become part of her life. The speaker had hoped for a "quiet wedding / high above a lost city," suggesting an intimate, romantic ceremony in some fantastical version of Pakistan. Yet this wasn't what she got: the wedding "tasted of nothing" and "had little color," implying that it was bland and dull, tainted by its Englishness.

And rather than being happy for the bride, the guests seemed untrustworthy, walking around like "sandalwood smugglers" (perhaps suggesting they wanted to steal parts of the speaker's heritage, or that the speaker felt this whole union is a way of "smuggling" that heritage out of Pakistan).

It's possible to interpret these guests as the speaker's *actual* in-laws, who are either fully British or of mixed heritage and more assimilated to British culture than the speaker is. Alternatively, the guests might be a metaphorical stand-in for England itself (with the implication that the speaker has recently immigrated). In any case, when they arrived, "England spilled out" of their suitcases; while the bride hoped for "a marriage to balance on [her] head," England apparently knocked that balance off. The guests also "scratched" at the speaker's veil "like beggars," an action suggesting that the speaker felt at once attacked, fetishized, and looked down upon by England.

It's no wonder, then, that the speaker feels a deep longing for Pakistan. She says she wanted to "marry a country" and "sing in the Jinnah Gardens." But this, the speaker confesses, was a "dream," as "tricky" as a "snake"—slippery, deceptive, and hard to hold onto. Perhaps that's because her vision of Pakistan was overly romanticized and not grounded in reality. Indeed, calling her house "an incredible structure / of stiffened rags and bamboo," she evokes pride in her Pakistani life while also calling attention to its deep poverty (and perhaps suggests that she agreed to this marriage or emigrated to make a better life for herself).

Nevertheless, the speaker's new life feels strange and alienating. The speaker and her bridegroom can't even look at each other; instead, they each stare into the distance, their eyes changing color "like traffic-lights" as though governed by some set of external rules. And when they *do* eventually look at each other, their thoughts are "half-submerged / like buffaloes under dark water." In other words, they don't understand each other and struggle to communicate clearly and honestly.

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Given that the groom seems to represent England itself, these images imply that the speaker isn't yet comfortable with or certain of her relationship to this new part of her identity. The speaker ends by saying that she and her husband have "imprints like maps on our hands," implying that they're somehow defined by and/or still trying to navigate their cultural identities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I expected a ...
... pot of water.

In the first stanza, the speaker discusses what she expected from the "Wedding" that gives this poem its title. She'd thought it would be "quiet," suggesting an intimate, low-key ceremony. She also thought it would take place "high above a lost city," a romantic vision that might speak to her longing for a version of Pakistan that no longer exists (if it ever did). (Note that the poem never actually says that this country is Pakistan, but it's a reasonable assumption based on Alvi's background and other poetry.)

The asyndeton of this passage evokes the speaker's feelings of disorientation. Details come thick and fast, with little explanation and no conjunctions (or even punctuation!) to guide the reader as the speaker jumps between images. For example, no sooner is the "lost city" mentioned than the speaker explains that she had also hoped her marriage would be one "to balance on my head // like a forest of sticks, a pot of water." Note, too, how the enjambment here breaks the sentence across not simply a line but an entire stanza. In doing so, it evokes the speaker's own feelings of being pulled between Pakistan and England.

In metaphorically imagining her marriage as something to "balance," the speaker might be saying that she hoped there'd be something balanced about the *union itself*—perhaps in the sense that the couple's families and cultures would get along. The speaker then fleshes out this metaphor with two quick similes that suggest she'd hoped her marriage would be as useful and familiar as objects that rural Pakistani women may carry home on their heads. The similes, like the mention of "a lost city" above, also suggest that the speaker has a rather *romanticized* vision of a simple, rural life in Pakistan.

LINES 5-9

The ceremony tasted ...
... England spilled out.

Having described what she'd hoped her wedding would be like, the speaker goes on to describe how the ceremony actually went. It "tasted of nothing / had little color," she says, meaning it lacked vibrancy and excitement. It was dull, bland, and boring.

