

The Home and Identity: A Postcolonial Journey in the Poems of Meena Alexander

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Abstract

There is no colony without power. Every colonial experience exhibits power internally as well as externally. In the social and cultural life of 'Pre', 'Post' and during the colonial period, the exercise of power is felt in every walk of life. In the writings of Meena Alexander these experiences are prominent. She negotiates with the issue of 'Home' and 'Identity' in almost all her writings. 'Home' is in fact a space basically fluid in nature. Meena Alexander is always in an experiment on the issues of 'Home' and 'Identity' in her creative oeuvre. In her writings the issues of 'family' and various relations are mixed together. As a prominent diasporic writer, Meena Alexander tries to break the social, cultural and linguistic barriers which have so long been the sources of pain for many individuals. This paper endeavours to explore her postcolonial journey and her views of making a home, a living one and a literary one, and an individual identity of her own through her literary and poetic creations. The explosion of expression brings new ideas and new theories. The colonial suppression grows into revolt and revolution, and literary movement or literary theory such as postcolonial theory which comes into existence through the endeavours of famous critics like Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Aijaz Ahmad and many others. The postcolonial studies cover a broad passage of literary discourse. The discourse also includes the area of diaspora with dislocation, displacement and settlement.

Introduction

The postcolonial era is an era of 'writing back'. The postcolonial literature came into flourish with the colonial and imperial views of the coloniser and the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. It covers the broad area of race and home, gender and division, and space and identity with conflicts and contradictions. The postcolonial studies are mainly concerned with an age of cultural conflict and existential conflict. The cultural imperialism is a noteworthy fact in the poems of Rudyard Kipling like *The White Man's Burden* (1899): "Take up the White Man's Burden- /In patience to abide, / To veil the threat of terror/ And check the show of pride;/ By open speech and simple, /An hundred times made plain, / To seek another's profit, / And work another's gain."The postcolonial era is an era of cultural imperialism and the search for home and identity. Colonialism and cultural imperialism give birth to dislocation and diaspora though colonialism mingles two cultures, one is native and the other is foreign and a hybrid culture is created. The colonial period is a period of suppression and domination. And the postcolonial period is a period of the issues of colonialism and cultural imperialism. The term post colonialism is related to 'postcolonial theory' and 'postcolonial literature'. The postcolonial literature tries to explore the colonial issues and its impact on the social, political, economical and cultural aspects. It is also concerned with history and identity. Through the hand of colonialism there appear the issues of displacement and diaspora. The postcolonial studies deal with the home and identity with a view of dislocation and migration. The diasporic writers create a home and an identity of their own. They live in betweenness. It may be called a home of hybridity. They belong to the world that is the 'Third World'. This is mostly concerned with the significant discourse of the postcolonial literature with an emphasis on the cultural empowerment and identity as well as equality.

Meena Alexander is a notable poet, critic and novelist. She is the South Asian American diasporic writer, wife of David Lelyveld, a South Asian historian. She was born in Allahabad, India on 17th February in 1951. Only at the age of about four or five her family had to leave Allahabad and Kerala for Sudan owing to her father's attachment as a scientist to the then Independent Indian Government. She belongs to a Syrian Christian family. Their family moved to Khartoum where she earned her early education at the Unity High School. In 1969 she completed her graduation with Honours from Khartoum University. She also obtained the Ph.D honour from Nottingham University in English on Romantic Literature. She came back to India, her original home. And she worked as a teacher at the Universities of Delhi and Hyderabad. Alexander left India for New York City. She achieved the position of an assistant professor at Fordham University. She married Lelyveld and settled in New York City with two children. Her poetic career begins with the publications of *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976), *I Root My Name* (1977), *Without Place* (1978), *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), *The Storm* (1989), *Night-Scene*, *The Garden* (1989), *River and Bridge* (1996) and so on. Her works deal with the theme of home and dislocation and the search for identity. The ever holding subject matter of her poetry is migrancy and boundary. It evokes a question of identity. So Maxine Hong Kingston has remarked: "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 visions and remembers and is uplifted." Alexander is a combination of split personality and split identity. Her familiar and historical facts come into a dominant spirit of her concrete image of poetic explosion. She constitutes herself a diamond of diaspora as a diasporic writer. Her luminous and embodied poetic fountain flows down through her tongue in the form of creative bullet: "I am a poet writing in America, but American poet- An Asian American poet- a woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a Third World woman poet." (*Fault Lines*).

