



Representing Identity as Fragmented in the Post-colonial Context: A Study of Meena Alexander's Autobiographical Texts

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Abstract:

The postcolonial era has given rise to a group of Diaspora writers, who leave their native place and settle in a foreign land. They write such narratives which focus on the trauma of dislocation, suffering of separation and loss of home land. The idea of self is more problematic with such writers which is portrayed as split, cracked, fragmented and hyphenated. Meena Alexander in her autobiographical writings *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (1993) and *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) problematizes the concept of self by introducing the idea of division and fragmentation. In her life narratives she represents her fragmented identity through some beautiful imagery. She compares herself with a stone, dried poppy seeds, barbed wire, waste basket, and with a parrot.

Keywords: Diaspora, Dislocation, Separation, Loss of Home Land, Fragmented Identity.

The postcolonial era has given rise to a group of Diaspora writers, who leave their native place and settle in a foreign land. These writers are emerged out of migration sometimes imposed and sometimes voluntary. They write such narratives which focus on the trauma of dislocation, suffering of separation and loss of home land. The notion of a dispersed, fluctuating, shifting and above all, discursively constructed selfhood works its way into the writings of these postcolonial writers. The idea of self is more problematic with such writers which is portrayed as split, cracked, fragmented and hyphenated. Many Indian woman authors like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Alexander have contributed to the category of postcolonial writing focusing on the issues of self-assertion, identity, and alienation.

Meena Alexander (1951-2018) is a postcolonial writer affiliated to the Indian Diaspora. She never experienced a fixed identity in terms of community, society and nation as her location was frequently structured, restructured and negotiated by different places, languages and cultures due to her father's transfer, for higher studies, for jobs and eventually for her marriage. She struggled between her actual self and the 'self' constructed by others. She uses writing as a therapeutic measure to represent her inner turmoil. In her autobiographical writings she problematizes the concept of self by introducing the ideas of division and fragmentation. In *Fault Lines*, the title itself suggests questioning of lines, boundaries and divisions where the author presents her individual "self" as fragmented. In *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* the title is suggestive of the shock or pain endured by a non-native in America in this postcolonial era. The trauma of migration, alienation and uprootedness are the major issues discussed in such writer of Diaspora.

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In 1980s and onwards the word “Diaspora” is used for all types of migration emptied of its original place with pain and compulsion. Thus, Diaspora mostly refers to a shifting of population from one location to another by the loss of homeland. William Safran has applied the term “Diaspora” to the expatriate communities – those who have been dispersed from an original centre to two or more peripheral or foreign regions. In his article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”, Safran explains the extended use of the term Diaspora as “metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court—in much the same way that ‘ghetto’ has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments, and ‘holocaust’ has come to be applied to all kinds of mass murder.” (Safran, 1991)

Immersed in a hybrid cultural space, Alexander was constantly haunted by the crisis of identity throughout her life, which in turn is reflected in her life narratives. Quite aptly she presents her individual ‘self’ as split, cracked and fragmented in both of her autobiographical writings *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (1993) and *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996). Both the books are based on the theme of self and identity; where she gives her justification for ‘self’ and her struggle to define the self. Alexander explains that self is complex, multiple and fissured for those who stay in a different country. While answering a question asked by Roshni Rustomji, in an interview published in *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*, Alexander discloses her connection with bhakti poets: “I take my root from that wandering, ecstatic woman Mirabai seeking, fleeing, wandering so that she can sing of her love.” (Rustomji, 1998) Alexander’s second book *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* is an excellent example of the postcolonial consequence of hybridity. Anupama Jain comments: “The author creates a complex model of hybridity for the raced, gendered, and classed identities of contemporary South Asian Americans while also hybridizing the text itself such that the structure of the work mirrors the identities she is describing.” (Jain, 1998)

Alexander presents her individual ‘self’ being amputated and recuperated several times in a country of immigrants. The investigation into woman selfhood or women’s subjectivity was her primary objective. The in-betweenness of diasporic sensibility is the major concern of her writings. She gropes for a proper definition of her identity in her writings. She considers her identity as a cracked identity full of faults. She considers her fractured self to be locked in her body and responds to her inner multiplicity:

My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadences, shouts, moans, the quick delight of pleasure, all rising up as if the condition of being fractured has freed the selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander takes pain to accept the reality of being othered in an alien country. She finds as if another self is formed within her actual self. She keeps looking for some elusive ‘real’ self while the experience of being othered confronts her time and again. She is always being haunted by the other in a different country. Wherever she goes, the other follows her. The other is a perennial shadow without any fixity. To accept this other body is to face the truth, to accept the image of an ‘other’ as reality. To quote her:

