

Tapestry of Memories and Fragmented Narratives: A Study of Meena Alexander's *Selected Poems*

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Abstract. Meena Alexander is one of the foremost Indo-American poets. Her literary works deal with migrant memories, separation, trauma of being uprooted, exile and loneliness. Alexander's works have characteristic sensuousness in dealing with themes like exile and identity, nostalgic memory of India, the ancestral land of her ethnic origin. The present paper aims at drawing a cartography of subjective experiences of Meena Alexander in India, Sudan, England and New York. It also attempts to deliberate on her nostalgic act of vividly recreating the images of Tiruvalla and her grandmother's house in Kerala. This process of recreating her past through her poems signifies her attempt of retaining historic legacy, although she could recollect the past events only in fragments. It is through her generative act that she knits all these patches of her subjective experiences, her wishful yearning and her well conserved memories of the homeland into a tapestry of verses.

Keywords : Indo-American Diaspora; aesthetics of dislocation; cartography of subjective experiences; historic legacy.

Meena Alexander is one of the foremost Indo-American poets who have gained prominence due to her works revolving around the "aesthetics of dislocation," the term coined by Alexander in her essay, "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics?" (26). She was born in 1951 in Allahabad, raised in Kerala and Khartoum simultaneously. She received her education in Sudan and Nottingham, UK. She received a Bachelor's degree in French and English from Khartoum University and a doctorate degree in English from Nottingham University, England. After working in Hyderabad and Delhi in India, she settled in New York. Alexander established herself as a well-known Asian American poet in the United States. She has published several volumes of poetry and has worked as a distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University, New York. Her literary works deal with migrant memories, separation, trauma of being uprooted, exile and loneliness. Her works have been widely anthologized and translated into several languages including Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, French, German and Swedish. She has received many awards such as Altrusa International Award (1973), The New York State Foundation for the Arts Poetry Award (1999) and a PEN Open Book Award (2002) for *Illiterate Heart*

Meena Alexander sensuously dealt with themes like exile and identity, nostalgic memory of India, the ancestral land of her ethnic origin. In her poems, she fondly revives her lived experiences in four continents. The recurrent images of Tiruvalla, her birth place in Kerala, creates an ambience of being rooted to her

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ancient culture and land. The Chinese-American author, Maxine Hong Kingston comments about the uniqueness in Alexander's poetry, "Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted." (*Six Poems*) In her poems, Alexander explores her memory, her writing becomes instrumental in remembering her life in New York. Her journey from India to Sudan at the tender age of five and her later immigration to England and New York have resulted in a patchwork of memories. It is through her poetic works that Alexander has tried to collate images of the multiple cultures and ethnicity into a coherent memory. Although Alexander exhibits generosity and openness in embracing her many homes, her poems remain steeped in her Indian roots. In her non-fictional work, *Fault Lines: A Memoir*, Alexander discusses at length her peculiar position as a multilingual diasporic writer. She attempts to chart out her identity through the fragments of recollections from the countries like India, Sudan, England and New York. Her displaced condition and her bewilderment is reflected in description of herself as a "a woman without a history in this new world...a woman cracked by multiple migrations." (*Fault Lines*, 160) Here, Alexander discusses her peculiar position as a diasporic individual and focuses on the pain and violence of dislocation. The theme of nostalgic yearning for the homeland, going 'back and forth, forth and back' in a state of suspended animation between the new land and the land of her ancestors forms the content of her poems.