There's then a pause (a.k.a. a caesura) in the middle of line 6, after which the speaker switches gears and describes the wedding guests. These people arrived "stealthy as sandalwood smugglers," a simile comparing the guests to sneaky thieves and highlighting how little the speaker trusted them.

Sandalwood is a very expensive commodity found in Pakistan and India (among a few other places). The simile thus also suggests that the guests wanted to rob the speaker of something precious—perhaps of her Pakistani roots themselves. Sibilance gives these lines a sneaky, whispery tone: "guests arrived/ stealthy as sandalwood smugglers."

"When [these guests] opened their suitcases," the speaker continues, "England spilled out." This metaphor reveals something important about the identities of these guests: they're either English or have assimilated to English culture. (And they might not be people at all, but a stand-in for England as a whole!) In any case, the country metaphorically "spill[ing]" from their suitcases reflects Englishness overtaking the speaker's Pakistani culture.

LINES 10-15

They scratched at ...
... rags and bamboo.

The speaker describes her interactions with the wedding guests, which were strange and tense.

The guests "scratched at [her] veil / like beggars on a car window." This simile presents the guests as desperate and implies that they wanted something from the speaker (perhaps a piece of her identity). That they clawed at her veil, in particular, is also striking: this is an item usually used to keep a bride's face hidden during a wedding ceremony. Perhaps the speaker felt exposed or exploited by these guests (and, reading the poem as an extended metaphor for immigration and cultural assimilation, by England itself).

The speaker responded to the guests by offering a simple "dowry." A dowry refers to gifts of money, jewelry, etc. that the bride's family traditionally gives to the groom's. Instead of offering the guests material possessions, however, she offered pieces off herself: "a smile, a shadow, a whisper." She also mentioned her humble house made from "rags and bamboo."

These lines might suggest the speaker's material poverty. Perhaps the speaker agreed to this marriage because she believed it would lead to more opportunities and a higher quality of life. At the same time, the speaker seems proud of herself and her possessions, calling her simple house "an incredible structure."

LINES 16-21

We travelled along ...
... view each other.

It's not clear if the speaker and her "bridegroom" were driving to or away from the wedding as they "travelled along roads / with English names." It's also not clear if these roads were located in Pakistan (and a nod to the legacy of British colonial rule) or in England. What *is* clear, however, is that the Englishness of these names was strange or foreign enough to feel notable to the speaker. She seems to have felt separated from the world around her.

The oddly formal, impersonal phrase "my bridegroom and I" might also reflect the *lack* of meaningful connection between the speaker and her groom. And yet, this is also the first time in the poem that the speaker uses the word "we"—a subtle nod to the fact that her life was now intertwined with her groom's (and, metaphorically, with the English world he represents).

Building on the image of roads and driving, the speaker says,

> Our eyes changed colour
> like traffic-lights, so they said.

This simile is ambiguous. It's not even the speaker's own: it's something an unnamed "they" said—an aside suggesting that the speaker felt defined or influenced by the way others saw her, or perhaps that she was confused and disoriented, in need of an outside signal to tell her when to stop and when to move forward. The simile might also suggest the awkward, halting relationship between the speaker and her groom.

The enjambment here, meanwhile, seems to mirror the speaker's state of mind, the poem flowing swiftly down a page in a way the evokes the speaker getting swept away into her new life:

> Our eyes changed colour
> like traffic-lights, so they said.

In the next two lines, the speaker expands on this awkward tension between her and her groom. She explains, "The time was not ripe / for us to view each other." The word "ripe" suggests that the speaker still had some growing up, some maturing, to do before she could "view" her groom directly. Neither partner was quite ready to fully face the other.

LINES 22-24

We stared straight ...
... into new cities.

Not being able to "view each other" yet, the speaker and her groom instead looked into the distance, "as if / we could see through mountains / breathe life into new cities."

This simile conveys the intensity and longing behind the speaker's gaze. Being able to "see through mountains" suggests an ability to see to the truth or heart of things, and perhaps to see far into the distance (perhaps all the way to the speaker's familiar homeland). To "breathe life," meanwhile, adds some hope into the poem; maybe this union will be the start of an exciting new chapter rather than the death of an old way of life.

