Quest for Identity in the Poetry of Meena Alexander

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Meena Alexander has established herself as a well-known poet and has also published several volumes of poetry related to uprooting, exile, trauma, separation, and loneliness on one hand but on the other, those of hope and a privileged multiple vision that can alone transcend rigid national and cultural barriers. Her works interweaves the Indian and immigrant experiences which results in her awakening consciousness of the past and present. Reflections of the themes of memory and home are obvious in her works and the reader encounters it at various settings histories, cultures, literary styles and genres. To pictures the agony of dislocation, Alexander transforms the ‘minority space’ into a highly vibrant zone of creativity. She carves her new artistic ‘hybrid’ aesthetic from intellectual, linguistic and cultural traditions of her colonial education and conventional heritage of Kerala lineage. Alexander is highly creative due to her unusual childhood experiences. This chapter unravels the major theme of the poet’s lost identity, time, places, languages, people and past events and how she had related them with the present day experiences in her poetry. It also portrays how the poet creatively engages in the postcolonial discourse of identity, language and gender and her identity in relation to self and the world.

Alexander in “Poetics of Dislocation” expresses her inseparable bond with her Tiruvalla soil and home “As a small child, how did I attach myself to place? I shut my eyes and see a child in a tree” (3). She remembers that tree of childhood in her poem “Black River, Walled Garden,” “I swayed in a cradle hung in a tree and / all of the visible world-walled / garden black river – flowed in me” (20 – 23).

Alexander in, “House of a Thousand Doors” which is a kind of generic benchmark in her writing, has drawn on the influence of family order to create an artistic vision. She has drawn grandmother figure from her memory and dream, and she is made to empower Alexander to speak in an alien landscape. Alexander reflects her interlocked relationship with her origins, to be more specific, about her ancestral home in Tiruvella and her grandmother:

This house has a thousand doors
the sills are cut in bronze
at twilight
as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast.
......
The roof is tiled in red In dreams
waves lilt, a silken fan in grandmother’s hands
......
shell colored, utterly bare
as the light takes her.
She kneels at each
of the thousand doors in turn
paying her dues.
Her debt is endless. (1-21)
Alexander tries to reorient her true self by welding her forgotten native roots against an agitating history of displacement in a highly active transnational world. Nostalgia gives way to a new understanding of the institution of marriage to be severe and confined, for it seldom accommodates the rosy dreams of the young.

In “Relocation” Alexander raises thematic and ideological issues about the return to Indian roots in pure forms, the marginal self who interweaves through both Indian and foreign locations, and the crucial issue of assimilation into American culture. Problems of the containment of the Indian imagination in an alien landscape are sounded in the poem:

Scraping-it all back: A species of composition routine as crossing streets or taking out the garbage nothing to blow the mind

......
The mind held in a metallic fork— its sense inviolate, the questions of travel scored by icy borders, the imagination ordering itself. (1 - 21)

Alexander's poetic voice in “The Travelers” seeks accountability to a history of migration and dislocation as it affects so many ordinary people, whose anonymous stories are evoked in the poem:

Migrant workers
stripped of mop and dirty bucker,
young mothers who scrub kitchen floors
in high windowed houses with immaculate carpets,

......
Tired chowkidars seeking their
Pennies out in a cold country,
students, ageing scholars,
doctors wedded to insurance slips,
lawyers shoveling guilt
behind their satin wallpaper. (137- 151)

Alexander in her poem “No Man's Land” considers the construction and the reconstruction of the self as an ongoing process and the violent pain of the "barbed wire" is vividly picturized. Alexander's invocation to the muse is expressed in highly charged words in the poem:

My back against barbed wire I stand at the garden's edge in the middle of the night

......
That out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me

... I may claim
my heritage. (60-116)

The space of “Home” is crucial to Alexander’s writings, as her life is figured and developed by leaving and coming home. It always proves to be an unsteady and abstract entity, which resonates variety of places and cultures, enriching her diasporic subjectivity. She laments in “The Travelers,” “Bahrain, Dubai, London, New York, Names thicken and crack as fate is cut and chopped into boarding passes” (103-106).

