

A Woman Cracked by Multiple Migrations: Search for Identity in Meena Alexander's Fault Lines

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Abstract

*Meena Alexander is an internationally known Indian American poet, scholar and writer. Born in Allahabad, India in 1951 to Syrian Christian Family, she accompanied her parents when she was five to Khartoum, Sudan, later attended university of Khartoum where she studied English and French Literature. Then she moved to England for her doctoral studies in Nottingham. She returned to teach in Delhi and Hyderabad where she met her husband and after marriage she moved to New York. She wrote her memoir *Fault Lines* in 1993. Meena Alexander traces her life from childhood in India through youth and education in Africa and England to marriage and motherhood in New York. As a result of her family's relocations as a youth, Alexander struggles in *Fault Lines* to forge a sense of identity, despite a past full of moves and changes. This work revolves around theme of establishing one's self, an identity independent one's surroundings. In this paper, how Meena Alexander does search for her own identity and self creation in a world that strives to define, identify and label people will be analysed.*

Keywords: Meena Alexander, memoir, multiple migrations, searching for self

Meena Alexander is a South Asian immigrant poet, writer and scholar who is known internationally. She was born on February 17, 1951 in Allahabad, in India to George and Mary Alexander. Her family was from Kerala, South India and they were Syrian Christians. She is the eldest of the three children. Alexander left for Khartoum with her parents when she was five years old. She went to school at Khartoum and she entered the University of Khartoum at the age of thirteen. She was a curious and intelligent child and by the time she was fifteen, her poems were translated into Arabic and published in Sudanese newspapers. When she was eighteen years old, The University of Nottingham in England awarded her a scholarship to get her Ph.D. After finishing her doctoral thesis on "Construction of Self Identity in the Early English Romantic Poets" she returned to India at the age of twenty two. She did not want to forget her Indian identity. She lectured in various Indian universities, including University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and University of Hyderabad. In Hyderabad she met with her husband, David who was a historian doing research there. During the five years she lived in India she published her first three books of poetry: *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976), *I Root My Name* (1977), and *Without Place* (1978). In 1979 she was a visiting fellow at the University of Paris-Sorbonne. The following year she married and moved to New York City and became an assistant professor at Fordham University, where she remained until 1987 when she became an assistant professor in the English Department at Hunter College, the City University of New York (CUNY). Two years later she joined the graduate faculty of the PhD program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. In 1992 she was made full professor of English and Women's Studies. She was appointed Distinguished Professor of English in 1999 and continues to teach in the PhD program at the Graduate Center and the MFA program at Hunter College. Over the years she has also taught poetry in the Writing Division in the School of the Arts at Columbia University. Since moving to New York, Alexander has been a productive author, publishing six more volumes of poetry, two books of literary criticism, two books of lyric essays, two novels, and a memoir She now lives in New York with her husband David Lilyveld, son Adam Kuruvilla and daughter Svathi Marian. Meena Alexander wrote her memoir *Fault Lines* in 1993. and in this book she tries to describe her experiences and events that shaped her life and writing. She does search for her identity and tries to find her place in a world attempts to define, identify and label people. In this paper, how Meena Alexander achieves her aim will be explored.

The title of the book is remarkable. Fault Lines is the term used by geologists to describe cracks in the earth. Ponzanesi (2004) states that Alexander uses it to visualize the uprooting she has faced in her life. (53) Alexander wants to pay attention to the fact that living in a female body in a world where the female body is a site for endless struggles. It becomes worse if you are a migrant woman. In the early pages of *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander describes her situation very clearly. She states that:

That's all I am a woman, cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, and in the chill wind of autumn, tossing back and forth, worrying myself sick. Till my mind slipped back to my mother- amma- she who gave birth to me, and to amma's amma, my veliammachi, grandmother Kunju, drawing me back into the darkness of the Tiruvella house with its cool bedrooms and coiled verandas: the shelter of memory. But the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind's space. Even what I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed up from in the face of present danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed. And there is little sanctity, even in remembrance. What I have forgotten is what I have written: a rag of words wrapped around a shard of recollection. A book with torn ends visible. Writing in search of a homeland. (FL : 2-3)

She is writing her memoir in search of a homeland and she indulges in a voyage of "self-discovery" and begins her narrative in a chronological order. She moves back and forth, to the past and to the present. It is about being born into a female body; and about the difficulty of living in space, moving about so much, living with ground rules. She says "I wanted to give voice to my flesh, to learn to live as a woman. To do that, I had to spit out the Stones that were in my mouth. I had to become a ghost, enter my own flesh". (FL:16)

As a result of her family's relocations as a youth, Alexander struggles in *Fault Lines* to forge a sense of identity, despite a past full of moves and changes. For Sujatha (2013) this work revolves around theme of establishing one's self, an identity independent of one's surroundings.(45) In fact, the title itself suggests a questioning of lines, boundaries, definitions of oneself. Alexander searches for her own identity and self-creation in the middle of a world that tries to define, identify and label people. These definitions of race and nationality prove difficult to defy. Alexander in her memoir, *Fault Lines* traces her growth as a child, woman, wife, mother and writer over borders and across multiple cultures. There are reflections and recollections about the cities, towns, villages she had lived in since birth; Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, within the boundaries of India; Khartoum in Sudan, Nottingham in Britain and Manhattan. She journeys back and forth in time, recollects her childhood experiences in Kerala, childhood images like conch shell, seashore, the rooms, the distant house, gardens and different characters like her mother, father, maternal, paternal grandparents, servants, cooks, children, friends all knotted into each other. (Sujatha, 2013: 45) "Alienation" or sense of not belonging anywhere has become the major obsession of Alexander. She is always traveling and feels a stranger wherever she goes and is living on the margin in alien lands amongst alien people.