With a calculative view the postcolonial journey of the postcolonial and diasporic writer Meena Alexander, demands that she is not oblivious of her own rootlessness and dislocation. The idea and nature of displacement occupies an engraving position in her literary creations. She considers herself a minority in the sense of culture, race, location and identity. She belongs to the class of the minority of the theoretical brand 'Diaspora'. The diasporic writers are those who leave their native land and settle in a foreign land. Alexander has settled in the New York City, America. She expresses herself: "In India no one asked if I were Asian or American Asian, here we are part of a minority."

The South Asian American diasporic writer Meena Alexander's dislocation mostly dominates her poetry. The exploration of her poetic outburst demands her subjectivity and memory. Her poetic creation goes on with her embracement of the experiences of border and border crossing with lyricism. Her poetry is, at once, both silent and vibrant on the issues of her identity and entity. Her own dislocation and disconnection for the creation of poetry are the major combination of her literary career. Her creative world gives her a space of freedom, a graceful freedom that lessens her earthly burden of the painful experiences. And the productive spirit is 'the great gift of poetry'. Her own words in a conversation with Lopamudra Basu, bear a testimony to her poetic power with the salient feature of lyricism: "It seems to me that the lyric poem is a place of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem you have to enter into a dream state. Yet, at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense place to reflect on the world.... In the composition of poetry, something that is very difficult to face is brought within the purview of language, into a zone of images and is crystallized. And that act of crystallizing the emotion through the image actually has its own peculiar grace, which frees one, if only momentarily, of the burden of the experience. This seems to be the great gift of poetry."

Regarding her view, her poetry reveals that she, like each and every human being tries to escape the earthly anguish and pains, wishes to escape the bitter experiences of traditional home and identity, and dislocation and diasporic settlement. From this angle she may be considered as an escapist. And escapism is one of the most relevant and significant features of Romanticism on which she worked for her Ph.D programme. Her research was published as *Construction of Self Identity in the Early English Romantic Poets*. Her poetic creation, research and personal experiences vividly strengthen the stereotype of her poetry woven with a fabric of escapism. The poetic creation of the diasporic writer Meena Alexander presents a clash of identity in between home and abroad and even within herself. Her journey of postcolonial life is full of experimental experiences. As it were she lives in an experimental land where she is always struggling to make a home but she is nostalgic. She is an inhabitant of multi-places and crosses multi-borders. She explores herself through an interview:

“I’m an Indian writer; I’m also an American writer. It’s all a question of multiple boundaries and affiliations.” Moreover, she lives, in another sense, at no home, that is she dwells neither in her native culture nor in a foreign culture rather in a ‘Third Space’ culture. She has been able to make a ‘Third Space’, a third home. She lives in a world of hybridity. Alexander is the South Asian American diasporic writer. It is not a matter of a day and a night that she becomes an American rather it is beggar description of how she struggled to stand on the stage of such a position. Even one does not conjecture what may happen. About the prediction and position Alexander clearly gives vent to: “I became all at once an American. This is a sentence very hard to translate. / One is singing. Two says: one flows. / You cannot know how things go. No Prophecy....” (*Experimental Geography*).

Alexander’s multi-migrations make her fall in search of her identity and entity. Her poetry is a mingling of native and foreign cultures and experiences. Her works are related to home and her identity. And it is replete with past and present struggling experiences. On the one hand, she has to leave her home and native identity and on the other hand, she continues endeavouring to make a home and an identity through her poetic outburst. Her poetry reveals the theme of rootlessness and dislocation. Her recurrent migrations make her determined to make a survival place in the literary world with a postcolonial journey of life full of anguish and nostalgic memory. Her journey is a fragmented journey of life and queries of life and hope: “I start to write fragments / as much to myself to another / Who lives in my mind? / Can the mind hold its hope?” (*Fragments*).

Her journey of life begins from her native land India and settles to a foreign land America. Her productive literary creations symbolize a journey from childhood to maturity with a literary career. And she had to face multi-migrations and many-facet experiences. Her creations dip into those experiences. So, her works may be compared to the genre ‘Bildungsroman’ and she is a Migratory Bildungsroman.