Alexander’s memoir Fault Lines deals with identity formation, “For years, she has used her poetry and fiction to piece together a cohesive identity to figure out what it means to be a woman born in India, educated in England, living in America” (8).

Alexander traces her beginning with fond memories of her Syrian Christian ancestors and says, “I was a Kerala girl-child brought up abroad and one of my feet was bound to the raised wooden threshold of my ancestral home” (73). Cherished memories draw her back “into the darkness of the ancestral house in Tiruvalla with its cool bedrooms and coiled verandas: the shelter of memory.” But “the house of memory is fragile” because it is “made up in the mind’s space” (3). As a child she remembers sitting on her adored grandfather Ilya’s knee avidly listening to his thrilling made up tales of a “mad, magical little girl Susikali” (59), “who raced through paddy fields in pursuit of rakshasis” (31). Naidu notes that “Alexander identifies with both Susikali and the rakshasi who transgress the bounds of traditional female roles . . . delighting in their respective power and freedom” (383).
Giving voice to the woman within, Alexander says, “I wanted to give voice to my flesh, to learn to live as a woman” (16). She extols the feminine lineage by focusing on four generations of women in her family. Her paternal grandmother, Kozencheri, velliammechi had compelled her to “accept the burden of flesh, the impossibility of leaping out of my own skin in the direction of desire” (72-73). She writes, “It is in me still, her voice, her bearing: my appa’s mother, grandmother Mariamma who loved to scold me for running around in the sun” (44). Surprisingly, as an adult she craves “to lie with her... to learn the trick of silence, of female invisibility. How else could women protect themselves?” (106). An imaginary conversation with her maternal grandmother Kunju (Eli), “a sensitive, cultured woman... intact in all her simplicity and elegance; a woman who had a tradition and a history,” enables her to realize that she is, “a dusty tattered thing... writing of the world that comes to her in bits and pieces... a woman with no fixed place, a creature struggling to make herself up in a new world” (15).

Alexander commends the youthful and rebellious enthusiasm of Kunju who had persisted in attaining a post - graduate degree, unlike most women of her time. Alexander had been baptized ‘Mary Elizabeth,’ anglicized forms of the names of her grandmothers Mariamma and Eli, the former bound by tradition and patriarchal constraints and the latter, a liberated woman whom she yearned to emulate. Changing her name to Meena, “to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden” (74), she asserts her right as an individual, free to choose the name under which she wished to appear.

Alexander reveals that her tradition-bound amma’s resolution to stay at home and rear her three daughters had been “in fierce reparation, as if the past might be done over again” (14). Grandmother Kunju’s busy public life as a social worker and her passionate involvement in the freedom movement had offered little time to be set apart for her own daughter. Her mother had been “so stern about a woman’s place in the world” that she ponders: “Did the domestic world give my mother a feeling of safety that she craved?” (14). Her mother epitomizes the ideal wife and mother who subscribed submissively to patriarchal norms. She had compelled her daughters to wear long sleeved blouses and longer skirts on their visits to appa’s ancestral home. Amma had disapproved of her early poetic efforts and had been anxious “about the disclosures that a writing life commits one to, quite contrary to the reticence that femininity requires” (113). Yet she remembers her amma with gratitude for her loving, nurturing and selfless nature. “Ever since I can remember, amma and I have been raveled together in net after net of time...Without her, I would not be, not even in someone else’s memory” (6-7). When she got a new job her mother had come to New York to look after her newborn son Adam. She recalls her amma’s patronizing advice that it would be wrong for her to take a job because a woman’s place is at home, by her family and felt “the burden of her on my soul, a gravitational pull, a mother-weight” (163). After her daughter Svati is born, she is apprehensive and broods, “What will she make of me, her South Indian mother?” (171). She confesses reluctantly, “There is very little I can be tout court in America except perhaps woman, mother” (193). Naidu observes, “she offers vignettes from her childhood and more recent past, which represent specific women, empathetically and reflexively” (376).

