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Fault Lines: An Immigrant Woman's Quest for a Homeland

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Recent times have witnessed a shift in focus in the Asian American Literature since now it emphasizes on exile, predicament of dislocation, identity formation, loss of homeland, ethnicity, heterogeneity and diaspora whereas earlier the stress was on American nativity and cultural nationalism. Currently, the postcolonial literature, theories, and criticism abound with the writings of women of South Asian diaspora who have been successful in giving expression to their creative urge by not only focusing on their experiences of migrancy but also exile, diaspora, dislocation, hybridism and multiculturalism. In several literary texts of contemporary South Asian American women writers like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Monika Verma, Sunita Jain etc., different settings, languages, histories, traditions, fusion of diverse cultures and the migrant minority experiences are addressed. For women immigrants, diasporic living brings about double marginalization/ exile. They are doubly marginalized as women and as members of a minority community. A geographical dislocation to a foreign country is only an accentuation of common exile that they experience. Encountering uncertainty and anxiety, these women struggle for cultural, physical, psychological and social existence. They indulge in an expedition of self-discovery and social revelation through the genre of autobiography. The memoir draws its power and appeal from the heightened knowledge of the interaction between the self and the world. This paper attempts to highlight Meena Alexander's quest for a homeland in her memoir *Fault Lines*.

Meena Alexander, a South Asian immigrant writer, through her memoir *Fault Lines*, draws attention to the problems of multiple migrations and the sense of loss of homeland. Along with a past serrated amid changes and restless moves, her intense lyrics orbit around numerous experiences colored with woes of dislocation and hopes of relocation. The fundamental issues of identity and hybridity, the self and the Other, longing and belonging, memory and marginality, and violence and terror pervade the fabric of Alexander's literary works. Alexander poignantly exemplifies through her memoir and other works the immigrant angst, the nostalgia for home caused by immigration, and the cultural negotiations that the immigrants make in order to survive. She expresses the course of her personal growth through her portrayal of cross cultural voyages and border crossings. Alexander employs the term "fault lines" for the title of her memoir to demonstrate the various linguistic, geographic and cultural fault lines in her identity. Tracing the meaning of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary, Alexander emphasizes the tensions intrinsic in this term "fault": "Deficiency, lack,... 'There are several kinds of fault e.g faults of Dislocation; of Denudation; of Upheaval; etc.'" (*Fault Lines* 2). Alexander has devoted almost half a page in giving the different meanings of this word and has also talked about the multiple locations that she has resided in and the diverse languages that are compressed in her mind. In "Looking for Nadu", the preface to the new edition of *Fault Lines*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes: "It is

difficult to find words with which to preface Meena Alexander's personal memories. As brilliantly captured in this new edition of *Fault Lines*, the memories are their own preface and introduction to a mesmerizing text culled from a life lived in fragments and migrations, a quest for *nadu* at home and in exile.... Hers is a life where the present and past are simultaneous remembrances of each other. Her here, in India, Sudan, Europe, and the United States, is both everywhere and nowhere, a life of a ceaseless search for answers where the only certainty is the qalam she holds in her hand, with which she stitches together the fragments of her experience to make a healing wholeness. After all, as a writer she asks, what does she have but the raw materials of her own life?" (xi). When her friend Roshni inquires about the content of her memoir, Alexander tells her that she is writing "about being born into a female body; about the difficulty of living in space'.... 'Really: living without fixed ground rules, moving about so much; giving birth, all that stuff'" (3). *Fault Lines* is replete with allusions to fragmentations, multiple divisions and fissures. Owing to her personal experience of migration and dislocation, the narrative style of Alexander's memoir is disruptive, fragmentary, and multilingual. The book starts with a contemplation on mirrors, the author wondering if and in what way this everyday article would be able to reveal her fragmented and dislocated self: "What would it mean for one such as I to pick up a mirror and try to see her face in it?"(1) She carries on with her autobiography with a particularly self-reflexive moment and a course of self-inspection. In the memoir, we come across a perplexed Meena who is striving to figure out what angle of vision about herself, about her existence to put forth before the humanity, asking herself several questions:

What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? How many different gazes would that need? And what to do with the crookedness of flesh, thrown back at the eyes? The more I thought about it, the less sense any of it seemed to make.... That's it, I thought. That's all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, and in the chill wind of autumn, tossing back and forth, worrying myself sick. (1-2).