But when she approaches me, this Other who I am, dressed in her bits- and- pieces clothing, the scraps cobbled together to cover her nakedness, I see quite clearly what I had only guessed at earlier: she has no home, no fixed address, no shelter. Sure,

everything looks fine. She has two hands, two feet, a head of long black hair, a belly, breasts. But it is clear she is a nowhere creature. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander presents herself as a writer who is a victim of many kinds of marginalities. She searches her identity through colour, gender, language and nationality. She faces condemnation hailing from a third world country. She is continuously in search of a dignified mode of self articulation amidst a world that labels people on the basis of nationality, colour and gender:

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. (Alexander, 1996)

Alexander had the experience of being othered for the first time at the age of five, when she was relocated in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan when her father took up a job there. It was then she had the feeling of up-rootedness and exile. She was so much emotionally attached to her motherland, India that she perceived her journey to Sudan as the first shock of transition. She felt the pain of being separated from motherland. For the first time she felt being divided. She experienced a complete change in her life. Thus, she describes her first ocean crossing:

As for me, just turned five, my days changed utterly and I became child of a different sort. My life shattered into little bits and pieces. In my dreams, I am haunted by thoughts of a homeland I will never find. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander experiences multiple places staying in one place. She feels the presence of her earlier surroundings irrespective of her present location. In her words: "It is summer in Manhattan and a hot wind blows. The wind blows in through the window. I feel it against my cheek almost as if I were in Khartoum or Tiruvella" (Alexander, 1993). In her memory, she tries to minimize the gap between different places where she lived. There is always a constant confusion between geographical space and psychic space. While staying in New York she remembers her Hyderabad days, and tries to cover over the gap through a leap of her imagination. To quote her:

And the parched landscape of Hyderabad, in the season before the rains fall, starts to crackle with flames and the flames become the blue gas flames in the stove in my New York City kitchen and in my dream I have to hold myself back with both hands, tie the end of my sari to the refrigerator handle to prevent me from tumbling over the slopes into the fault lines that split my imagined earth. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander is always in a dilemma to find out a proper place to designate as homeland. For her, home is more of a psychological entity than a physical structure with walls and floors, doors and windows. She considers house as a burden. She asks several questions to herself: "I ask myself, am I a creature with no home, no nation? And if so, what new genus could I possibly be?" (Alexander, 1996) While her biological self dwells in different places her actual self, her soul is rooted in India. She experiences dual presence, finds division, spilt and, cracks or fissures on the ground where her house stands:

My house is spilt through, a fault in the ground where it stands. They're auctioning my soul where they auction fish, catfish, swordfish, scooped from the Arabian sea, ten

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thousand miles from Poe's cottage by the old wharf, by the paddy beds on the Tiruvella-Kozhencheri Road. (Alexander, 1996)

Alexander presents herself as an Indian, positions herself in India and measures all distances from India. Her Indian identity is purely integral to her. So India is her here and America is her there. She experiences the feel-at-homeness with India only. Though she has led a nomad's life, she claims herself to be a native of Kerala. She considers her maternal grandfather's house in Tiruvella as her home. She carries within the permanent imprint of childhood days in the Tiruvella house where she enjoyed her life without fear. She cherished the actual sense of freedom where she grew like a free bird in the lap of nature. In the beautiful landscape of the village she discovers actual bliss. She experiences the worth of being born human in that village. With those wonderful experiences of her childhood she is made a complete individual. This is how she valorises the remembered life in Tiruvella:

In Tiruvella I could run as fast as I wanted, eyes closed, heart thudding and no one would stop me. I felt I had no need of parents. . . I raced around crying, "Athe, athe – That, that," as if that I was. "Tat Tvam Asi," it says in the Upanishads and in my childhood, I realized its truth. And surely the "I am that I am" of Hebraic religions is much akin and realizes in the child of mud and blood and skin an irremediable joy, the closest we get to any possible paradise. (Alexander, 1993)

Tiruvella house is her 'possible paradise' – a spatial expression of her longing for rootedness. After several positionings, she considers her Indian home as her abode of bliss, albeit as a possibility. She finds the actual meaning of life in this Tiruvella house. She loses her "self" in that place and is one with that place. This is the place where she discovers ultimate happiness, peace of mind and everlasting freedom:

I sat on the ground, no longer conscious of the house behind me. I knelt, running both hands over the fine cracks in the earth near the incense roots. I touched my cheeks to the root cover. I felt a small ant crawl over my lips. I picked up a rough incense fruit, set it to my mouth, and tasted raw earth. I felt I needed the peace of a place where there was no more marrying, no more taking in marriage. And in bright moonlight, on the soil of my grandmother's garden, for a few moments I felt I had found it. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander singles out Tiruvella house for making her as an individual. All those experiences gathered in Tiruvella house in her childhood contributes to the growing poet's mind. She ultimately admits that her childhood days have made her a complete human being and through those memories she justifies her presence in this earth: To quote her