The present paper aims at drawing a cartography of subjective experiences of Meena Alexander in different countries. It also attempts to deliberate on her nostalgic act of vividly recreating the images of Tiruvalla and her grandmother's house in Kerala. It is not an unscrupulous plundering of allusions and images from the warehouse of her experiences, but a conscious act of employing her esemplastic power and collating all the fragments of memories in order to retain solidarity with the land of her cultural origin. It is through her generative act that she knits all these patches of her subjective experiences, her wistful yearning and her well conserved recollections of the homeland into a tapestry of verses. Her poems reflect her own conviction of keeping her ethnic consciousness alive despite the fractured nature of her immigrant's experience. It is a unique way of seeking integrity with her identity as an Indian in the flux of multiple experiences. Helen Grice, a lecturer in English and American literature comments on Alexander's treatment of diaspora experiences, "Alexander treats her writing as a search for a homeland, which is less physical than psychological, especially her poetry as a means of making sense of her multiple cultural, geographical and psychological positionalities. She also adds that it is Alexander's ethnicity, gender and exilic status that make her the person she is." (Warren, 48)

In her poem, "House of a Thousand Doors", Alexander exposes the ill-effects of colonial rule on her homeland, Tiruvalla. The village near Calicut has

witnessed intrusions by Dutch explorers, followed by the reign of British imperial masters. Despite these foreign influences, the house is an emblem of the Indian cultural tradition. The image of thousand doors of a house signifies the openness of Indian culture to the guests from foreign countries along with their ethnic uniqueness. In the post-colonial period, the same house has seen migration of young intellectuals to the newer and the wider world outside, seeking the prospects of better careers:

In dreams
waves tilt, a silken fan
in grandmother's hands
shell colored, utterly bare as the light takes her.

(House of Thousand Doors, 13-16)

The reference to a grandmother in these lines suggests the lost world of charm that can only be captured in our dreams. Her act of kneeling down before a thousand doors, in turn, hints at multiple options open before her. The music is heard in the background, which is played by a young bride. The poem presents overlapping images of a grandmother and a young bride which symbolizes the parallel feminine existence in the house:

A poor forked thing
I watch her kneel in all my lifetime
the household gods
who will not let her in. (23-26)

The image of a woman kneeling down for a lifetime is continued in the above lines which exposes the fact that female folks are perpetually subdued in the patrilineal set-up of the country. Alexander identifies the plight of a common household lady with that of the Indian subcontinent which also had to be subservient for a long time before the coercive colonial power. The ambivalent existence of India in the pre-independence era is aptly conveyed through the phrase, “A poor forked thing” (23). Alexander successfully recreates the condition of her ancestral land during the colonial period. The poem ends on a positive note. Despite being colonized and enslaved, these historical and social events add richness to the existing exuberance of her native land.

Another long poem by Alexander, titled “Black River, Walled Garden” carries elaborate autobiographical details. The poem portrays her childhood in the sheltered and secured atmosphere of the garden in her grandparent's house. The reminiscences of childhood in the ancient mansion and the walled garden near the river are very dear to her. Alexander gives a sensuous description of picturesque Nature in the coastal region of Indian peninsula with its variety of flora and fauna in the following lines:

Scent of cloves at the point of decay,

citadel of orchids swollen with rain,
 runnels of black earth
 where rose bushes sprang clotted with mist
 and on small rocks, sharp stars of
 Jasmine and Saughandi...
 where the kingfisher taps its beak against wood:
 Tat-tat-tat!
 Tat-tat-tat!
 Tat-tvam-asi! (Black River, Walled Garden, 2-10)

In the above lines, the portrayal of a tropical afternoon is finely blended with a deep ecological insight. “Tat-tvam-asi”, the lines from *Upanishada* hint at her strong belief in pantheism, the presence of omnipotent God in all aspects of nature. Her faith in the divine and integrated presence of God in the natural objects of the “walled garden” of her grandmother’s house expresses her conviction on being rooted and having a strong anchorage in the land of her ancestors. She vividly describes every corner of this “walled garden”. Such revival of images, objects and the memories of this beautiful garden from the rustic southern milieu of India insulates her from the feeling of being disjointed from her motherland. During her stay in Peterborough in Canada, she clearly recollects how she had spent a cosy afternoon in the rainy season back in India.