LINES 25-29

I wanted to ...
... a snake-charmer's snake.

What the speaker really wanted, she admits here, was to marry Pakistan itself. She's of course being metaphorical; one can't literally marry a country. But she's revealing how much she loves Pakistan, and how much she wanted to tie her own fate and future to it. She wanted to belong to Pakistan rather than to England, the country that the poem implies she currently calls home.

Building on this idea, she says that she wanted to wear "a river for a veil"—a line that counters that of guests "scratch[ing]" at her actual veil "like beggars" earlier in the poem. Wearing a "river" suggests her closeness to her homeland. And she'd "sing / in the Jinnah Gardens," which are located in Pakistan's capital, Lahore.

The poem uses breathless enjambment and asyndeton to capture how thrilling this all seems to the speaker:

> I wanted to marry a country
> take up a river for a veil sing
> in the Jinnah Gardens
> hold up my dream,

Notice how the four verb phrases here pile swiftly on top of one another, without conjunctions or punctuation to separate them or slow things down.

And yet, the speaker herself admits that this romanticized vision of life in Pakistan is just a "dream." She's describing an idealized vision of Pakistan that might not exist in real life. As such, she describes this dream as "tricky as a snake-charmer's snake"—elusive, untrustworthy, and even dangerous.

LINES 30-34

Our thoughts half-submerged ...
... on our hands.

The speaker describes the moment when she and the groom finally turned toward each other. As they did so, their thoughts were "half-submerged"—or partially underwater, "like water buffaloes."

Buffalos are huge, heavy, somewhat lumbering creatures. This simile thus suggests that both the speaker and her new husband had lots of heavy, unwieldy thoughts and feelings hidden beneath the surface. (The darkness of the water might

further signify just how far down these thoughts were pushed.) The image suggests trepidation on both sides, that they still weren't able to communicate openly and honestly. Reading the poem as an extended metaphor about immigration and assimilation, the image suggests that the speaker found it hard to embrace England and that England found it hard to embrace the speaker.

There was thus "turbulence" as the speaker and the groom "turned and faced each other." Turbulence suggests confusion, tension, and trouble. It's also a word linked with plane travel and thus might be a nod to the vast geographical distance between England and Pakistan. This journey between two cultures was a bumpy one.

Finally, the speaker ends the poem by saying that they had "imprints like maps on [their] hands." This simile could be referring to mehndi, elaborate henna hand drawings that Pakistani brides often receive the night before their wedding. The word "maps" might suggest that both the speaker and groom were defined by where they came from and/or that their paths were laid out for them. At the same time, there might be a bit of hope here: perhaps such "maps" would help the speaker and her groom find their way to each other.

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem musicality, linking words together and bringing metaphors and images to life.

In line 17, for instance, the long /i/ that travels through the words "my bridegroom and I" emphasizes the new connection between the speaker and her new husband. At first, that might seem romantic. But the continuation of the same assonance through the next few lines suggests the speaker feels pretty ambivalent about her marriage:

> Our eyes changed colour
> like traffic-lights, so they said.
> The time was not ripe
> for us to view each other.

The speaker and her husband might be connected, but they're certainly not seeing "eye" to "eye" just yet.

Later, they have to confront that fact head-on:

> we turned and faced each other
> with turbulence
> and imprints like maps on our hands.

The guttural /tur/ sounds of "turned" and "turbulence" suggests how difficult the couple's connection feels. But the gentle /a/ of the "maps" on their "hands" also suggests that, with work, they might find their way to an easier understanding.