Alexander acknowledges in the beginning of her memoir that she was writing “about being born into a female body.... giving birth, all that stuff” (4). She feels that in Indian culture, marriage has great social relevance, but at the same time it can be a traumatic experience for a woman. She observes candidly, “For a woman, marriage makes a gash. It tears you from your original home... once married you are part and parcel of your husband’s household” (23). Her wedding had been a simple affair that had followed no ritual or religion. She had gone against her parents’ wishes and married an American Jew named David Lelyveld, in a Hyderabad courthouse, wearing a red kanjeevaram sari, a graduation gift from her parents. She felt that the only way she would be able to make her way back into her family was “by marrying and having children” (208). She compares the event with her parents’ extravagant, traditional wedding attended y a large crowd of relatives, friends and neighbors. The description of the lavish wedding festivities seems to emphasize the ironical conviction that in Indian society.

The autobiographical narrative also highlights childbirth as the exclusive prerogative of woman who is thereby initiated into the joys and pangs of motherhood.

The sentiments of guilt and sorrow in leaving the family and the homeland are characteristic features of her memoir. The author records the painful memories of her first migrant experience, from Allahabad to Khartoum, which had “thrown her irretrievably across the border” (65). The difficulties and conflicts she experienced in Khartoum while adapting to a new culture and learning new languages like English, Arabic and French are conveyed effectively through the text. “I felt I had no name, no nature” (65), so she attempted to make her voice heard in the alien land by writing poems. The thirteen years spent in Khartoum were replete with activities, of female entertainments and married an American Jew named David Lelyveld, in a Hyderabad court in America except perhaps woman, mother‖ (193). Naidu observes, “she offers vignettes from her childhood and more recent past, which represent specific women, empathetically and reflexively” (376).

Alexander remembers how she used to look forward to the “ritual return to Kerala, to Ilya’s home in Tiruvella” (57). “Back and forth, forth and back, I went as a child. The train rides did not cease. They persisted right through my childhood” (56). The annual homecoming trips evoked in her a sense of belonging and stability amidst a life filled with motion and change. She records, “My attachment to Kerala deepened. Retained in memory, my affections grew closer, adding layer upon layer to the soil of my imagination” (71). The second continental crossing from Africa to Europe enabled her to pursue her studies in Nottingham University, U.K., as a “Third World woman.” There she had been “tormented by a sense of having transgressed a boundary” and so returned home “as a grown adult,” “to discover, to make up my history.” “I had to unlearn my tortuous academic knowledge, remake myself, learn how to read and write as if for the first time” (142).

The final transnational crossing was from Hyderabad to New York, as a married woman. In America she is just a South
Indian Third World woman poet and she contemplates, “Was this what a woman’s life had to be?” (163).

Often I did not recognize myself. I felt I had lost my soul: that it was sucked into the vortex of an Otherness I had no words for; that all I was had contracted into being a wife, being a woman who had crossed a border to give birth in another country. Seasons of birth have stripped me, formed me afresh.

(164)

Alexander also worries about the ethnicity of her “Indian-American” children and tries “to hold on to the reality of mechi and mechan” in “another soil, another earth” (170). She is so obsessed with the memories of nadu as a “real, solid place” (53) that she intensely desires her children to at least cling on to memories of an imaginary homeland. The choice of names for her children, Adam Kuruvilla named after Ilya and Svati Mariam named after Kozencheri velliammechi and amma, indicate a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between cultures. The graphic narration of idyllic childhood and paradisical images of Kerala—the bright filtered sunlight, the clear blue of the premonsoon sky, the green paddy fields, the glorious beads of golden coconuts, the extraordinary blueness of the Arabian sea, acres of intricately bordered fruit trees, crimson carpets of ripe peppers and the frangipani tree with thick clusters of white blossoms reveals the migrant’s angst to reclaim her homeland. She affirms passionately: “In India, I rest, I just am, like a stone, a bone, a child born again” (176).

Moving between cultures and countries, Alexander experiences multiplicity of dislocation during her past and present, and it has been influencing both her life and writing career. Alexander not only negotiates the fractures of her selfhood, but also engages into endless scenarios of identity

Alexander’s poetry emerges as a consciousness moving between two worlds, between memory and present day experience, lit by multiple languages. The fascinating images and her mastery of multiple languages are the outcomes of her wanderings between her adult life and the territory of her childhood which are unusual and they offer a fresh approach to the autographical element in her poetry. Alexander’s migratory memory is highly inventive she looks back upon the landscapes, languages and the events of her childhood.

References

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