

Review Article

"I am a Fault Line": Meena Alexander and the Poetics of Fragmentation

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ABSTRACT



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The paper will address the poetics of fragmentation in the works of Meena Alexander, to whom the subject of interaction between memory, language, body and diasporic identity is the emphasis. As it is shown in the analysis, structural and thematic fragmentation are employed by Alexander in her poetry and memoirs to attain the complexities of postcolonial, migrant and female subjectivities, i.e., Fault Lines and Illiterate Heart. Her English, Malayalam, and Hindi as symptoms of linguistic dislocation and, at the same time, the creative resistance to colonialist and patriarchal rule, her focus on the body are anticipations of trauma, memory, and resilience as the central notion of diasporic consciousness. The paper, based on postcolonial theorists, like Homi K. Bhabha, Edouard Glissant, and Gayatri Spivak, and feminist and diaspora studies scholarship, shall argue that the fragmented forms of Alexander, as in the juxtaposition between poetry and prose, the mixing of tongues, is a considered and innovative aesthetic. Her literature does not depict disintegration as nihilistic, in fact, fragmentation is productive since it enables in order to express multidimensional and multifaceted identities and offer fresh modes to comprehend the migrant and postcolonial self. This paper entails making Alexander a key constituent of new writing, the technical and expressive gambit of which expands the literary description of displacement, plurality, and embodied sense of diaspora.

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Introduction

I am like a fault line, a fissure of continents, a fragment.
(Alexander, 1996).

Reading poems and prose of Meena Alexander is to break the door and enter to an entirely new world where the self is not a complete part, but a fragmentation of gleaming bits of britester. The above line is not merely a bit of poetic decoration, but it is a statement of an exceedingly desirable and existential philosophy. The most prevalent condition of her life of many displacements commences when she was born in Allahabad, India, as she grew up in Kerala and Sudan and as a grown-up in the city of New York, successful and innovative in the case of Alexander (Alexander, 2003). It is not a false coherence that she is not ready to join these pieces but instead she remains in the cracks and explores the fertile and usually painful landmass of the fault line. Her poetics of fragmentation prove to be a mighty tool of the expression of the sense of the diasporic consciousness, traces of colonial and patriarchal violence and even feeling of memory, which never exists in the linear form and is always associative and fragmented, a stream of consciousness (Alexander, 2002; Shands, 2008; Spivak, 2023).

The Geological Self: Fault Lines as Generative Rupture

The metaphor which is at the centre of creative and intellectual project of Meena Alexander is the fault line. A fault line, geologically, is a fissure or a crack on the crust of the earth whereby the masses of the rocks have been moved releasing seismic energy. Alexander appeals to this scientific metaphor in order to convey her own complex and productive sense of self. She is whereby tectonic plates, plates of India, Africa, and America collide, rub against and rub against each other (Alexander, 1996). It is not a sympathetic contact but a discordant contact, which produces shock of cultural confrontation, language displacement, and disqualify existence (Chowdhury, 2011).

*In her fault lines poem, she says:
in the rift, the rub, the shaking of the earth,
I make my home. Here, the light is sharpest.*
(Alexander, 2002).

It is not no space in the rift in this case but a home constructed out of disjunction in a metaphoric way. Fragmentation, however, is not destructive, and it is generative, according to Alexander; it is in the shaking of the earth that the light is to be provided. This vision has been a derailment of the conventional identity of immigrants' assimilation where

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wholeness is the final point of destination (Gonzalez and Oliva, 2015). Instead, she praises multiplicity and accepts spaces of fissure of identity as crucial and fruitful places of meaning. These fault lines or faults that are both a wound and a healing place are followed through her poems to form what Shands (2008) describes as a postcolonial poetics of displacement, but what Spivak (2023) views as the speaking of the fractured voice of the subaltern in a global modernity.

Memory as a Shattered Mirror

In this instance, the past is the fractured image of the self since the latter is a fracture. The theme of memory is very conscious in the work of Alexander, and it never is retrospective and flawless memory of a homeland that has been lost. Instead, memory is held in its fragmented form like the scent of jasmine, the downpour of monsoons or the picture of a sari donned by a grandmother and the flickering of the senses not readily arranged into a line (Alexander, 2002). These historical artifacts are powerful and, therefore, fragmented, and cannot be narrated in the form of a mere reversion or identity story (Chowdhury, 2011; Gonzalez and Oliva, 2015).