It is in such interrogation that one is able to find out answers to the existential difficulties. Here Meena the author and protagonist, ascertains that in her writings she had to surpass the excessive pomposities of sounds that hit upon the eardrums without making any solemn impact on the readers to something more serious anchored in one's life experiences of a woman. Alexander portrays here the dislocated self who is wedged at the crossroads of different cultural arenas. In addition, the author intentionally distances herself from the confines of regional territories and exhibits a travelling identity revealing the anguish of dislocation and the split between body and mind. One can infer that the image of fault lines is essential to Alexander's work. She writes: "What could I ever be but a mass of faults, a fault

mass? ” (2). The expression of “fault lines” brings to our mind the image of a clashing and rubbing of continental platforms, provoking quakes and instability, as if the author rested on several tectonic plates. The chapters of the memoir, though simple, do not proceed strictly chronologically but are now and again interspersed with childhood memories, present circumstances, all stretching across time and territories. In one passage, and sometimes within a single sentence, Alexander writes about the dinner with writers in Manhattan and her conversation with her father a decade earlier in India. The author organizes her book into twenty five chapters, each of which presents the story of an Indian woman writer. After setting the agenda in the first chapter “Dark Mirror”, she embarks on her journey of self discovery. In the second chapter “Mirror of Ink”, Alexander presents a detailed account of her maternal and paternal grandparents and her parents George and Mary. She discusses in detail her upper-caste Syrian Orthodox Christian background, “her maternal grandfather Ilya’s lessons on the violence of colonialism, the Indian national struggle, and the pressures of conforming to appropriate female behavior” (Sanga 5). The memoir is a composite of various genres- history, mythology, photography, poetry- and this alludes to the postcolonial, multilingual, transnational and multicultural conditions that have influenced Alexander. One paragraph in the memoir seems to encompass Alexander’s whole biography:

The first child of my parents, the eldest of three sisters, I was born in 1951 in Allahabad, in the north where my father was working, in a newly independent India. My sister Anna was born in 1956 and my sister Elsa in 1961. Amma returned to her home in Tiruvella each time to give birth.

In 1956 my father, who worked for the Indian government, had been ‘seconded’ abroad to work in the newly independent Republic of the Sudan. My mother and I followed him in February of that year. I turned five on the Arabian Sea, my first ocean crossing. For the next thirteen years my childhood crisscrossed the continents. Amma would return to her home in Tiruvella, sometimes for six months of the year. The other six months were spent in Khartoum. In 1969, when I was eighteen, I graduated from Khartoum University and went to Britain as a student. I lived there for four years while I was completing my studies. In 1973 I returned to India to Delhi and Hyderabad. In

1979, just married, I left for the United States and have lived in New York City ever since. (6)

Actually it takes Alexander a lifetime to recompose the fragments of her life, resulting in a mosaic of open-ended selves. The third chapter appropriately entitled “Katha” as well as the following chapters, tell us multiple stories of her life beginning with her idyllic childhood in Kerala, her transnational crossings, her Khartoum journal and concluding with the chapter “Indigo Ink” in which she makes a revelation of her traumatic sexual abuse by her beloved grandfather Ilya and which she was reluctant to acknowledge for a long time: “I have written what I could through the rips and tears in the dress I once wore, a shield for a small child’s soul, silk stitched with shadow work in delicate rose, violet, and green” (317). In her autobiography, Alexander is preoccupied with the task of creating the self and forming her identity in the context of migration. The memoir is a manifestation of the totality of her diasporic experiences of migration, dislocation and features a gradual realization of Alexander’s complex identity which cannot be delimited or contained in boundaries. As a postcolonial memoir, *Fault Lines* hints at every feature of the debate on migration or diaspora. The opening chapters of *Fault Lines* are full of references to how difficult it is for a writer to create a consistent narrative of the fractured and splintered life. The author narrates the stories of her intermittent returns to Kerala, Ilya’s death and the feat of an extraordinary girl who could swallow stones in a chapter entitled “Stone-eating Girl.” Alexander is inspired by this girl who began putting first mud and then stones into her mouth following the consequences of the hunger strike during independence struggle. Alexander identifies with the stone-eating girl: “Once an ordinary girl-child like me, she had taught herself whatever skills she had, learnt to use them in her own way,...-she became a female icon, creator of a stern discipline, perfecter of an art” (85).