...black water cutting and clashing
 wrist slit by raw sugarcane stalks
 a child crying to Jesus (9-11)

Alexander feels an urgency to communicate her childhood memories and experiences to the whole world. Her naive expressions might appear disorderly, anarchic and sometimes explosive, too. Yet she feels a need to put them into words, through an act of snatching them from the “plentitude of silence”. The story about her grandfather’s library with the sight of Bible, encyclopaedia and dictionaries, and her grandmother’s rose-wood room with a mirror to stare in, has to be told to the entire world. The recollection of a well in the walled garden where she would see her reflection in the hot morning and the garden which has witnessed her playful swinging in a tree during sweet adolescence are embedded in her mind. The incidents of being drenched in the rain water and the sound of pounding hail storms are greatly exhilarating. In the far off foreign land, she is moved by a wistful desire to steep herself completely into a nostalgic recollection of those days.

Must I stoop,
 drink from those waters again,
 reach a walled garden,
 memory’s unique place? (19-22)

This longing is so strong that it is difficult for her to put them into words. Many a time, she feels like keeping all her worldly ambitions aside and returning back to

the land of her childhood dreams and to make “peace with the first gate/she will never meet again?”(62)

In her poem, “Golden Horizon”, Alexander deals with the angst of migrating from her homeland at a tender age of five. She describes this process as an act of ruthless hacking of someone from his or her roots. It is like severing a tree from its trunk, which leaves a raw wound at its pith. The reference to ‘marrow and meat’ suggests the core which is left exposed to the world. The poet’s narrative voice is split between the native and the migrant self, these twin consciousnesss are always at war with one another. The past is jostling with the present and fending for its claim amid the multiple impressions falling on the consciousness of her diasporic self. Amid these impressions, the vivid and picturesque description of rural Kerala brings out her own longing for her homeland. Alexander identifies this act of crossing the black-waters (*kala-pani*) and entering a new world with the inner death of an individual. The beauty of the foreign land with all its polish and sophistication fail to impress her migrant soul. With an urge to articulate her peculiar plight, Alexander reinvents her own voice with the available resources at hand in terms of ‘bits of spelling lessons’ and ‘shards of script’. Like the phrase ‘shards of script’, Alexander employs the metaphors of ‘being torn’ and ‘fragmented’ throughout the poem:

I saw the sari that bound her
dropping free, feet cut at the ankles
severed from her thighs, stucked with red earth...
(Golden Horizon, 38-40)

However, the act of severing is temporary. These scrapes and lesions are not permanent. The images of wounds are employed here to signify the rawness of her experience created out of dislocation, yet there is a scope of assimilating and collating into a coherent impression. The experience of being disjointed is in urgent need of articulation with an alternative voice that can successfully communicate her angst. She invents this power of eloquence afresh from her own archives of languages. Although the process is not very simple, despite being endowed with rich linguistic resources, many a time she finds herself clueless regarding the right ways to express her malaise. Alexander describes her discomfort in her poem “Black River, Walled Garden”:

Till the Indian Ocean and the salt water of Atlantic
rocked him free, the arms of the girl
a bent ship of longing
her hair the skin of muddied garden,
feverish source of ruin, as
over the anthills, leaves swirl
in an alphabet no tongue can replicate. (9-15)

With her generative power, she puts all the fragments of impressions from the alien world together and sets upon the task of stitching the fractured images from different lands into a tapestry of memories belonging to the ‘coruscating geography’. The poem “Golden Horizon” has an extended image of split or twin consciousness at war. This struggle is physical and serious in nature. The author is constantly at war with her diasporic-self, each one of them is fending for its superior claim. It is the diasporic self which amidst the multiple impressions gains the upper hand. The idea is supported by the belief in the Hindu scriptures where the act of crossing the black-waters (*kala-pani*) is considered as the event of defiling one’s soul, this is identified with the inner death of an individual. Thus, the struggle between the split selves ends in the spiritual death of the narrator, which gives way to the diasporic identity gaining the superior claim.

