

# Trauma and Memory in Meena Alexander's Poems

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Adrienne Rich wrote in *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, 'It is exhilarating to be alive in the time of awakening consciousness: it can also be confusing, disorienting and painful. This awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness has already affected the lives of millions of women...the sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes. Woman is becoming her women mid wife, creating herself new.'

The above lines may hint the flavor of Meena Alexander's poems. It beautifully enacts the suggested rhetoric, that implies a 'before and after,' an act of 'becoming' or 'coming out.' The description is in consonance with the poems that teem with the act of birth and procreation, quite literally also. This kind of a temporal movement assumes a series of binaries like sleep/awake, silence/speech, unborn/reborn and oppressed/liberated.

First and foremost, one can list the key words that keep appearing throughout her poetry. Marriage, barren, family, fate, patriarch, mother-in-law, cooking, festivities, fair skin, beauty, womb, fecundity, dark skin, fasting, karma, woman, growing, weddings, brides, dowry, groom, wife, mother, hating, loving, infants and God. The words resonate singly and in clusters. One can trace structural patterns in the repetition of certain words. One can set up clusters of words in thematic opposition: rich, poor; dark, fair; barren, fertile etc. However, the Derridean reversal/ deconstructive reading claims to undo the hierarchy set up in such pairs by showing the first privileged term to be dependent on the second which it can never entirely exclude.

While bombarding her poems with multiple locations erases claims for inherent authenticity of the purity of cultures/nations which frequently become arguments

for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures, it also produces in the lives of these women, as well as the poems itself, many hybrid gaps. These gaps produce no relief, it is in these gaps that the birth of these subjects take place, 'and birth is always bloody.' (*Stone Roots*). Their position is inscribed in that space of iteration where one culture constantly struggles with the other. The multiple anchorage points in the lives of these women, as also in the poetry itself, serve to disinvest notions of uniformity and linearity on one hand and on the other offer construction of selfhood and identity through these cultural spaces that come across as counter cultures in a trope that seems a counter trope.

Embedded in the *Illiterate Heart*, *Raw Silk*, *Quickly Changing Heart* and the lives that it speaks of, is a colossal and chaotic politics of diaspora and paranoia, of migration and discrimination, of anxiety and appropriation, which is unthinkable without attention to those subaltern and metonymic structures that the poems dismantle. Hybridization of culture and languages and poetic references releases the anguish associated with vacillating boundaries—geographical/ territorial, psychical/emotional, cultural, economic, racial and even linguistic.

These symbols/signs on one hand suggest social specificity of their production of meaning and on the other, seen against the backdrop of transnational cultural scenario, they make cultural understanding a complex form of signification. Much of what the poems wants to convey in terms of migrant women's search for selfhood can be understood in the light of these complex forms of signification.

Amidst this colossal chaos of words hinging primarily on a woman's search for homely bliss, it is incidentally never achieved. The poet mourns the loss of homeland following what she called a self-imposed exile. While poems like *The Birds Bright Ring* are interspersed with poet's reflections on exile, migration, trauma, memory and the human condition in the chaotic world, there are

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others like *I Root My Name* which is dominated by a sad, melancholy strain which comes out of separation from motherland and beloved grandparents at a very tender age. Alexander's poetry continuously lingers on her soul cracked by multiple migrations where "to breathe is pain" She deals with the theme of alienation and expresses the accursed life of the modern woman who finds himself disillusioned, exiled and completely alienated. Amidst her explorations, she uses in her poetic canvas a series of recurring mages.

The first of these images that demonstrates the anti-essentialist notion of nation and identity of Indian diaspora women in her poetry is the image of house/home. The narrative mark has been used in a number of her poems. The frequent employment of this concrete anchoring point and its questioning of the all-too-common conflation of experience and identity is what is of interest here.

Consider these lines from *Relocation*, 'the prose of my world unfixed/the landscape of mother's home and the balconies of childhood have passed away' (*River and Bridge*) These lines, as also many others, are evident of the fact that whenever house/home is spoken of, it foregrounds the double marginalization of women; one from the father's home and second, from the nation homes. Home, like nation, thus, is not just a static essence, but rather a location of over determination. Thus, the concept of home, unlike its seeming suggestion of security and static comfort, actually suggests fluid and flexible ways of being that posit identity as relational, situational and interactive—the result of an ongoing process of becoming without origin or end. These spatially based notions presume a creative tension within individual and collective identities between agencies on the one hand and on the other hand, over determination by material and ideological conditions—what Louis Althusser in Lenin and Philosophy famously refers to as 'interpellation' or 'hailing.'