Fault Lines presents an account which is not only limited to the exfoliation of an individual personage but negotiates the development of an embedded, relational self which is hinged upon its wobbly hyphenation with people, places and events. Arriving in America as a pregnant wife, Alexander considers herself to be a “fault line” between her past and present. Alexander’s choice of the subtitle *A Memoir* “indicates a more intimate form of concatenation of the self”(Ponzanesi 56). The memoir as well as her other works are largely concerned with the theme of self creation against an agitating history of dislocation. A dislocated ethnic female is at the pivotal center in Alexander’s memoir. Though the protagonist of the memoir remains deeply rooted in India, particularly Kerala, her constant movement through various cultures and continents makes her ponder: “And what of all the cities and small towns and villages I have lived in since birth: Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, all within the boundaries of India; Khartoum in the Sudan; Nottingham in Britain; and now this island of Manhattan? How should I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?” (1). Looking nostalgically back at her roots, “and sitting here in New York City, at my writing table in a room filled with dust, I recall my childhood fears about what it might mean to be born into a female body” (42). She gives expression to the pure joy of childhood where not only the author but the readers also long to return to that magical world:

Under those ceilings, in the profuse gardens edged by mango and bamboo and the clusters of gulmohar and laburnum blossoms, my childhood was free. I did what I wanted to and what I wanted to I did or so it seems now, harking back....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. In the large house in which Ilya lived, there were visiting relatives and cousins coming to call, servants and older aunts, multifarious visitors all bound together in the loose yet formalized functions of the family. There were crevices and gaps for me, places I could hide in and find myself again, utterly transformed in the magic of childhood, so that a bush laden with green berries or a goose flapping its wings could make me into that and 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. (38)

The central metaphor of Alexander's work- fault lines- offers insight into Alexander's difficulty in not only maintaining a cohesive self but also the delicate ties of identity and place. Fault Lines is an attempt by Alexander to present her "evolution from a consciousness of exile and its carefully assembled picture of the past, to the immigrant awareness of the claims of the present" (Vinoda 73).

Alexander writes in her memoir "[w]hat I have forgotten is what I have written: a rag of words wrapped around the shard of recollection. A book with the torn ends visible. Writing in search of a homeland"(4). In her essay in Somdatta Mandal's edited book Asian American Writing vol. 2, Debjani Banerjee states that Alexander deals with "the issues of dislocation and migrancy" (30). Having crossed borders of India, North Africa, England and America, the protagonist of Alexander's memoir finds herself mediating amid different ethnicities and geographies, resulting in the term 'home' coming to indicate an unstable position which is no longer locatable in any one place. In the chapter entitled "Home at the Edge of the World", Alexander states: "Home for me is bound up with a migrant's memory and the way that

poetry, even as it draws the shining threads of the imaginary through the crannies of everyday life, permits a dwelling at the edge of the world” (260). Home, the place where one can feel a sense of belonging and to which every immigrant longs to return, is defined by Meena Alexander in these words:

Though I was born there, Allahabad is not my home. It is far from Tiruvella, about a thousand miles due north. Nadu is the Malayalam word for home, for homeland. Tiruvella, where my mother’s home, Kuruchiethu House, stands, and Kozencheri, where appa’s home, Kannadical House, stands, together compose my nadu, the dark soil of self. I was taught that what I am is bound always with a particular ancestral site. Perhaps I will return there to be buried, my cells poured back into the soil from which they sprung. How tight the bonds are, how narrow the passage from birth to death. (22-23)