In her poem, “Atmospheric Embroidery” which appears in the anthology with the same name, Alexander touches upon her extremely personal yet highly political experience in India as well as abroad. She wonderfully exposes her confused state of mind with a hyphenated identity. Her identification as an Indian born British-American individual puts her in a complex identity quotient, which leaves her oscillating between her homeland and the foreign country. Even in a foreign location, her thoughts are caught in the labyrinth of sweet and sour memories of her childhood:

...thoughts thrust into a bramble
Oriental bitter-sweet pocketing the hedges
Fists in pockets, lemonades dripping from
a child's hem. (3-5)

She compares all her memories to Boetti’s embroidery. The famous Italian artist, Alighiero Fabrizio Boetti’s embroidery maps the world, similarly her travelling history, too, spans over a long period of her life, encompassing almost the entire globe. Every sight is registered in her mind, if not wholly, yet in a fragmented form. She is, herself amazed by the width of her experience. The richness of experience on visiting many alien shores is extremely appealing to her poetic self and inspires her to continuously write about them:

Occult ordering-silk and painted steel
...The Nile is the hardest water.
...Already its August
Season of snipers in the heartland, ...keep on walking. (7-14)

The descriptions of significant parts of the globe reaffirms her wagabond-like existence, wandering from shore to shore. Alexander juxtaposes these varied experiences with the unlike pairing of the words like, ‘silk and the painted steel’ and ‘butterfly and the naked man’ etc. Shikha Malviya in her Review “Atmospheric Embroidery by Meena Alexander” rightly points out:

Alexander, reflecting her own experience of having lived in India, Sudan, England and the US, explores Mappa, a series of embroidered maps of the world, created by Italian conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti. It is likely that Mappa inspired the book title and the title poem. (Review, *Atmospheric Embroidery* by Meena Alexander)

In a beautiful verse, “Shook Silver”, Alexander physically describes the process of dislocation from the vision of a child. The poem conveys the sense of anxiety and uncertainty that a child experiences when she embarks upon an uncertain journey to a strange African land. Alexander describes how her grandfather had cautioned her about the harsh weather in Africa which might turn her into a “little black girl”. The child is apprehensive and decides to follow her grandfather’s instruction to “keep that parasol over your head.”. The expressions like, “Child crossing the livid sea?”, “They have goats and cows just like us.”, “Mother peers out of portholes” clearly indicates the anxiety of an expatriate individual. Yet another beautiful poem, “Udisthanam” also deals with the theme of displacement. From the age of five till eighteen years of her age, Alexander had crossed many oceans. The memory of the displacement had seeped into her psyche. In the course of working on her poems. Alexander had often recalled those sounds of waves dashing on the sides of her ship creating a musical effect:

Piercings of sense
Notes lashing time
Ecstatic self hidden
In the Ship’s hold. (Udisthanam, 1-4)

Alexander talks about her experience as a writer with a vast travelling experience and acknowledges the impact of the impressions of her exodus on her creative faculties during her speech at *Hyderabad Literary Festival in 2016*. She states that writing has always had a healing and therapeutic effect on her ruptured soul due to the experiences of recurrent migration. She states, “The act of writing, it seems to me, makes up a shelter, allows space to what would otherwise be hidden, crossed out, mutilated. Sometimes writing can work toward a reparation, making a sheltering space for the mind. Yet it feeds off ruptures, tears in what might otherwise seem a seamless oppressive fabric.” (Kumar, Remembering Meena ...)

It is observed that Alexander’s poetry is often beset with the conflicting emotions of being adrift and of being securely anchored to her moorings. The images of multiple experiences and the fragmentary expressions of her emotional development during her immigration into the foreign land can be found in almost all of her poetic creations. Alexander puts the patches of these subjective experiences into a mosaic of literary expressions that are consolidated with her “aesthetics of dislocation”. In many of her poetic works, we find Alexander indulging

in the process of recreating her past which signifies her attempt at preserving her historical legacy. Through her literary works, she displays fidelity with her native land. The act of reviving the fond memories of her childhood days hints at her need to go back to the reminiscences of her sheltered and secure life in India, with the conviction of finding a strong cultural anchorage in her oriental homeland.

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