Birthplace is the motherland and the primary identity of an individual. The home and parents are the actual identity of a child and a grown up man. The child, when grows up as a mature one with ups and downs in life, he or she tries to remember and ruminate his or her childhood experiences and the experiences of the journey of life. The individual can never live without the memory of home and homely affections as well as hard and bitter realities regarding homely identity. It is the zigzag journey of life full of cares, duties, pains, agonies, complexities and the betweenness of life. Meena Alexander always faces and feels dislocated. Her writings are replete with cultural instability, minority, gender, race, dislocation and rootlessness, and struggle to find or make a home. Her postcolonial journey concerns with a diasporic aspect and reflects her memory: “Place names splinter on my tongue and flee / Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri / Khartoum, Nottingham, New Delhi, / Hyderabad, New York, / the piece work of sanity stitching them into a single / coruscating geography / (a long drawn breath / In an infant’s dream might work) / ruined by black water in a paddy field.” (*Gold Horizon*).

Nostalgic Meena Alexander’s poetry sparkles with the loss of love and childhood. She begins her journey of life with her birth and peaceful childhood and a simple life. But gradually she faces complexities and simplicities in life. During her growth and development she encounters many facts that haunt her and the haunting experiences shape her poetic image: “I had a simple childhood, / A mother and father to take care of me, / no war at my doorstep. / Stones / sang canticles in my mouth / as darkness rose. / Love, love where are they gone? / Father, mother, in dark stars, / singing stones.” (*Field in Summer*). Happiness is the one facet of the coin of life. The opposite one is the sorrow. The matured age with the burden of bitter experience recalls the happy childhood and wishes to have those days of thoughtless rapture. It is her journey of self-expression and self-discovery. She discloses the wishing desire of each and every one: “Happiness is an aspect of life.” (*Field in Summer*).

The home is a living identity for the owner of a house or building. Man is born to live and die. After one’s birth one has one day to die and to leave the living place. Throughout his living tenure man continuously tries to make his identity in and out of his home. The journey of making identity continues. The soul is such a spirit that makes an abode in the form of a body. The body becomes the living place of the soul. But the body can’t be an everlasting living place of the soul. The home or the body is a changeable object to the soul. As the body once becomes inactive or cold blood, the soul leaves it. The soul cannot live in ‘her mutilated parts’ of the body. The term ‘Diaspora’ may be connected to this analogy. The diasporic writers leave their own homeland and settle in a foreign state or country. The home is to Meena Alexander a home of confinement with traditional boundary and traditional cultural practices and beliefs. Meena Alexander violates the traditional system and appears to be a distinguished diasporic writer. His journey with postcolonial objectivity and subjectivity is imbued with the journey from known to the unknown and seen to the unseen.

An interview between Meena Alexander and Ruth Maxey, clears the idea of Alexander: “I come out of many traditions, and so I use the word ‘familial’ to think about diaspora, because you feel in a vibrant relationship with a community because that’s the only way I know how to think about it. There are other more interesting ways of talking about this because of course we cross borders: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal. This larger South Asian nomenclature is not something you’d find in India, for instance, because you don’t need it in quite this way.”

If one finds a place or a homely place in an unknown region or country, he or she tries to make a memorable place and an another home one. One’s own home may not be a permanent home and identity for his or her state. Alexander, thus, stresses: “Shall a soul visit her mutilated parts? / How much shall a body be home?” (*Pitfire*). It is natural for a bird to twitter or sing though some try to hinder its spontaneous flow of music. The musical song bears a message for human beings. Sometimes man also symbolically becomes a bird to scatter his message for his identity and for the welfare of the mankind. Even there are some persons who always try to draw back others’ leading attitude and humane activities. What the motto of others may be it is the bird’s challenge to move forward with its natural instinct. It is indirectly and symbolically referred to the patriarchal dominance prevailing in most of the families of the human society. Alexander presents the patriarchy with an indirect and symbolic point of view through her poetic strength: “We’ve even struck the bird’s throat.” (*Pitfire*).

The poems of the collection of poetry *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013) are deeply rooted in memory and mystery with personal history. The terms in the title ‘Buried Stones’ somehow hint at the unforgettable and unavoidable hard realities of the life of Meena Alexander, which she cannot break like a stone but they shake her while she tries to produce her literary productions. And they make a place in her poetic creations. War and love have also made a place in her poetic creations. The poems also symbolize her journey of life from a common home India to an unknown home America and an uncommon literary home with an extraordinary creative power, where the cultures and pictures of her native land India make a home, a global home and an identity, an international one for none but herself. On the collection Billy Collins comments: “With one hand on the things and textures of the material world and the other reaching into the mysteries beyond us, Meena Alexander does what poetry does best, conveying us from the known to the unknown with grace and formal care.” Alexander knows that life is a zigzag journey with pains and pitching forward. But dream and destination cannot remain unfulfilled. So she hails hope and holds the rope of success in life.