Assonance also appears in the speaker's lost dream of a happier (and emphatically Pakistani) wedding:

> I wanted to marry a country
> take up a river for a veil sing
> in the Jinnah Gardens

That repeated /ih/ sound gives this wistful vision its music.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "quiet"
- **Line 2:** "high"
- **Line 3:** "marriage," "balance"
- **Line 4:** "pot," "water"
- **Line 12:** "insisted," "simple"
- **Line 17:** "my bridegroom," "I"
- **Line 18:** "eyes"
- **Line 19:** "like," "lights"
- **Line 20:** "time," "ripe"
- **Line 23:** "we," "see"
- **Line 24:** "breathe"
- **Line 26:** "river," "sing"
- **Line 27:** "Jinnah"
- **Line 32:** "turned"
- **Line 33:** "turbulence"
- **Line 34:** "maps," "hands"

ASYNDETON

By creating strange jumps from one idea to another, asyndeton helps to create the poem's dreamlike, surreal tone.

Take a look at how this device works in the second stanza:

> like a forest of sticks, a pot of water.
> The ceremony tasted of nothing
> had little colour – guests arrived

The asyndeton here helps to set up the contrast between what the speaker hoped for from her wedding and what she got. First, she puts two wistful similes next to each other, as if she's pulling images from the air one after the other. Then, as she describes the disappointing reality, the lack of conjunctions makes her voice sound listless and unenthused.

Later, in the fifth stanza, the speaker explains her dowry (the payment from the bride's family to the groom). Rather than material riches, she says, she offered "a smile, a shadow, a whisper." The lack of conjunctions here highlights the strangeness of this list and plays up the similarity between all these faint, ungraspable gifts.

Next, listen to what happens in stanza 9:

> I wanted to marry a country
> take up a river for a veil sing
> in the Jinnah Gardens

Asyndeton makes this vision of marrying a whole country seem even more surreal: each of these images seems to flash past, one by one, like pictures from a dream.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "a forest of sticks, a pot of water."
- **Lines 5-6:** "The ceremony tasted of nothing / had little colour"
- **Lines 13-15:** "a smile, a shadow, a whisper, / my house an incredible structure / of stiffened rags and bamboo."
- **Lines 23-24:** "we could see through mountains / breathe life into new cities."
- **Lines 25-29:** "I wanted to marry a country / take up a river for a veil sing / in the Jinnah Gardens / hold up my dream, / tricky as a snake-charmer's snake."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's many enjambed lines create emphasis and surprise, making the poem feel abrupt, strange, and disjointed.

For instance, take a look at the enjambment that connects stanzas 1 and 2:

> a marriage to balance on my head
>
> like a forest of sticks, a pot of water.

By breaking this sentence across a stanza (not just a line!), the speaker evokes her own sense of being torn or divided, caught between a Pakistani and an English world.

And listen to what happens when the speaker and her new husband drive off together:

> We travelled along roads with English
> names, my bridegroom and I.
> Our eyes changed colour
> like traffic-lights, so they said.

That first enjambment falls at an awkward place: one would never pause there in everyday speech. That choice both makes the reader stumble and hurries the poem along, evoking the speaker's feeling of getting swept helplessly away into a new life she doesn't completely understand.

There's a similar kind of startling, disjointed rhythm in lines 26-27:

> take up a river for a veil sing
> in the Jinnah Gardens

Here, enjambment leaves the word "sing" dangling alone for a moment, perhaps suggesting that the speaker is getting lost in memories of the wedding she once dreamed of.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "head / like"
- **Lines 6-7:** "arrived / stealthy"
- **Lines 8-9:** "suitcases / England"
- **Lines 10-11:** "veil / like"
- **Lines 14-15:** "structure / of"
- **Lines 16-17:** "English / names"
- **Lines 18-19:** "colour / like"
- **Lines 20-21:** "ripe / for"
- **Lines 22-23:** "if / we"
- **Lines 26-27:** "sing / in"
- **Lines 30-31:** "half-submerged / like"
- **Lines 32-33:** "other / with"
- **Lines 33-34:** "turbulence / and"

METAPHOR

Metaphors give the poem much of its dreamlike atmosphere. Three metaphors appear in quick succession in the first three stanzas:

- The speaker expected a "marriage to balance on my head"—an image that suggests she wants a marriage that feels like one of the useful, comfortable objects she describes in the next line's similes ("like a forest of sticks, a pot of water"). In other words, she wanted her marriage to feel distinctly Pakistani, like something a woman in rural Pakistan might carry home on her head to make a fire or do some cooking.
- Instead, her wedding "tasted of nothing" and "had little color." In other words, it was a bland and boring affair—and lacked the dazzle of a traditional Pakistani wedding.
- What's more, when the guests arrived, their "suitcases" were full to bursting with "England," a metaphor that suggests one of the problems with this wedding (and perhaps with the groom's side of the family) is that it has lost its Pakistani flavor through English assimilation.