The poetry collections like *Illiterate Heart* enact the contradictory relations between the members of a home and there is no attempt at marginalization of differences. In fact, Meena Alexander's exposition perpetual homelessness is evident when she remarks, 'You have crossed a border, never to return/ stranger in this soil, who will grant you a home?'

This women's quarrel with patriarchy and imperialism gives a particular complexity to their appropriations of home. At the same time, she plays upon its multiple significations—home and society margins, body, literary canon (poetry as a home)—and sets them in shifting relations to women. In *Raw Silk* she writes, 'The sign of four cornered world, gammadion/ which stands for

migration, for the scattering/ of the people. The dislocation of homes.'

The struggles of exile and migration thus depicted can be summed up in the words of Judith Butler. She remarks in *Gender Trouble*, 'This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes fixes and constraints the very "subjects" that it hopes to represent and liberate. The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility qua possibility but to re-describe those possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated culturally unintelligible and impossible.'

In fact, a further attempt at foregrounding strategic locations and space within this home which constructs women's identity is undertaken through another recurring metaphoric image—the kitchen. A part of home space, it seems to define and inform the experiences of these kitchen slaves. In *Krishna*, she remarks, 'I stole from mama's kitchen/ stones and sky and stars melt in my mouth/ wooden spoon in hand she chased me/ Round and round the tamarind tree.'

Repeatedly she showcases how these women, despite their marriages in western developed countries, fail to outgrow their kitchen centered training in womanhood. The poems teem with pictures of mothers and grandmothers working in the kitchen. The kitchen defines women, constructs their identity. It also encloses, encircles and constraints them. The relationship between home, kitchen and the subsequent loss of self is crucial. What these poetic moves do, is that they dismantle stagnant and static notions about an identity, much like the concept of a homogenous nation that pre-exists the text. Judith Butler remarks about the same in *Gender Trouble* saying, 'The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated, and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed.

Thus, the perspectives in each home/poem are multiple and shifting and therefore allow for an emphasis on the need for remapping the boundaries, for the coherence of the women situated in these exiled cross border positions is only illusory. So much so, the appearance of these homes, as also the women implicated within them, is basically the staging of a disappearance. The pleasure of these narratives is constituted primarily by such intermittence.

Roland Barthes has remarked about the same in *The Pleasure of the Text*. He says, 'Is not the most erotic portion

of the body where the garment gapes? In perversion there are no erogenous zones; it is the intermittence that psychoanalysis has so rightly stated which is erotic, the intermittence of skin flashing between the two articles of clothing, between two edges, it is the flash itself which seduces or rather the staging of an appearance as disappearance.'

The above lines also serve to anticipate the distinctive poetic flavor of her poems as also their construction of Indian women as a discrete, different category that is as much an appearance as a disappearance. The same idea has been quite literally sewed across her poems through a sartorial narrative mark—*sari*.

The allusions to this magical and delimited six-yard fabric are varied and diverse. From the lines 'her mother dressing/ winding the six yards of the sari round her overweight waist.' (*Manhattan Music*) to 'look at the sari/ one size for everybody/ no stitching, no tailoring, no fitting, no complaints, everything beautiful and simple.' (*Home*) in her poem *Bright Passage* she remarks, 'Grandmother's sari, freckles of gold poured into silk, / Koil's cry, scrap of khadi grandfather spun, / I pluck all this from my suitcase—its buckles dented, zipper torn.' (*India Quarterly*, 2014)

Weaving of such an image indubitably contributes to the construction of these Indian women's identity as separate but what it also does is that it decomposes (like the fabric) the limit of her identity as also of these experiences shared by Indian women. The decomposition of this limit produced symbolically by this deceptively simple fabric also folds the poems/identities/nation homes back upon themselves, calling attention to these poems as a contingent continuity that tell one story of Indian women, any part of which can impose its own random limit and retain the shape and character simultaneously. Much the same is true of the flexible ego boundaries of the Indian women who is at once capable of sacrifice and suffering and at other of revenge and retaliation.

There are several feminine images she evokes in her poems to embody and convey the diverse and sometimes opposing virtues of Indian women. She presents women as *Durga*, *Kali* and even *Draupadi* representing fierceness, destruction and indomitable strength. In the poem *Her Imageless Face* the two female figures of the Mother and Sister fuse with Goddess *Durga* who can provide escape from the terrains of grief. She often resorts to the symbol of *Draupadi*, one of the leading characters of *Mahabharata*, known for her great seductive beauty and her determined will. Her life is symbolic of sacrifice, strength, suffering, virtue and honor. The imparting of this symbol to the women protagonists in these texts renders to these women a distinct character of their own—fraught with ambivalences and with capacity for ruthless vengeance.

