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Unconscious Fantasy in Meena Alexander's "Everything Strikes Loose": A Psychoanalytical Perspective

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Abstracts:

Fantasy is very important means to deal with different kinds of experiences. It does not copy empirical world but creates a world which follows its own laws. In this world, all human beings indulge in fantasy whether it is about their love life, economic position, societal behaviour or public career. There is no limit to the extent to which a human mind can go when its flair for fantasy finds a free rein. It is often used as synonymous with the imagination in psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic theory of fantasy on literary analysis, the modern fantasy is inspired by Freudian psychology which also seems to give it a new lease of life. After Freud, fantasy in a Lacanian framework is sometimes called the 'fundamental fantasy' which engages with everyday reality, in other words, reality supports the exertion of fantasy, and fantasy protects and has relation with reality. Meena Alexander is one of the recognized contemporary South Asian American writers whose poem "Everything Strikes Loose" focuses on the reality of family and fantasy of personal life. She believes that a woman needs to explore the unconscious fantasy and shared experience in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of her life.

Keywords: Meena Alexander, Unconscious fantasy, Lacan, Desire, Body grace.

Meena Alexander's factual, emotional biography records the early influences which shapes her unconscious psyche. She is one of the most recognized contemporary South Asian American writers. She is internationally known as a poet, writer and scholar. She was born on February 17, 1951 in Allahabad, India, to George and Mary Alexander. She is the eldest among her two sisters, Anna and Elsa. She lived in Allahabad and Kerala until she was almost five-year old because her father worked there as a scientist for the Indian government. At the age of five, Alexander and her family move to the Sudan and remain there till her Graduation. There she learns to read and write and later in 1964, when she is only fifteen, she writes her first poem, which is translated into Arabic language and published in Sudanese newspapers. "My first publications were these poems printed in the Arabic newspapers in Khartoum" (*Fault Lines: A Memoir* 119). In her poetry, she is more concerned with the inner reality than the outside world around her. She is the artist of moods and wills, of desires and dreams, of conflicting choices and inner experiences. Out of the trauma of her migration, she emerges as a significant voice of women psyche. With strong roots in the rural Kerala, she has won many literary prizes and her poetry is undoubtedly an expression of her innermost feelings.

Before moving to the psychoanalytical approach to fantasy, it is established that fantasy is constantly an integral part of the literature. It deals not only with the particular forms of fiction

and poetry, but also touches broad areas of folk tales, myth, satire, allegory, gothic fiction and science fiction etc. It is a work which takes everyone into an imaginary and unreal world. It is often used as synonymous with the imagination in psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic theory of fantasy on literary analysis, the modern fantasy is inspired by Freudian psychology which also seems to give it a new lease of life. He describes that "some part of the latent material of the dream is claiming in the dreamer's memory to possess the quality of reality, that is, that the dream relates to an occurrence that really took place and was not merely imagined" (33). Fantasy in a Lacanian framework is sometimes called the 'fundamental fantasy' which engages with everyday reality, and crucially, it is in relation to the real that the real of fantasy functions (41). For both the psychoanalysts, fantasy is in relation to reality against the traditional view that it provides a means to escape. While applying psychoanalytic theory of fantasy to the analysis of fantasy in literary poetry, it turns out that fantasy no longer merely represents the impossible, the transcendence and the escapable. The disturbed feelings of a poet are the result of fantasies which involve subconscious and the unconscious urges, so fantasies also have roots in real life and through an in-depth analysis become comprehensible in relation to reality.

Fantasy is very important means to deal with different kinds of unconscious experiences. It does not copy empirical world but creates a world which follows its own laws. The modern and post-modern poets have made an innovative use of fantasy in order to examine the contemporary social reality from different angles. Their poetic language offers a powerful tool for opening the self to new possibilities. In them, Indian women poets often write in confessional mode with the prominence of topics such as ambition, conflicts, shame, physique, guilt, sexuality, memories of past, childhood traumas, suffering by patriarchal society and articulation of fractured self. They allude to their personal lives, desires, moods, values, and hopes. Their poetry focuses on the actuality of family and personal life. They believe that women need to explore the unconscious fantasy and shared experience in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of their lives. Their poetry contributes liberally to the enrichment of human sensibility. But no significant woman poet is identifiable until Kamala Das has created a splash with her fiercely individualistic and iconoclastic poetry. She is taken Indian poetry in English far ahead of her predecessors like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. After her, Meena Alexander is conscious of her own problems and her poetry seems to be confessional, autobiographical, frank, bold and realistic in the expression of her attitude towards the position of women in patriarchal society. So this article will examine a selected poem, "Everything Strikes Loose" with the example from other poems in Meena Alexander's *River and Bridge* that is considered to be the representative of her fantasy creativity and her role as an autobiographical poet. It is stressed that fantasy fundamentally work to transform the memories of real events so Lacan's fundamental fantasy will be used to interpret dreams as revealing the secrets of Alexander's inner life and immediate experiences, as well as to realize certain hidden facts about her personality.