Later in the poem, the speaker uses metaphor to describe what she *really* wanted. Rather than marrying her groom, she wanted to "marry a country" (that is, Pakistan) and "take up a river for a veil." These images speak to her longing to meaningfully belong in a place other than the one that she currently calls home—a longing for which this whole poem can be read as an extended metaphor.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "a marriage to balance on my head"
- **Lines 5-6:** "The ceremony tasted of nothing / had little colour"
- **Lines 8-9:** "When they opened their suitcases / England spilled out."
- **Lines 25-26:** "I wanted to marry a country / take up a river for a veil"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions reflect the movements of the speaker's imagination.

For example, take a look at the parallelism in line 4:

> a marriage to balance on my head
> like a forest of sticks, a pot of water.

The repeated sentence structure here helps to underline the connection between these related similes, which both depict the speaker's dream of Pakistan as a romanticized rural land.

Later on, when the speaker describes her "dowry" (a wedding gift) to the groom's family, she uses parallelism (and more specifically, anaphora) again:

> a smile, a shadow, a whisper,

The list form here highlights the similarity between all these immaterial "gifts": all quiet, fading, passing things, not physical objects.

Similar moments of parallelism appear when the speaker envisions a series of lovely impossibilities. In a long chain of clauses that start with verbs, she imagines how she wishes she and her husband could "see" through rock and "breathe" life into the world around them—and how she once felt she could "marry" Pakistan itself, "take" a river and make it into her bridal veil, and "sing" in a famous garden in Lahore. All those active verbs in a row make this passage feel swift and sudden as a series of dream visions.

And indeed, later on, the speaker confesses that her idea of Pakistan is a kind of elusive dream, "tricky as a snake-charmer's snake." The diacope on the word "snake" has a subtly hypnotic quality that matches the thing being described: a snake swaying to the tune of a pipe.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "a forest of sticks," "a pot of water"
- **Line 13:** "a smile, a shadow, a whisper,"
- **Line 23:** "see"
- **Line 24:** "breathe"
- **Line 25:** "marry"
- **Line 26:** "take," "sing"
- **Line 29:** "snake," "snake"

SIBILANCE

Sibilant sounds give the poem a sense of mystery and unease. For instance, listen to the speaker's description of her wedding guests:

> [...] guests arrived
> stealthy as sandalwood smugglers.

The whispery, hushed quality of all those /s/ and /z/ sounds seems perfect for these sneaky guests, and it heightens the speaker's alienation from them; this is hardly a warm, loving occasion. The sibilance in lines 8 and 9, when England "spill[s]" from the guests' "suitcases," strengthens this link, and perhaps marks the Englishness of the guests as itself sinister.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "guests"
- **Line 7:** "stealthy as sandalwood smugglers."
- **Line 8:** "suitcases"
- **Line 9:** "spilled"
- **Line 12:** "simple"
- **Line 13:** "smile," "whisper"
- **Line 14:** "structure"
- **Line 15:** "stiffened"
- **Line 19:** "so," "said"
- **Line 22:** "stared straight"
- **Line 23:** "see"
- **Line 29:** "snake-charmer's snake"

SIMILE

The many similes in "The Wedding" help to create a surreal (and sometimes dangerous) atmosphere. Consider line 4 for instance, in which the speaker imagines:

> a marriage to balance on my head
> like a forest of sticks, a pot of water.

Both that "forest of sticks" (perhaps a basket or a bundle of firewood) and the "pot of water" are essential items that people living in rural Pakistan might indeed carry home on their heads—an image that evokes the speaker's longing for a romanticized, dreamlike version of the country. In these similes, her ideal marriage would be both homey and emphatically Pakistani.