The poem *Birthplace with Buried Stones* is deeply rooted in the memory of Alexander. Her homely memory and incidents make a home for her in her literary creations. She cannot live without thinking of her birthplace Allahabad and India. Her memory relating to her home is vibrant even though she lives abroad. All the pictures reflected in her mind come to her poetic pictures of words: “All this flows into me as mottled memory.” (*Birthplace with Buried Stones*). Alexander is also shocked at the bloody incidents and riots. But she remains positive with the existential belief of God, ‘blessing’ her and her family. And she has been able to mix herself up with a huge area of culture. She is silent and vibrant: “The unspeakable hurt of history: / So the river Ganga pours into the sea. / Heaven bent, / Blessing my first home.” (*Birthplace with Buried Stones*).

Life begins with a welcome of birth just as the day begins with morning. The morning is a very beautiful and joyous part of a day. So the morning shows the day how it will go on throughout. One’s birth hints at the journey of life, a difficult one. Man is born free and brings joy to the near and dear ones. But his journey of life is full of cares, difficulties, predicaments, joys and it is a life of unstable accounts of living. The struggling person identified with Meena Alexander, starts the day with diligence of study in order to make a home and an identity staying at a home of culture and nature: “I sit in a patch of shade cast by a pipal tree. / Each morning I read a few lines from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.” (*Morning Ritual*).

Everything lies around everybody. But it is the life that matters much. In a state of rootlessness and dislocation Meena Alexander finds trouble in life. Just at her early age she and her mother had to set for Sudan where she had her early education. But being an Indian she had much attachment to India and her birthplace and even her native culture. She is actually in a dilemma of diaspora. Yet she tries to come out of a culture of traditional belief of some Indians. Even her mother was against her motto of her life. In an interview Alexander without hesitation expresses: “My mother didn’t approve of me writing at all. She just thought this was the weirdest thing to be doing with your life. Mothers don’t want their daughters to write because this is against a model of womanhood of some sort, right? My mother thought I should be a good needlewoman, learn how to make good sambar [lentils with vegetables], and take care of my husband. I should have a certain amount of education but not too much.”

Regarding her mother's view of life, sometimes life seems to her to be both pessimistic and optimistic though in the long run optimism overshadows pessimism. She has a horizontal hope for achievement even with a difficult way. She as if considers herself as a learner- child who often without knowing grips something inedible and tries to have that into its mouth. Her inward picture comes out through her mighty words in the form of an ornament of language: "Everything is broken and numinous / Tiled roofs outcrops of stone, flesh, torn from mollusks. / Far away, a flotilla of boats. A child sucking stones. / There is a forked path to this moment." (*Morning Ritual*). Strangeness makes one strange. The strange thinking leads a writer to an unknown place and state or home or success. Alexander had and has such a strange imaginative power that made her famous and distinguished. Such imaginations are like that there are no trees but there are green leaves; there is no human being but the imaginative or real powerful soul that is free to think. The human body is dislocated but the soul along with indomitable will-power, is not, rather it is mixed with its inventive and discovering urge: "Trees have no elsewhere. / Leaves very green. (*Morning Ritual*).

The poem *Question Time* contains the hidden theme of suppression and expression. The idea of suppression lies in the form of patriarchy and gender. And the idea of expression lies in the form of independent development irrespective of race and gender. Moreover, the poem discloses the matter of the coloniser and the colonised even in the short area of a home. The home and the familiar codes become a shadow in life. The home is transformed into a four-walled confinement. Alexander heard the cry of herself or the soul though sometimes womanhood raises questions against the same race womanhood: "Her question, a woman in sweatshirt, / Hand raised in a crowded room- / What use of poetry?" (*Question Time*). Light can never be shrouded by darkness. Darkness is a curse to an individual and to the society. Light or knowledge dispels darkness or ignorance. Patriarchy is also one kind of coloniser even in an independent country. The other members especially the female ones are considered, in some families, as colonised. Though the idea of the 'double colonization' is not applicable in an independent country, the idea of single colonization is still found in a patriarchal system.

The Social Contract by Rousseau begins with the very significant speech: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." The home is a kind of confinement to the females in some cases. The females feel that they are pent up in a prison. But it is the indomitable spirit of an individual female that can really free her from her own imprisonment. And it is the light and free will that is their only hope for independence. Such a piercing symbolical spirit is found in the sketch of words of Meena Alexander: "I remember the scarred spine / Of mountains the moon slips through." (*Question Time*). Alexander comes out of the single colonization and her free will paves her way to a successful self-expression and self-discovery through her poetic journey. When a woman asks what the use of poetry is, Alexander clearly retorts and proves that the colonised in a family or outside, cannot be overruled for a long time by the coloniser rather she appears to be an individual identity and makes a literary home and includes herself to a home of the 'Third World', with her memory and history: "In the shadow of a shrub once you and I / Brushed lips and thighs, / Dreamt of a past that frees its prisoners. / Standing apart I looked at her and said- / We have poetry / So we do not die of history." (*Question Time*).