In her memoir *Fault Lines* (Alexander, 2003), she superimposes psychological displacement with physical trauma, when she technically relates this impulse to fragmentation to the physical trauma of an accident that she experienced as a child. Writing proves to be the art of bringing together these fragments, not to provide the mirror with the old look, but to craft the fragments in a different and meaningful pattern (Shands, 2008). This structuralist is experienced in her books of poetry whose poetic text is built in a way that it combines verse and prose to create a collage of tissue which is a reflection of the processes of which a mind imaginatively seeks to draw up its own fragmented pasts.

Alexander conjectures that home is a continuity dream. I have none. I have pieces and using these pieces I must build a world. (Alexander, 2003, p. xx). It is not a building of reconstruction but creation a re-creation of subjectivity, an ongoing reconstruction. It turns the poet into an archaeologist of the self since he/she brushes the dust away and gathers fragments of language, culture, and experience, and then constructs them into a small but glorious whole that acknowledges the power and beauty of fracture (Spivak, 2023; Shands, 2008).

Linguistic Hybridity in the Writings of Meena

Alexander: Weaving a Postcolonial Tongue

Language is not a neutral place or unbiased territory to Meena Alexander but a place of a conflict- a meeting point of the past colonial history, remnants of the old languages as well as the conflicts of the American modern world. Her language style is a type of linguistic hybridity, or calculated and creative fusion of linguistic layers that does not only mark a plural identity, but also opposes the supremacy of one and the idiom of purity (Alexander, 1996; Bhabha, 1994). It is not only an aesthetic hybridity but such a kind of political and epistemological position is part of her poetics of fragmentation (Shands, 2008; Spivak, 2023).

Even though she did her writing in English language, Alexander was very conscious of the irony and seriousness of using the language of the previous colonizer (Said, 1978). However, she does not desire to adopt English as an entity or hegemony. Rather, she unravels and reinstates and strokes it with the intonations, rhythms and idioms of the Malayalam and other Indian language (Alexander, 2002). It turns the English language into a palimpsest, which is the voice of the subaltern, written on the master language and through it (Spivak, 2023). The sign of her multilingual consciousness is that she knows how to use Indian words that have not been translated -thali

(necklace of marriage), kovil (temple), Kaveri (a river), are words that she does not try to explain but she is not apologetic. In a way, Alexander opposes that, as she makes the monolingual reader in English feel that he/she is in the embarrassing situation of learning half what is being talked about, the same way she tackles the issue of cultural displacement (Chowdhury, 2011). The reader should be forced to guess by the surrounding or dwell in the vagueness of language, which scatters the dominance of language hierarchies, and on her cultural vocabulary the ownership of integrity (Gonzalez & Oliva, 2015).

In *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander expresses the fact that, language is the skin I impale the bones of my disappearance (Alexander, 1996). It is in fact, the mixed form of her language which is not only stimulated as an instrument of expression, but the content of survival, an inscription of oneself in which the feeling of erasure is changed into the feeling of creating and surviving. Alexander is more than just hybrid at the word level. The Malayalam rhythm, syntax and rhythm of a sentence in English are frequently present in her sentences producing a musical memory. Her line was usually violated, repetitions and lengthy sentences, was more inclined to Dravidian linguistic pattern than the traditional English verse (Alexander, 1996; Alexander, 2002). This is no loss of control of English language, but a first language awareness actively written or passively written. This is what one can call the new hybrid music, what Alexander calls the new music, the output of the tripping of a tongue with multiple worlds (Alexander, 2002).

The theorization of the middle ground that Homi K. Bhabha constructs is consistent with this linguistic hybridism, in which the cultural interactions raise new identities and forms that undermine the authority of any single and original culture (Bhabha, 1994). The issue of language is also one of the thematic issues and Alexander prefigures it. Her poems are full of language and language metaphor, language barriers, translation and silence and revolve around the inability to construct a self across a variety of languages (Shands, 2008; Chowdhury, 2011).