But her "dream" of such a marriage ends up being "tricky as a snake-charmer's snake," dangerous and false. Everything about

her actual wedding turns out to feel not comforting, romantic, and practical, but strange and menacing:

- The image of the guests as "sandalwood smugglers" paints a picture of bandits trafficking in fragrant woods, but also suggests the guests aren't to be trusted. Perhaps this image also suggests that the guests themselves are immigrants, "smuggling" the sandalwood of their culture into England, feeling as if they can't remain fully Pakistani in their new surroundings.
- The speaker's sense of disconnection and fear around them gets even clearer when they "scratch" at her veil "like beggars on a car window," suggesting that she feels split off from her new relations.
- This wedding, it seems, feels less like a stable and comforting union and more like a threatening, demanding, and alienating experience.

The speaker's relationship with her new husband himself doesn't seem too easy, either. When the speaker describes her and her husband's eyes changing color "like traffic-lights," the simile suggests that it's not exactly green lights all the way between the two of them: there's a hesitant, stop-and-start quality even in the way they look at each other.

And they don't always seem to be of the same mind: their thoughts are "half-submerged / like buffaloes under dark water," a simile that suggests they both have a lot of passionate, stubborn feelings that aren't coming to the surface.

At least, the poem concludes, they have "imprints like maps on [their] hands." Perhaps those "maps" suggest the couple's sense of cultural identity—and the hope that they might be able to find their way to each other eventually.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "a marriage to balance on my head / like a forest of sticks, a pot of water."
- **Lines 6-7:** "guests arrived / stealthy as sandalwood smugglers."
- **Lines 10-11:** "They scratched at my veil / like beggars on a car window."
- **Lines 18-19:** "Our eyes changed colour / like traffic-lights"
- **Lines 25-26:** "I wanted to marry a country / take up a river for a veil"
- **Lines 28-29:** "my dream, / tricky as a snake-charmer's snake."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Our thoughts half-submerged / like buffaloes under dark water"
- **Line 34:** "imprints like maps on our hands."

VOCABULARY

Stealthy (Lines 6-7) - Sneaky.

Smugglers (Lines 6-7) - People who traffic in illegal goods.

Sandalwood (Lines 6-7) - A valuable, fragrant kind of wood.

Veil (Line 10) - A face-covering worn on wedding day.

Dowry (Line 12) - A payment of money or material goods given by the bride's family to the groom's.

Bamboo (Lines 14-15) - A fast-growing plant, useful for building because of its sturdiness.

Jinnah Gardens (Lines 26-27) - A green space in Lehore, the capital of Pakistan.

Snake-charmer (Line 29) - A street artist who hypnotizes a snake with music (usually played on a pipe).

Half-submerged (Lines 30-31) - Partially underwater.

Turbulence (Lines 32-33) - Chaotic movement.

Imprints (Line 34) - Markings. Here, this image might suggest the temporary henna tattoos that Pakistani brides traditionally wear on their hands.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem consists of eleven tercets (that is, three-line stanzas) and a single concluding line all on its own. Though the form looks fairly regular on the page, it also feels shifty and abrupt due to enjambments that tie stanzas together. For instance, look what happens between stanzas 6 and 7:

> Our eyes changed colour
> like traffic-lights, so they said.

By continuing a sentence not just past a line break, but past a stanza break, this enjambment (and the many others like it) makes the poem feel lurching and unpredictable—fitting for the general mood of dreamlike strangeness.

Meanwhile, the single lonely line at the end leaves the poem feeling tense and unresolved. The poem's form suggests that nothing in the speaker's world is clear or steady.