According to Sandra Ponzanesi (2004), memories of her past in India rescue her initially from being a non entity in a world that survives only through its ability to define, identify and label people. (53) These are memories coming from the foundational basis of a conscious existence. It reminds Homi Khabha's words. He says in *Location of Culture* (1994) "to establish one's cultural identity, memory is sometimes necessary". For Khabha, "Remembering is never a quite act of introspection or restrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the present". (1994 63) But memory itself is unreliable, there is little sanctity even in remembrance. Alexander admits. The question "why did I leave India?" often torments Alexander . She writes, all I knew was that something had broken loose from inside, me, was all molten".(FL146) And what was "molten" and "broken loose" had to do with India, and to write, Alexander finds she had "to flee into a colder climate else she would burn up and all her words with her." (FL 146)

Marrying David and moving to America might have resolved this trauma. But America proves to be more tormenting. Marrying a man of her choice, coming with him to another country, giving birth and finding a university job within a short time do not resolve the inner conflicts of rootlessness and displacement. She says:

When I arrived in America in 1979, five months pregnant, newly married to David, whom I had met in Hyderabad, I felt torn from the India I had learnt to love. In those days I was struck by all the differences between Hyderabad and New York. I could not get over how little dust there seemed to be in Manhattan. Then why packup the vegetables, celery, broccoli, cabbage, in plastic?

My own soul seemed to me, then, a cabbagelike thing, closed tight in a plastic cover. My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation (FL 15)

Meena Alexander had to learn something else when she moved to America. Racism is part of daily life in the States. She realizes her “otherness” there. Her alienation intensifies when on one occasion a white man in black leather jacket calls her “black bitch”. Her condition was similar to those of other Indian women – who were forced to give up their saris and wear western clothes lest they lose their jobs, or the Asian children in the city schools, or to those Indians who lived through racial stonings and murder in Jersey city, and who lived in fear of the Dot Buster skinheads. Did one know what it to be unwhite in America. (FL 169) This question shows the extent of psychological oppression on the marginalized communities in a country. According to Nair (2007) , marrying a white man intensifies the competing anxieties color which extends itself to the identity of her children, Adam and Svati. (77) Svati states, “You are brown mama, Adam is Brown Adam, and I am peach Svati. (FL 170) The tension surrounding self-identification emerges in a scene where Alexander’s son, Adam encounters a man who asks him What are you? Adam, of mixed heritage, chooses to identify himself as neither American nor Indian, but rather a Jedi knight. (FL 172) He escapes a fantasy land where such distinctions were unnecessary. Even choosing a cultural identification has its boundaries and borders by which to abide. Meena also had to tell the difference between Native American Indians and Native Indians. Her daughter thought that they were Native American. These all raise the question of identity. “Who are we?” What selves can we construct to live by? How shall we mark out space? How shall we live another day? (174) If you are an immigrant living in United States, you have to define yourself constantly. Meena Alexander tries to answer the question “who are you?” as follows

As much as anything else I am a poet writing in America. But American poet? What sort? Surely not of the Robert Frost or Wallace Stevens variety? An Asian-American poet then? Clearly that sounds better. Poet tout court? Will that fit? No, not at all. There is very little I can be tout court in America except perhaps woman, mother. But even there, I wonder. Everything that comes to me is hyphenated. A woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a postcolonial language, as she waits for the red lights to change on Broadway. A Third World woman poet, who takes as her right the inner city of Manhattan, making up poems about the hellhole of the subway line, the burnt-out blocks so close to home on the Upper West Side, finding there, news of the world.(FL 193-94)

Early in her youth, Alexander’s mother tells her she must never take a job, that her work is to raise her children. Arranged marriages are also part of Indian culture. Alexander resisted all these traditions and she chose herself a different path from her mother’s. She tried to be successful both in her career and family. Alexander’s process of self- creation has been a great challenge. . She tries to create an identity despite her past. She fights against the definitions and traditions set by society. Meena Alexander’s struggle to develop her sense of self-identity lies in being true to her creative self- thus going beyond the boundary lines set by nation , race, gender, and color.

Meena feels that because she has lived in several different places throughout her life and lived several different lives, speaking several different languages that she has ultimately become multiple being locked into the journeys of one body. As an adolescent she is torn between the conflicts of the dictates of her mother about ideal womanhood and the requirements of femininity and the claims of intelligence. In Khartoum she was forced to learn and speak English along with Malayalam and Hindi. She feels inferior to others and cannot interact with others as she considers herself ugly because of her skin color. “Ethnicity” becomes an important concern as one shifts one’s location and becomes a member of a minority community in a foreign land. She says” In India no one asked if I were Asian or American Asian, here we are part of a minority”. An immigrant woman is at once made conscious of her difference in terms of color, race and gender. The racial discrimination and colonization compound her pain of dislocation. She feels she is exiled perpetually. She is unable to sever her cultural links with India. Languages become her refuge. She dwells in many languages but She chooses English as best way of self- expression among all others.

Women in diasporas are doubly marginalized, as women and as members of a minority community. As Sujatha(2013) points out: the cultural displacement and sense of isolation are typical to migrant writers’ existence. The tensions of transplanted existence, the struggle for survival in an alien land and culture, the traumatic experiences cracked by multiple identities, the state of rootlessness, insecurity, denial of independence and a safe anchorage etc. are compounded in case of migrant women. For diaspora writers, there is a greater compulsion to discover “self”. (47)

Meena Alexander feels this compulsion and she tries to survive herself and wants to find her “self”. Writing memoir helps her. Alexander speaks all the things that unspeakable before.

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