She also deals with the tongue in other poems like the *Illiterate Heart* in which she describes the tongue as a clumsy beast as she carves out the physicality of the expression (Alexander, 2002, p. xx). This rivalry is however creative and the hybrid tongue which is produced is more inventive, productive and better than any so-called pure language would be. It is infiltrated with the stigma of historical, cultural, and diasporic discontinuities and, consequently, is suitable to describe the forces of the contemporary fragmented self (Gonzalez & Oliva, 2015; Spivak, 2023).

The Body as a Site of Fracture

Human body can never be a fine united form in the intricate embroidery of Meena Alexander. Instead, it is transformed into one of the main sites where the rupts of the past, migration, gender and memory are firmly inculcated. The body can be seen as a palimpsest of trauma to Alexander - a space in which geopolitical fault lines are performed using individual, corporeal experience (Alexander, 2003; Chowdhury, 2011). The poetry and her prose constantly revert to the female, brown and migrant body as the origin of pain, dislocation and ultimately, some wobbly strength. Such emphasis on the corpus gives backing to her poetics of fragmentation, which anchors abstract diasporic and identity fears to the conditions of flesh and blood, which are material and lived (Shands, 2008; Spivak, 2023).

Alexander tends to project physical trauma towards more general historical and political violence. A good example here is her memoir *Fault Lines* (Alexander, 2003) where she literally cracks her skull in an accident she suffered when she was a child and the figurative cracks of broken life. The scar on her head is the body writing which can never be erased, that scar which witnesses to a break-up of a coherent self-identity. As she writes:

My scarred head served as a fault line, a ridge of body that showed the cleavage of my world (Alexander, 2003). This is not merely a personal injury but an emotional identity of the Partition of India which is a wretched national division that preceded her birth but inscribed an indelible mark in the history of her family. The body is thus introduced into some sort of archive in the poetics of Alexander where the traumas of the past of a group are a constituent of the body tissue (Gonzalez & Oliva, 2015; Shands, 2008).

As a woman of color with to travel in the West, Alexander has successfully infused into her oeuvre the way the body has become a medium through which racial and gender projections are scripted on it. The migrant body has come to be hyper-visible and is subject to scrutiny at all times and Othered (Alexander, 2002; Chowdhury, 2011). She lives in the vulnerability of this carnal existence in such poems as she writes in "Paper Flesh:

They lope at me and discover a topography / of brown skin, a past that they can create (Alexander, 2002). The colonial gaze is dismantling the body and trying to define and enclose it. It is dehumanized, transformed into a landscape that can be perceived through the outside lenses, and it is also put in check by the patriarchal norms based on which female actions and movements are under control (Said, 1978; Spivak, 2023). Alexander tends to challenge the burdens of sanity, humility, and gender norm, body is a battlefield in which the self and the other are colliding and ripping the self apart (Shands, 2008).

It is a very bodily and terrestrial experience to write on behalf of Alexander, to create the chaotic body with words. However, in her poem in a Time of Violence she writes:

What can I possess with my blood and flesh?... I desire a paper, a paper to get it right (Alexander, 2002). The page, in this instance, becomes a temporary skin, a kind of paper flesh, on which the sufferings and disintegration of the bodily organism might be projected and actualized. Writing is a performance of the writing is bleeding, a work of breathing and voice and makes the fragmentation of the body an art. The textual body is an object of disintegration that has been repurposed and made a testament to it (Gonzalez, as well as Oliva, 2015).

The primary memory vessel is the body though it is fractured. Memories of Alexander concerning India and Sudan are very sensuous, not necessarily cerebral, but they are perceived in the form of incoherent impressions of the smell of jasmine, the taste of a mango, the feel of monsoon rain, or the hum of a song of a grandmother. These parts of senses are present in the body and a single smell or any other kinds of sensations will be sufficient to remind us of the past world in a very short time (Alexander, 2002; Chowdhury, 2011).

Critical Appraisal

The fragmentation of Alexander, as a postcolonial strategy, has not only received a warm welcome as a purposeful act of disruption of the hegemonic, univalent accounts of colonial histories, nationalist mythology, or Western imperatives of a linear, integrative account of immigration (Bhabha, 1994; Glissant, 1997; Shands, 2008). The issue of a cogent and smooth story as cited by critics such as Homi K. Bhabha will be subject as a human being into a false depiction of lived reality as a result of discontinuities of colonialism and Partition. Fragmentation is therefore the most genuine form of expression because the world passed to the postcolonial subject is fractured and discontinuous (Glissant, 1997). The poetic dismemberment of Alexander, the opposition between prose and poetry, and the collection of selections, at which her memoirs are made, is not the failure in craft, but the zenith of the same: the medium itself is the process of dislocation (Alexander, 2002; Gonzalez & Oliva, 2015).