Alexander's poem "Everything Strikes Loose" deals with the unconscious fantasy. As a narrator, she tries to speak to her first child after giving him birth. In her fantasy, she desires to hold her child in her hands as safe as pepper vines hold the mango tree because fantasy sometimes involves highly unlikely or quite realistic situations. She expresses her desire through these lines:

Look at my hands

that held you
 as the pepper vines
 hold to the mango tree
 my child, my first child. (5)

The black pepper growing tracts are found in the west coast of India and are cultivated to a large extent in her childhood places. Psychoanalytically, Alexander's fantasy goes back to her past memories, to her homeland and to her childhood trees that is buried deep into the unconscious mind to protect her child. So, in her imagination, she holds her child safely in her hands and protects him from worldly pain and suffering. Actually, she crosses the bounds of absurdity and impossibility when she experiences conflict with the society which is full of violence and hypocrisy. By comparing her hands with pepper vines, she wishes for the unthinkable and wants to keep her child safe from the depression and dread around. She has a strange mental make-up with this line 'my child, my first child,' and makes her lose grip on the real and indulge in fantasy. The fantastic surges out of her nature to shapes her life is the desire to keep her child in her hands is really fantasy.

Psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan treat fantasy as a significant issue and have long maintained that it is a product of the mind and originates with frustrations, fears, ambitions, desires, depressions and anxieties etc. Their psychoanalytical approach to fantasy is also imaginative and they take into consideration the role of the unconscious desires with fantasy. "Fantasy, the fantastic, phantasy are words used to describe the realm of the unconscious and the worlds of imagination" (Jain 70). As per Jasbir Jain, for psychoanalysts, fantasy is often misunderstood as a mean of escape from the present constitution and restraints, is in fact, inherently connected to reality. So after protecting her child in her unconscious imagination, like the pepper vines, Alexander shows the anxiety of present situation of her psyche and feels that everything strikes loose in her body after giving birth. These lines: "In the end / everything strikes loose" (5), show her anxiety for her body and she laments over the bygone days when there was grace in her body. Going back to the past memories and desire for body grace is related to the neurotic behaviour because in this behaviour one is not happy with the present condition. Similarly, Alexander is not happy with her body because it has changed during pregnancy. She thinks through these lines: "The glare / was in my eyes, / the flickering leaves (6).

Alexander consciously focuses on both the inner and the outer experiences of her life and this naturally facilitates her imagination with psychological fantasy. For this psychological fantasy, Freud says: "Everything a person feels, thinks, fantasizes, dreams, and does has a psychological motive" (qtd. in Streaan 7). According to Freud's definition, Alexander at one time protects her child but at the same time, she finds herself unwanted and undesirous. Psychoanalytically, it is her poetic creativity that shifts her imagination to the present day condition to the past and compares her with dry fallen leaves: "scuffing up leaves / at the tree's base" (5). The leaves scatter here and there when a bird tries to find an insect in the base of tree. Like leaves, her body is also stretch after giving birth to a baby.

In another poem "South of the Nilgiris" Alexander expresses the same situation for her body grace. A body experiences two lives in one body, heavy, stooped with child, listens another heart

panting but this experience is painful. She writes through these lines: "He pointed at my belly / watermelon swollen" (7). Her feelings also symbolize the role of a female with many responsibilities as a daughter, sister, wife, mother and many more. The psychological changes that occur with pregnancy and the birth of the child are studied by many psychologists. Sociologists, on the other hand, attribute a total socio-biological change in a woman with the attainment of motherhood. For modern feminists as well as for Alexander, motherhood for a woman is a biological experience as well as a cultural construct. It is one of the channels which bestow recognition on woman. Therefore it is an empowering experience for Alexander.

The processes of pregnancy and becoming mother not only symbolize the body's reproductive faculty but also celebrate literally the regenerative force of the poetic creative matrix. In other words, the mother symbolizes the giving woman, as artist and creator. The mother within woman represents intellectual and physical creation through mental and actual reproductive fecundity. "Motherhood stands as a first ground, one we all migrate from" (Souffrant 6). In an interview with Alexander, Leah Souffrant writes that her interest in the idea of motherhood emerges in her poems. The desire to be pregnant, to give birth has been universal desire of Alexander's life like every woman which cannot be repressed.