The poem *Migrant Memory* sketches the picture of nostalgic feelings and experiences of Alexander. She remembers her native culture and practices. Her journey of life makes an identity with native memory and foreign memory. She makes a fine blending of past and present in her poetic creations. Alexander goes back to her past time which is, according to her, very important for literary creations. So, the past facts and traditional cultures are the recurrent theme of her poetry: "I try to remember a desert town, / Mirages at noon, at dusk at dusty lawn / Bottles of gin and scotch, a mathematician / To whom I spoke of reading Poust all summer long. / His mistress stood on tiptoe wiping his brow with her pent up silk, / Her sari, hot green rivaling the neem leaves." (*Migrant Memory*). Alexander discovers a difference between the views and opinions of a female and a male regarding an issue of living a life for a girl. In the voice of the female there is the importance of wealth but in the voice of the male there is the stress on one's own self-development: "Watching her, amma whispered in the wind- Be real. / Take a husband of good stock. As for love, it's blind. / Appa's voice low-No dowry. You're all you need, / Your own precious self." (*Migrant Memory*).

Alexander's grandmother makes a colony in the house of Alexander's heart, and the home and an identity in the world of her poetic creations. Alexander writes back to the past and the most significant fact is that the past experiences and history greatly influence her poetic career, "so we do not die of history". She is considered as the memory ruminator. She is in search of compensation for loss: "A life time ago grandmother Eli wore gold, / Stepped off a boat into a paddy field and vanished. / Where is grandmother now? / I need a golden ratio for loss." (*Migrant Memory*). None and nothing can free Alexander of her memory. The land she belonged to is a land where she spent her childhood with many unforgettable experiences. She puts her grandmother into the box of her memory, which she always bears with her. This is really found in her pictorial words of her poetic productions: "Can Fibonacci's theorem ease the hazard of memory? / Grandmother's gold, sunk in time's flood, / And in the dusty capital / Where I spent my early years, / A boy soldier bathed in his own blood." (*Migrant Memory*).

Man lives to wander whether it is for food or for pleasing mood. He is dynamic and some are diasporic. His dynamism is a journey of life for making money and colony. Before and after colonial period one thing seems to be mentioned that man is always in search of home or place and an identity. He goes from door to door, from home to home, from country to country and from identity to identity. He desires to discover the history and to make a history. With such a view and new ideas the diasporic and postcolonial writers appear. Meena Alexander is the South Asian American diasporic writer. She crosses multiple boundaries regarding traditional beliefs, family as well as countries. Her inward and outward growth and development is the postcolonial journey of her postcolonial life.

Feminism is for feminism. Her poetry explores this when she expresses that she was much inspired by her parental grandmother and the maternal grandmother and other female personalities like Virginia Woolf. The collection of poetry *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988) reveals the Indian culture, feminine identity, an identity of traditional India, and an inspiration to Alexander, by which she came to her own independent thinking identity through the inspirational activities of her parental and maternal grandmothers. The picture of India was very different during the colonial period and even the postcolonial period. The collection also deals with the facts of colonialism. The collection of *River and Bridge* (1996) is imbued with political and personal experiences. Through this Alexander tries to sketch out the racial problems of the South Asians. The poetry and her other creations portray a conflict between her inner world and the outer world. Rootlessness is the dominating fact of her poetry. In a postcolonial situation with a postcolonial and traditional view she struggles to make a position of her own. She can speak in different languages like Hindi, English, Arabic, Malayalam and French. Her life begins with a journey with her parents. She may be considered that she was born with diasporic feature and diasporic journey. Though she knows different languages, she expresses: "Colonialism seems intrinsic to the burden of English in India, and I felt robbed of literacy of my own mother tongue." (*Fault Lines*)

Conclusion

The postcolonial journey of the postcolonial diasporic writer and traveller Meena Alexander is a journey for existence full of practical border crossing and cultural experiences from childhood to maturity along with her traditional homely experiences. Her state is compared with the state of 'unhomeliness'. The poems, in her collection *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013), "convey the fragmented experience of the traveller, for whom home is both nowhere and everywhere".

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