*Draupadi* remarks in Chaturvedi Badrinath's *The Mahabharata: An Enquiry in the Human Condition*, 'He who is always forgiving invites several defects. His relatives, his subordinates, his enemies, and even those who are neutral to him, behave towards him with disrespect; nor does anybody ever show him courtesy, because forgiveness is seen as weakness, and weakness invites disrespect. Therefore, to forgive always is unwise, even for the wise.'

Not very different is the predicament of these women who try to assert their selfhood, to search for an identity but find it too difficult to 'break through the bars she (they) herself had built.' Not unlike *Draupadi* they wish to create a Brave new world but they are crushed by the oppressive weight of multiple forces surrounding them.

Another metaphorical image that she employs, and which accentuates the predicament of Indian women as peculiar and distinctive, is that of race and religion. There is always a sense of wasted blood, defeated struggle and betrayal echoing through several poems. But given their faint attempts at struggle the women also prove that they are not expendable. They are not social liabilities: they are dreamers, poetesses, social activists, mothers and fierce fighters—all at once. Another recurring image that is sewn through a number of her poems is that of *Race*. The poem '*Toxic Petals*' expresses the bitter sense of racism which leads the poet to lose the sense of her experience as a human being. She considers herself as a skinless, four-armed Goddess, 'I share his arms/ I am goddess now/ four armed and skinless.' In the poem '*San Andreas Fault*', the poet speaks of the doubleness, split, identity and fragmentation. The fault suggests the crack caused by migration that affects poet's sensibility. The poet sees herself doubled, split, a stick figure and her two arms bloodied with a bundle.

Yet, amidst a set up that is largely putrefied and stinking and exposes the myth of gathering, these women are incarcerated in several layers of suffering. Amidst these multi layered and ambivalent depictions, Meena Alexander also explores the matrilineal tradition through her poetic matrix. In the poem '*Dream Poem*' the poet touches the mother-daughter relationship, based on Indian cultural roots and drawn from the stereotypical images of women restricted by the silence, patience and acceptance of social and patriarchal realities. The depiction of mother seems like a challenge to the power of father constituted by patriarchy. The poet's self is linked to the voice of mother who is ruled by the laws of father, 'Each woman has a daughter / touched in a mirror / there is ash at the edge of disaster.'

Sudha Rai sees the celebration of matrilineage through the mother-daughter relationship as 'rebellious movements working against any monologic ideological

moorings.' The mother-daughter relationship has been influenced by new feminist awareness, speech, choice, and direction. The narrator of *'Blood Line'* (River and Bridge) speaks about continuity and change, the older generation and the new one and how she serves as the bridge. The poem is written for the poet's daughter Svati Mariam who is compared with rain on the tamarind. She indicates her carefree and engendered being. She belongs to next generation and she stands at the opposite pole from the last generation symbolized by *'burnt grass.'* The daughter is the representative of the new female being, projected onto a future society. She marks the destruction of old, male centered myths and paradigms of social experience. The new generation woman (child) will be never like woman of past generation and will not be burdened under female body, never be suppressed and burdened by the femininity and suppressed feelings. The poet addresses her daughter to soar high and revolt against old customs in the poem *'Green Parasol.'* She writes, 'Soar over the Bronx River /Set fire to old straw / light up the broken avenues of desire /Then be a girl like any other.' Speaking about her matrilineal bloodline, the poet writes, 'I was born out of my mother and out of her mother before her, and her mother, and her mother, and hers.'

The poem *'In Divi Seema'* focuses on women's capacity of reproduction as the basic reason of their exploitation. The sorrow of the woman caused by such male domination has been expressed by the poet. She writes, 'Composed in darkness/may she lie /like the first plough marks /on her native soil.' With female third person 'she' and 'I,' use of birthing metaphors and matrilineal relationships the poet attempts to weave a new feminist perspective.

As Friedman (1993) points out, 'Concurrent with the second wave of feminism from about 1965 to the present, there has been an explosion of women's writing about pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and motherhood. Birth imagery to describe the self-creation of both women and artist permeates contemporary women's writing. Nonetheless, women's birth metaphors still retain an individual stamp encoding each woman's negotiation of the conflict between creation and procreation.'