Most immigrants often engage themselves in constructing a different imaginary India, which need not be similar to the real location. It exists chiefly in the mind, and no act of actual physical return can facilitate it. The concept of the home country may split up into fragmentary images with each act of returning home. Possibly Avtar Brah’s assertion in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* explains this better. She writes:

Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. (192)

Because of their experiences of translocation, Salman Rushdie considers the postcolonial migrant writers to be “wounded creatures” who try to comprehend the world through “cracked lenses” and are “capable only of fractured perceptions” (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). To get rid of the feeling of dislocation, the author endeavors to build a fictional space that confers upon her a sense of comfort and belonging. Alexander describes this space to be an attempt of a migrant writer to construct a “homeland, a sheltering space in the head”(193). As a result, she begins to formulate a point of origin from where she can situate herself. In this manner, Alexander is able to compensate for her feelings of dislocation as a woman who has been uprooted from her geographical home as a consequence of colonialism’s repercussion. Structuring her memoir through memory: the memory of childhood, of places, of relationships with family and friends and writing out of experiences of migration, Alexander expresses herself through the rhetoric of dislocation. Doubting the sanctity of memory, Alexander says “the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind’s space. Even when I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed up for me in the face of present

danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed” (3). Not only because the writer traverses many different national locations but also because Alexander is situated within multiple diasporas that Lavina Dhingra Shankar writes in her article “Postcolonial Diasporics ‘Writing in Search of a Homeland’: Meena Alexander’s Manhattan Music, Fault Lines, and The Shock of Arrival,” about Fault Lines that “it resists and subverts linear and single migration models” (286). She continues with her assertion that it is easy to recognize “Alexander’s yearning for physical, imaginative, and spiritual space that she can call her own as a minority female artist is conjoined with her self-reflexive stylized questions about how to live her life as an Indian-American” (305). To position herself in relation to a “homeland”, Alexander delineates a genealogy through linkages between mothers and daughters. She reflects upon the time when she and her sisters were provided with their “first home” by her mother’s “large belly” (24). Alexander traces and records her own family history in order to counter feelings of dislocation of a woman who has been “uprooted so many times” (3). She writes about the strong mother-daughter bonding: “Ever since I can remember, amma and I have been raveled together in net after net of time....Lacking her I cannot picture what I might be” (6-7). Alexander admits to possessing a double vision since she “sometimes is torn apart by two sets of memories, two opposing ways of being towards the past” (29). The second strand of Alexander’s memory is “flat, filled with the burning present, cut by existential choices. Composed of bits and pieces of the present, it renders the past suspect, cowardly, baseless” (30). It expresses existential anxiety of a diasporic postcolonial woman, marked as other in the new country. On the one hand, she has a feeling of leading a certain and fixed life, a life which is “already written, already made.” On the contrary, there also come some moments when Alexander feels as if she “has no home, no fixed address, no shelter” and therefore becomes a “nowhere creature” (30). The prior inner inconsistency dealing with Alexander’s position is perhaps determined here when the narrator and the Other extend their relations to bare the never unblemished body on one hand and the non temporal status of a “nowhere creature” on the other. What makes these lines more problematic is the dilemma of dislocation; the longing for belonging which troubles and blends the narrative course while the tacit agony of self/other is made known. Alexander’s spatial dislocations rupture and undermine her idea of home and identity. Throughout her memoir, Alexander struggles to come to terms with her frequently changing domicile: “My life shattered into little bits and pieces. In my dreams, I am haunted by thoughts of a homeland I will never find” (27). Feeling homeless and unbelonged, she ponders, “Where was my home? It was hard for me to figure out” (256). Even Alexander’s daughter Svati admits how her brown skin sets her apart from her classmates, ““My skin was screaming at me, Mama,...They were all staring at me. All the kids in class””(280). As realizations of the complexities of belonging to America become apparent to Alexander she confesses that she is hesitant “to fashion a self in the face of a violent world” (281). She describes her predicament and persistence in her characteristically poetic language thus: “This is a book of slow, sometimes uncertain accretion that I have had to cut and polish into form. The destruction visited on the island where I make my home, a second home, tore open the skin of memory, made me start to write again. But to close this book I had to go back to India. I had to return to the house of childhood”(229). Determined to revisit and reinvent her Kerala memories, Alexander in her

remaining memoir binds together the complex imbrications of her postcolonial identities with American ethnicities.