Along with her universal desire, Alexander unconsciously cries over her present physique and spends a lot of time in craving and thinking about herself. She seems to be focused within and develops her ego so she writes of her own self-identity which develops through the interactions and struggle with others. There are evident instances in this poem where the critical focus is on the way to fulfill her obligations. Her repressed feelings and nostalgic brooding are reminded her childhood phase, a golden phase of one's life because there is no anxiety.

Now the river trickles
through low hills,
it tastes of childhood
the boats fly no flags. (6)

Alexander is concerned with the power of psychological images in her writing and spiritual potential in life. When she refers herself to leaves flickering in the wind, boats fly without flags, she doesn't describing them in a purely physical or visual sense but treats them with an existential understanding. A woman's body image is a psychological representation of her body. It comprises her attitude and self-perception of her appearance developing from biological, psychological and social influences. It can be significantly affected by the rapid and extensive physical changes during pregnancy and after the birth of child, signifying a transition to motherhood parallel to the psychological assimilation of this role. Alexander speaks about her experience of giving birth, the pain, the anxiety and the final joy in *Fault Lines: A Memoir* also. She expresses the same situation of pain when her child was born:

... almost nine pounds of solid muscle and bone and circling blood, twenty-three inches long and the shoulder blades so huge the mid-wife summoned in the doctor to check they were not broken in the bruising he received as he butted his way out, out of my womb and vagina ... dark blue, Lord Krishna's color, my son, life of my life ... (166-167)

Throughout these lines, Alexander imagines a powerful and spontaneous identification with every aspect of female experience. The influence of mother and child is mutual. The life of mother gets radically changed after the entrance of the child into her life. She considers that motherhood is linked with a repressed desire of woman's body. She also asserts that women's procreative ability is controlled and subordinated in the symbolic world since it has always been considered a threat and insecurity. She tries to explain the symbolic world's attempt to diminish women's power to reproduce by associating pregnancy with women's experience of negativity, which is the process of liquefying the rational attempt to define and stabilize thought and language.

Psychoanalytically, through her fantasy, Alexander takes every reader to the reality that to become a mother is a discovery of her new existence, like a strange new room in the house where she already lives. As a psychoanalyst, Alexander unconsciously goes deep into her psyche and reveals everyday incidents only to expose the societal restrictions of being a mother. As a mother, she suggests that mothers and their children need to protect their relationships and strengthen their bonds to one another. She uses her life-experiences to portray the helpless sufferings of a woman who hardly had taste of freedom because she is also fully immersed in the darkness of the cheerless routine of her life. Actually, she spotlights an extremely complex nature of life. She prefers the inner reality to outer, insight to sight. The real life has an infinite variety; it may take as many forms as there are individuals.

Alexander's poem "Everything Strikes Loose" is subjective poem that incorporates personal experiences and social predicaments. It also projects her personal disposition, judgments, values, and feelings. It is born out of pains, desires and ecstasy. Her poetry is well categorized as 'Confessional poetry' as it deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of her own. She says: "There is a kind of "confessional poetry," but even that kind of poetry goes beyond what we think of as memoir" (Souffrant 8). Confession itself is a psychological process. The human heart is an ocean of secrets, and it haunts in loneliness but confession is a kind relaxation to one's mind. Therefore her poetry is not merely represent her circumstances, experiences, desires and feelings but it also gives the details of her private matters including her past life-experiences and feelings, experience of women body as a mother, pains of childbirth, mental anguish and pain of immigration during her childhood, etc. In spite of the directness of passion and love expressed in her poetry, it gives the sense of sublime and controlled expression. The large number of poems has the dominant feeling of being a woman. The expressed feelings are more impatient, urgent and under tension. Along with autobiographical details, the Kerala background, multiple migrations, consciousness of being born in female body in the independent India stand as the background of her poetry. So in the end of this article, it is concluded that Alexander has been quietly writing poetry for the last forty years. Her poetry emerges as a consciousness moving between two worlds, between fascinating images and languages that her dual life has given her. She psychoanalytically deals with the inner world of her personal feelings and reveals her vision of life. In her poems, she unconsciously shows herself as a silent sufferer who has to bear the burden as a mother and loses her bodily grace. She is often seen as an experimenter who deals with many existentialistic problems and predicaments. Her depiction as a woman is authentic, realistic and credible. She articulates her emotions, fears and feelings as experienced by all women. So she is a forceful

writer. She talks with a powerful voice. She seems very sure of herself and makes her voice heard through psychological perspectives.

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