Pregnancy and childbirth, being the crucial issues for women, have been focused very untraditionally by French feminists. Julia Kristeva, in her *Desire in Language* (1980) describes a mother-centered realm of expression as the semiotic opposed to the symbolic law of the father. Kristeva rejects the psychoanalytic theorizing of motherhood as the model for psychic health. She observes, 'A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh.' For her experience of giving birth 'wounds but increases' resulting in 'the calm of another

life, the life that other who wends his way while I remain henceforth like framework.'

Keeping in line with these radical feminists, the poet describes the relationship between mother and child ironically, 'Before that script was set the child was born / but by that script the woman is torn.'

The lives of women have been controlled and manipulated by patriarchy in all cultures, all nations and all ages by setting various norms, values, roles of gender perception and idealism to 'make a woman.' Then the motherhood also becomes kind of imposition as Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*, 'Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control....This glorious motherhood imposed on women conditions her entire life.'

No wonder then, prison is another image that appropriately conveys their condition of perpetual subservience. At every step, they find their search for identity thwarted and themselves captured in the confines of prison, literal and ontological. Literally the image has been employed by her in one poem but suggestions of their imprisonment abound throughout her poems: sometimes within.

Incidentally it is also this period of solitary confinement that paradoxically leads to emancipation from shackles, or put simply, it is precisely this exile where they are at home with their own self. The mirror effect is created and leads to self analysis. The co-existence and convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment. There is no self that is prior to this convergence. There is only a taking up of tools where they lie. These, and many other images, reinforce the difference of Indian women as also of the poetry produced by Indian women. Such moves render both to the Indian women and the Indian women's lyric, a distinctive character of their own. Under the triple impact of patriarchy, border crossing and at times racism, her poems become de centered heteroglossia where a constant collision of signifiers and signified enacts the infiltration of the language of power.

Bakhtin, remarks about the same in *The Dialogic Imagination*. He says, 'These distinctive links and relationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia is its dialogization.'

Another series of poems evoke images of fire/burning, perhaps to underline the tragic consequences of life in an unwelcoming marital home. *'Dream Poem'* speaks about 'sparrow burning' which refers to the burning incidents of the women who are 'burnt by stove.' The poet not only writes about the incidents of dowry deaths, bride

burning, brides catching fire by kerosene stove or gas but she also participated in the protests against bride burning in Delhi. The poems in *House of a Thousand Doors* have emerged from the poet's struggle to define her feminism in a culture where 'a wife is somebody who walks ten steps behind.' The countless women burnt in their homes are depicted in 'Brief Chronicle by Candle Light'. She writes, 'Children torn by the winds/Married women burnt in their own homes /I thought I had seen it all that night /as I lit a candle at my door.'

'This little trip through some of her poems has brought forth some alternative imaginations about borderlands/nation/ identity, the same also serves a double purpose: it both evokes and erases totalizing boundaries and disturbs those ideological maneuvers through which essentialist identities are forged. From the purely essentialist standpoint, such a strategy turns against the Platonic tradition of the privileged pole of identity formation. This kind of zero focalization makes untenable any supremacist claims to cultural purity, for there is no one place/ position that is unaffected. The subject, in this case woman and the nation too, is thus somewhere between one place and the other. Ironically it is this double scene, the very condition of cultural knowledge that causes alienation of the subject making their own lives dreamlike to them. 'She was alone, afloat in the city and I was someone to confide in, or so it seemed. At times, her own life seemed like a dream.' (*Manhattan Music*)

To conclude, the non-synchronous time space of transnational exchange and exploitation has been embodied in the allegory of the subway also. It is this very flux of exchange that becomes the *pays age moralise* of the world of global trade, of the gamut of cross-cultural relationships and of bridges called homes. It is through passages like these, hither and thither, as migrants, part of the massive economic and political diaspora that these women are blasted out of their historical specificity as also their past. Draupadi expresses a similar feeling when she says, 'I meant roses. Sandhya/we are women of color. Think of what Emerson/our household philosopher said/ Be like the roses, cut off the past, frisk it/skin it, live in the present! (Raw Silk)

Such poetic depictions go a long way in challenging the hegemonic codes that presuppose deterministic definitions of nation. As the narrative deals with the lives of disadvantaged immigrant women in countries like America, this tool of breaking up the narrative into widely scattered contingencies serves the purpose of questioning social and cultural codes. Reconstitution of the discourse of cultural difference requires not just a redefinition of cultural contents and symbols but also a radical revision of the temporality in which emergent histories may be

written. It is only there, that new cultural identities can be inscribed.

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