Alexander fragmentation refers to a feminist commentary on patriarchal descriptions of an independent, holistic identity. A rational, monolithic, egoic (I) can be glorified by the Western philosophy, yet feminist critics adam that Alexander is disruptive in her effort to present female self as a multi-, relational-, and fluid self (Spivak, 2023; Shands, 2008). Her fiction is more of a literary reclaiming, and she makes the female body and mind on her own terms (Chowdhury, 2011; Gonzalez and Oliva, 2015).

Critics such as Annette Langbaum refer to the manner in which Alexander imprints the female body with the discontinuity of corporeality, the scars, drives, recollections of the female body and turns it into a space of knowledge and testification and no longer objectifies it passively (Shands, 2008). Within the framework of the diaspora studies, the fragmented forms of Alexander are praised as the most appropriate method of the definition of the diasporic consciousness that represents the further experience of in-betweenness that characterizes the migrant experience (Chowdhury, 2011; Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). The light that her poetics sheds, therefore, is partly about the bewildered sense of time, space, and corporeality of the displacement, and the legitimacy of multiplicity as a principle of survival and perception.

The critics refer to the fact that Alexander manages to explain homely (the feeling of familiar and alien world) that is the subject of Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994; Alexander, 2002). This discontinuity can be noted in the manner she remembers Kerala, who has been recalled in New York subway.

It is especially important to note that the tearing down of Alexander is not a nihilistic one. The products of her fault, according to scholars, are generative: writing, gathering the ruins is a creative activity of self-conjuncture (Shands, 2008; Gonzalez and Oliva, 2015). This creates an optimistic picture of diasporic identity, which values multiplicity, power and creativity as opposed to mourning about some lost integrity (Chowdhury, 2011; Cohen, 1997). The critics also admire her technical innovation: she combines Malayalam, Hindi, and English, which represents the split self and is the tool of the resistance against the linguistic imperialism, rather than confusion (Alexander, 2002; Spivak, 2023). Alexander is perceived as the special individual to the establishment of a poetics of fragmentation. Her textuality continues the expressive and technical skills of the contemporary poetry and life writing, and demonstrates that the multi-dimensional and multi-faceted identities should be expressed in the literary forms that are as multiple as they are fragmented (Shands, 2008; Alexander, 2003).

Conclusion

It is a poetic and courageous attempt of Meena Alexander to uncover the fragmented modernity. She makes the claim of wholeness and purity by assuming the role of the fault line. Alexander linguistic hybridity goes way beyond style. It is one of the most important points of her philosophical and political project. Thematizing the conflict of multilingualism she develops a postcolonial literary language in the literal sense of the word, in which linguistic imperialism violence is recognized and at the same moment, the creative subversive force of the colonized to re-invent the languages of the master are attained. It is the most promising medium of reaching to the reality of the fault line, because her hybrid tongue is the tongue which is able to guarantee incompleteness of purity instead of the rich and

many-threaded and beautiful weaving. Her poetics of fragmentation is not poetics of hopelessness or even poetics of witnessing but poetics of deepest creativity. It is aware of how the self can never be complete in an escaping violent world, but it can multiply within. Its memory, its fragments, its words, its cultural reference, the ghost of a complete life inhabits it, and even in the very way, in which they have been so well, so artistically, used, Alexander demonstrates us that we can find a dwelling place even in our dispossession. She provides a vision, in which a right not easily comprehended, or not easily classified, is a basic human right, and in which the fissure itself is source of light. And finally, body can be regarded as a place of discontinuity that Alexander proposes but it is not a failure history. Despite the violence, displacement, as well as pain that characterize the body, they have an inner extensiveness. The struggle to survive is even in the very process of making the fractures into language. Through elucidating the silence and pain that is received through the body, Alexander reinvents its possession. The generative power originates in the fractured body such as the fault line. It is an arch of surviving, a plan of a voyage that transforms into the truth of anguish, and a reminder at all the time that the identity is not an ephemeral, hazy concept, but something that is lived, touched, and marked on the fragile, although powerful body.

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