

Meena Alexander's Fault Lines - An Expatriate Woman's Autobiography

Smt.K.B.Sujatha,

I/C.Principal,
K.T.R.Women's College,
Gudivada- 521301.
Krishna District,
Andhra Pradesh.

Abstract: *The experiences of migrancy and living in Diaspora have animated recent postcolonial literature, theories and criticism. For women immigrants, diasporic living entails double distancing/double exile. A geographical movement away from home to an alien country is only a accentuation of general exile that they have already borne. South Asian immigrant writing occupies an embattled space marked by multiple forms of marginalization. Faced with uncertainty and insecurity they struggle for cultural, physical, psychological, social survival. They indulge in a voyage of self-discovery and social revelation through the genre of autobiography. Meena Alexander, a South Asian Immigrant writer through her Autobiography 'Fault Lines', highlights the issues of marginalized existence, the sense of loss of independent selfhood and deals with various issues of race, gender, sexuality. She articulates the process of her inward growth through her descriptions of cross cultural journeys and border crossings. Alexander in her 'Faultlines' often turns back to her mother, grand mother and female friends who are the major source of inspiration at times of suffering and misery. Thus her 'autobiography' is a social document reflecting the collective female experiences and helps to examine the relevance of the process of construction of 'herself' to contemporary women's self images.*

Keywords: *Diaspora, Post Colonial Literature, Alien Land, Safe Anchorage, Artistic Vision, Struggle for Survival.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years a considerable number of diaspora writers especially women of South Asian descent have given expression to their creative urge in the form of 'Autobiography' and emerged successful in the world literary scene. The focus of this body of literature produced by them is marked by certain distinct features such as heterogeneity, hybridism, exile, dislocation, diaspora, multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class sexuality, post-modernism and multiculturalism.

2. PROBLEMS OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Women in diasporas are doubly marginalized, as women and as members of a minority community. The cultural displacement and sense of isolation are typical to migrant women 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'. Commenting upon the creative process of immigrant literature, Uma Parameswaran has observed that "it starts off as a transplant, with its major referential points centered in the original homeland and whatever it says is implicitly comparative."²

In the words of D.K. Pabby, The writings of South Asian Immigrant Writers focus on the issues of race, gender, sexuality, cultural differences, multiple identities, making use of Different narrative strategies, memory of the past, the roots to grapple with, the frequent existential self-questionings of – who am I? Whence from I come? –and the answers are a bitter – sweet poignant experience of putting bits and pieces together to make a wholesome whole.³

3. MEENA ALEXANDER AS AN IMMIGRANT WRITER AND AS A POET

Ketu H. Katrak hails Meena Alexander, one such South Asian immigrant writer as a poet and one of the finest thinkers of Asian American aesthetic. Born on February 17, 1951 in Allahabad, the holy city in India to George and Mary Alexander, Meena Alexander is the eldest of the three children. Her mother Mary is a quiet, traditional religious woman and her world centers around her domestic responsibilities as a wife and mother. Alexander left for Kartoum along with her parents when she was five years old. She had her schooling at Khartoum and she entered the University of Kartoum 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 pursue 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 to retain her Indian identity. She lectured in various Indian Universities, including University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and University of Hyderabad. Her first volume of poetry *The Birds Bright Ring* was published in 1976 in Calcutta. Later she migrated to New York and accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Minnesota. Presently, she is an Associate Professor of English and creative writing at Hunter college and the graduate center, CUNY. She resides in New York with her husband David Lilyveld, son Adam Kuruvilla and daughter Svathi Marian.

She has produced substantial amount of poetry in five books in nine years. Her other volumes of poetry include *Stone Roofs*, *House of a Thousand Doors*, *The storm*, *A Poem in Five Parts*, *Images of Women and Female Experiences*. She is involved with issues like immigration, ethnicity, culture, race relations, exile, and diasporic dislocation. Her diasporic consciousness, pain and violence of dislocation are the issues of focus in her novels *Nampally Road* (1961), her autobiography *Fault Lines* (1993) and *Manhattan Music* (1977).

Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* a memoir is a gradual unfolding of the imagination. It is distinguished by a peculiar mode of experiencing and recording reality. The personal narrative derives its power and charm from the heightened awareness of the interaction between the self and the world. Alexander's *Fault Lines* is a memoir and according to Webster's New World Dictionary, memoir is an autobiography that is objective and anecdotal rather than inward and subjective. It is a report or record of important events based on the writer's personal knowledge or observation.

Meena Alexander is an acclaimed South Asian writer, a woman born in one continent, educated in another, living in the third continent, in all or in none, speaking many tongues English, Arabic, Hind, French... A woman cracked by multiple migrations, uprooted so many time. She explores the challenges faced by postcolonial immigrants. In *Fault Lines* she takes us from her childhood in Tiruvella in the South of India and Khartoum in Sudan to her present day home in Manhattan. She poignantly describes the wealth of experiences and events that shaped her life and writing. Leaving places and returning to them in memory is the theme of *Fault Lines*. *Fault Lines* is the term used by geologists to describe cracks in the earth. Alexander uses it to visualize the uprooting she has faced in her life.

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; Kartoum in Sudan, Nottingham in Britain and Manhattan the island. 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. '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.

Her memoir is writing in search of a homeland. 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. To a query by her friend Roshini "what are you writing about?" she sums up the essence

of the subject matter of her narrative. It is about 'being born into a female body; and about the difficulty of living in space, moving about so much, living without ground rules.'

In *Fault Lines* she plants herself in her early days of Kerala, recollects childhood events. Her memory, myth, history interact as she recreates strongly felt images of her childhood in Kerala. She fondly remembers her parents, grandparents and the narrative advances through a galaxy of characters. Her grandfather Ilya's influence on her is tremendous as he shapes and sharpens her ideologies and political acumen. In 1956, she leaves India with her Amma to live in a place called Khartoum in Sudan. In her words, "The first ocean crossing obsessed me. I think of it as a figuration of death" (FL 65). The following years of her childhood are spent partly in Khartoum and partly in Kerala. It is split between two vastly disparate worlds, but her identity remains firmly rooted in India because of her familial connections. Alexander's focus is on the agony and pain resulting from the dislocation and she attempts to relocate herself through artistic process. In the words of Neerja Chand, she successfully emerges as powerful writer whose sensibility is enriched by the simultaneity of geography, which involves the possibilities of "living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination, inhabiting multiple spaces at the same time."

Alexander joins in Kartoum school and at school she is extremely shy and depends on her friend Sarai's boldness. Besides the school, her parents also instruct her about religion, sentiment, womanhood, its demands etc. 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. Her tutor polished her Indian English and she is the first 'Non-White' child in clergy house school. At the beginning, she is jeered at for her dark skin. He poignantly states, "My blackness struck out like a stiff halo around me" (FL 113). She feels inferior to others and cannot interact with others as she considers herself ugly. But she comes out of her inhibitions once she starts writing poetry. Initially she receives rebukes and chiding for her intellectual work. Her 'female body' and Indianity stand in her way to success and appreciation.

Her first poems are composed in French and later she revises and turns to English, the language learnt by her through great pains. For her, English was 'The language of intimacy which bore the charged power of writing'. In 1969 her parents return to India and she feels sad to leave her friends and Kartoum. But the desire to return to India is irresistible. Her mother wants her to join in Madras so as to start afresh the traditional life which is battered so far by being expatriates. But she is refused a seat in Madras University. She is awarded scholarship for Ph.D in the University of Nottingham when she is eighteen year old. Her second crossing to England takes place in 1969 with a tearful adieu by her parents and others. At Nottingham she feels that she is falling through empty air.

She returns to India after the completion of Ph.D. to preserve her Indian identity and lecture at various Universities at Delhi and Hyderabad. Her first volume of poetry *The Birds Bright Ring* is published in 1979. Since then she has published seven volumes of poetry. Her poetry centers around female experiences. Her women are strong and independent and grow to establish a firm identity of their own. Her artistic vision is created by the influence of her family. She falls in love with David and she makes another continental crossing to New York after marriage. Once again this migration throws her into desperation, blankness, a sense of displacement and profound loss. In the first two years of their married life they move eleven times and after those two years she is burnt out. She considers herself a burning wastebasket and totally collapsed. The pains of negotiating barriers and dislocation are symbolized by a recurrent motif and metaphor 'barbed wire'. This is more evident in her memoir *Fault Lines*.