METER

"The Wedding" is written in free verse, meaning it has no strict meter. This informal, flexible shape helps to make the poem feel like a window onto the speaker's confused, dreamlike thoughts. The whole point here is that the speaker's wedding *isn't* a typical one, so erratic rhythms are more appropriate than a regular, predictable meter would be.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use any rhyme scheme at all. Rhyme, in a way, is a wedding-like "union" between different words. But *this* poem's wedding is a strange, surreal affair, and the unpredictable sounds of the end-words reflect that disorienting mood. Strict rhymes would probably feel too stately and ceremonial for this wild and dreamlike poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a bride, telling the story of her wedding in the first person. It's not totally clear whether she is from Pakistan or is of Pakistani descent and living in England—but she definitely longs for the former country. In lines 25-29, she says, "I wanted to marry a country"—in other words, to be with *Pakistan*, not with the man she marries.

Perhaps this longing reflects a romanticized "dream" of the country. Many of Alvi's early poems touch on her Pakistani-British identity; she was born in Pakistan, but her family moved to the UK when she was only a baby. This poem might draw on her own feelings about having a complex cultural identity.

Whether or not readers feel the bride is based on Alvi's own experiences, they can tell she's torn between worlds. She hardly seems happy about the wedding, and perceptively keeps an eye on the unspoken feelings lurking beneath the surface of the ceremony.

SETTING

It's not totally clear where the poem is set, but the first few stanzas probably take place somewhere in Pakistan—or a dreamy, fantastical version of Pakistan, at least. That half-imagined setting informs a lot of the speaker's references, like the "sandalwood smugglers," the "Jinnah Gardens" (which are in Lahore, the capital of Pakistan), snake-charming, and water buffaloes.

The second half of the poem, however, might move to a different country altogether. As the speaker and her new husband drive away, they "travel[] along roads with English names"—a line that might suggest either the relics of English colonialism in Pakistan or immigration to a whole new country.

This ambiguity about where its events are taking place reflects one of the poem's big themes: the struggle to feel a stable sense of connection and belonging when one's life feels split between cultures.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Moniza Alvi (1954-present) is a Pakistani-British poet. Alvi was born in Lahore to a Pakistani mother and British father, but the family moved to England shortly thereafter. This move had a major impact on Alvi's writing, particularly her earlier work. Many of her poems, this one included, examine what it feels like to feel connected to two countries at once. She characterizes her own work 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's first full collection, *The Country at My Shoulder*, was shortlisted for the prestigious T.S. Eliot prize. Many of the poems in the book investigate questions around culture, nationhood, identity, and otherness. Her second book, *A Bowl of Warm Air* (in which "The Wedding" appears) touches on similar themes.

Alvi wrote her first book of poetry before she had visited Pakistan as an adult, and she has spoken of the role that the "fantasy" of Pakistan—rather than its reality—played in her early poetry. That playful, dreamy, and strange atmosphere is on full display in "The Wedding."

Alvi was selected as one of 20 New Generation poets in 1994, as a member of a group that also included writers like Simon Armitage, John Burnside, Carol Ann Duffy, and Don Paterson.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Wedding" was first published in 1996, towards the end of John Major's time as the United Kingdom's Prime Minister. By this time, a swell in immigration had made the country increasingly multicultural. In the post-war 1950s and 1960s in particular, many Pakistani immigrants came to the UK in search of work.

The relationship between Britain and Pakistan, which lurks in the background of this poem, is a long and complex one. Pakistan was once part of the British Empire, achieving independence in 1947 and Republic status in 1956. The country's initial separation from the Empire was a bloody affair resulting in thousands upon thousands of deaths and widespread suffering—another reason that many Pakistani people would eventually leave their homes.

The UK's Pakistani community remains the largest in Europe, making up almost 2% of the entire population. Alvi's family was thus part of an era of immigration that reshaped both Pakistan and the UK.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Learn more about Alzi's life and work at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126949.html)
- Alvi's Website — Visit Alvi's website to read more of her poetry. (http://www.moniza.co.uk/#links)
- Alvi on Her Pakistani Heritage — Listen to a BBC dramatization of another of Alvi's poems, including an interview in which Alvi discusses the way her cultural background has influenced her writing. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00wrlzw)
- An Interview With Alvi — Read an interview in which the poet discusses her work. (https://www.fireriverpoets.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/FRP-Interview-Moniza-Alvi.pdf)

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