During her first sea voyage from India to Sudan, Alexander experiences a sense of loss: “[T]hat moment of parting” she writes, “repeated time and again as we returned to Tiruvella, only to leave again, became my trope of loss” (63). Later, Alexander views a connection in the crossing of borders to particular experiences of the body: “Somehow in my mind’s eye, the crossing of borders is bound up with the loss of substances, with the distinct pain of substantial loss: with the body that is bound over with death, with the body that splits open to give birth” (140). In this sense, the act of writing comes to signify for Alexander a crossing of borders which implies a particular inscription of the body as a figure of loss; yet this inscription also entails a certain transgression of bodily constraints. She writes “I felt for an instant as if I had metamorphosed, become another thing.... My life split, then doubled itself, in a terrible concupiscence” (63). In this way, Alexander engages in a feminist and postcolonial poetics of displacement that surfaces, paradoxically from Alexander’s experience of dislocation and also from her conscious disruption of those borders that serve to instill this feeling of dislocation. It can be assumed that the felt experience of dislocation occasions Alexander’s self-reflection in the form of an autobiography. Alexander conveys the failure of a singular and consistent history to present the existential dilemma of her being:

In the inner life coiled within me, I have sometimes longed to be a bud on a tree, blooming in due season, the tree trunk well rooted in a sweet, perpetual place. But everything I think of is filled with ghosts, even this longing. This imagined past- what never was- is a choke hold.

I sit here writing, for I know that time does not come fluid and whole into my trembling hands. All that is here comes piecemeal,... (2)

Therefore, Alexander writes the poetics of displacement to express the dissensions within her own psyche. She remarks “there was a connection between how I came to language and what it meant to be cast out, unhoused” (111). As such, the act of writing is figuratively connected to cultural displacement or the traversing of the geopolitical borders. In a conversation with Meena Alexander, Lopamudra Basu asks her about the usefulness of the image of fault lines in her memoir to which Alexander replies, “In what I write, fault lines, cracks appear in the givenness of things, of languages, streets, marketplaces. It’s a world filled with migrants. And yes, suddenly that does seem closer, I think, for some people. Though for me it is just the way things are, multiple places, fluid selves. So many languages filled my head when I was a child: Malayalam, Hindi, English, French, Arabic. Now those borders are pressing in at the brink of this new century, in a time of war” (“The Poet in the Public Sphere” 34). Alexander expresses her perpetual dislocation in the following words: “My own soul seemed to me, then, a cabbagelike thing, closed tight in a plastic cover. My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation” (Fault Lines 15). She questions herself “Did the ugly pupa know it would become a butterfly? Where did

the butterfly part exist, when the plump thing clung to a leaf in the darkness of a shoe box? Was there some secret that sustained it? Where did my Khartoum life go when I was in Kozencheri or Tiruvella? And what of this life of rock and stone, under the thick green leaves of Kerala, when I was living in a desert land so far away? Where was I at any one time? What was I?" (77-78).

About her life in America, Alexander says "In Manhattan, I am a fissured thing, a body crossed by fault lines" (182). Alexander explains that "I have to hold myself back with both hands...to prevent me from tumbling over the slopes into the fault lines that split my imagined earth" (128). Alexander is overcome with the sentiments of guilt and sorrow for leaving behind her family and the homeland. When the author leaves India, she writes: "Why did I leave India? Why did I feel as if there still were a part of my story that had to be forged through departure? I am tormented by the question. All I knew was that something had broken loose from inside me, was all molten. And what was molten and broken loose had to do with India as I saw the land, and to write I had to flee into a colder climate. Else I would burn up and all my words with me" (146). It can be seen that the protagonist's life spins around an enigma of constant movements, departures and negotiations that she can neither resolve nor discard. From the lens of a migrant minority, Alexander dwells upon this issue in her memoir and depicts its poignant impact on her psyche. The anguish hence infiltrates beneath the surface and perpetuates the loss of a frail uprooted body.

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