In this personal narrative *Fault Lines* 'memory' traverses through different places, Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri, Pune, Kartoum, London, Delhi, Hyderabad, New York; speaking different languages Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, English, French and finally concluding as a 'nonentity'. She frequently indulges in self-questioning "Who Am I? Where was I at any time? Where was I?" (FL 78). Here she struggles to forge a sense of identity. Her work revolved around the theme of establishment of one's self, an identity independent of one's surroundings. Her rumination about her predicament of being cracked by multiple identities is detailed in the first chapter of *Fault Lines*. She writes. "I am a woman cracked by multiple migrations, uprooted so many

times" (FL 3). She becomes intensely preoccupied with her identity and selfhood and this is evident in latter chapters of *Fault Lines*. She writes, "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" (Fl 193).

'Ethnicity' becomes an important concern as one shift one's location and becomes a member of minor 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 colour, race and gender. The racial discrimination and colonization compound her pain of dislocation. She suffers from the pangs of oppressive colonialism as a child in Kartoum and later in America and she has a marginalized existence. Her blackness strikes out as a stiff halo around her. Once during an evening stroll in America, she is condemned as 'black bitch' by a white young man. Meena Alexander's life bears testimony to the statement that exile makes one learn that 'roots are deep.'⁵ She feels she is exiled perpetually. She is unable to sever her cultural links with India.

There is immigrant consciousness, trauma of her marginalized existence, inconveniences and uncertainties, barriers of color, nationality, socio-cultural pressures, tensions, feeling of belonging and not belonging all reflected in her memoir *Fault Lines*. Her cross-cultural experiences increase her creative sensibility. The creative writer in her indulges in philosophical rumination. She develops deeper insights and strives to know the truth of her identity, the reality of selfhood and the relevance of roots. She is conscious of her complex identity, but the deeply ingrained traditional and value system in which she was nurtured in Kerala gives her the needed base and anchorage.

An autobiography may be considered a historical or a social document. Here the writer attempts to know the self, selects certain basic social and historical determinants that shape the individual being. Since the lives of the individuals are so inextricably linked to the fate of the community, the autobiographies turn into historiographies of the community, ethnography of their people. They become cultural acts. As such, the expatriate women tried to rewrite, reconstruct their bodies and inclined to recreate the self through first person narration. These self-centered narratives reflect collective female experience and knowledge. Meena Alexander also articulates the shared fate and collective action of the female community. She shifts her narrative voice from 'I' to 'We' thus articulating the above. As observed by Vijayasree, "The inculcation of female bonding appears an important feature of expatriate women's writing and women are major source of inspiration in times of suffering and needs and the empowerment of female tradition becomes the significant aspect of Alexander's writing."⁶

To conclude, Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* is highly introspective and psychoanalytical, the process of growing up and the establishment of her identity are delineated in the most spontaneous, lyrical manner. She has attracted the attention of critics as an immigrant writer, internationalist, feminist, part of multiethnic writing community. As both a woman and a migrant, Alexander has a need to break the silence and make sure that her voice is heard.

REFERENCES

- [1] Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New Delhi: Penguin Publishers, 1993). All the textual quotations are drawn from this edition of the text.
- [2] Uma Parameswaran, "Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada," *Common Wealth Literature, Theme and techniques*. Ed. P.K. Rajan et al., (Delhi: Ajana, 1993), p.102.
- [3] D.K. Pabby, "Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*: A Study," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, Ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001), p.153.
- [4] Neerja Chand, "An Aesthetic of Dislocation: Meena Alexander," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001), p.151.
- [5] R. Partha Sarathy, *Rough Passage* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977). P. 117.
- [6] C. Vijayasree, "Alter-Nativity, Migration, Marginality and Narrations, The case of Indian women writers settled in West," *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures; Diaspora writing of the Indian Subcontinent*. Ed. Ralph J Crane & Radhika Mohanaram (Amsterdam-Atlantic:Rodopi B.V., 2000). P.130.