And because it was, I am whole and entire. I do not need to think in order to be. I was a child there, and here I am, and though I cannot find the river that bought me here, yet I am because that was. And this stubborn, shining thing persisted for me. It has done so for so many years. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander has left her home at an early age and travelled extensively, sometimes cross-culturally. But she is found constantly longing for her ancestral home, her lost community, her extended family. She has many pleasurable experiences in her ancestral home. The contradictory pulls of 'home' and 'non-home' is frequently found. Alexander shares the experience of her racial and ethnic status in America. She finds herself a minority in terms of culture, race, location and identity in a foreign country. In her view this status cannot be shed or withdrawn till her death. Though staying in America is exciting but it is up

to a point and after this everything ends:

I can make myself up and this is the enticement, the exhilaration, the compulsive energy of America. But only up to a point. And the point, the sticking point, is my dark female body. I may try the voice-over bit, the words-over bit, the textual pyrotechnic bit, but my body is here, now, and cannot be shed. No more than any other human being can shed her or his body and still live. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander feels very disheartened in her divided state. She is unable to position herself in a fixed place. In such mental trauma with utmost despair, she wishes herself to be a non living entity, a stone, which is without any emotion and sentiment. She anticipates herself to be a dead stone because her frequent portability would not hurt her:

If I were a stone, amma could so easily pick me up – and surely she would. . . Tucking me into her bag, she would make off in great haste, leaping into a metal body that travelled a great speed, over crossroads, boundaries of nations, oceans, cutting from house to house, state to state, never stopping, never resting, my stony self bound always in her bag, held in a metallic thing with wheels, wings coasting or steam puffing as we moved over earth, sky, water. (Alexander, 1996)

Alexander is assailed by images from the past and is alert to the pulse of present experiences. In such ambiguous states she is unable to relate to the stable axes of time and space. She faces the after-effects of a divided existence. At times her past memories and present memories get jumbled up. This existence tears her “self” in to two parts as she describes: “But then-it was like getting stuck on the train and almost being cut down the middle – I realized with a brutal shock and real place I am in. I wanted to tear myself free from that past. It had sucked me back in a vortex I could no longer support.” (Alexander, 1993)

To represent the condition of her fragmented self and multiple identities Alexander uses quite apt imageries. She has taken the image of the “barbed wire” from the postcolonial writer Frantz Fanon (“Concerning Violence” from *The Wretched of the Earth*), which she found during her childhood days in Tiruvella garden. This image suggests border, boundary or barrier between two regions. These barbed wires are always very difficult to cross and the space in between them is no man’s land. The author positions herself in a world which is segmented with “barbed wire”. In her words: “Shelter, unhousedness, the multiple speeches that surround us, broken walls, prison cells. The thoughts turn jagged in me. Everything is overcrowded. Everything is emptied out. I dream of barbed wire.” (Alexander, 1993)

Being brought up in a hybrid cultural space, the author compares her struggling situation with dried “poppy seeds” which are blown about and dispersed in different places. She is trying to find a firm ground and trying to carve out a space of her own. She presents herself as an individual who is continuously searching for a stable anchorage. Her condition is like the poppy seeds which are separated from their original place. To quote her:

As if seeds were blown out of a dried poppy pod and shook roughly, dispersed, flying; or as if the insides of a silk cotton pod had broken and the tiny dark life within had blown out, removed itself, and fallen a great distance from the upswept branches of the tree. (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander questions her status in such a “blown out” state. She considers her life as a disconnected and discontinuous whole. She thinks as if she has been thrown out being an inhabitant of a segmented world. She compares herself with a “waste basket” where she tries to piece together an identity:

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But in my mind's eye I kept seeing that basket burning, filled with waste paper from writings that never had time or space to come to anything, torn pages of a Sears catalog, fourth-rate junk mail, bits of soiled tissue paper. Where was the life I had led? Who was I? (Alexander, 1993)

Alexander tries to survive in such a tormented state where she feels suffocated which restricts her freedom of living. She identifies herself with the bird in a cage, who cannot live freely in this world, whose independence is prohibited. She compares her condition with the parrot of Banabhatta's *Kadambari* who is encased and subjected to interrogation:

Tell me everything about yourself, starting with your birth. Where were you born? Who gave you your name? Who is your mother? Who is your father? Do you remember what happened to you in another life? . . . How were you caught in this cage?" (Alexander, 1996)

In this way Alexander has used writing autobiography as a tool for claiming identity. She explores the question of identity and racial discriminatory practices of the postcolonial world. She tries to tackle this question of identity with utmost rationality. She is in a confused state to find out a proper definition of her identity because her frequently changing locations. Finally, she seeks to account for the ways racism and the long-lasting political, economic and cultural effects of colonialism affect her identity as fragmented, cracked and split. She opens up grounds for other postcolonial writers to study on such problematic identity.

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Bio-note

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