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MEMORY AS A MODE OF SURVIVAL: THE POETRY OF MEENA ALEXANDER

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The Anger, anxiety, bewilderment and even negation mark this backward journey until his restless spirit finds its mainstay in the philosophy of prapatti or sarnagati as preached by the ālvār saint-poets of Tamil in the medieval period. This trajectory begins with scepticism and traversing a whole gamut of responses finally crystallises in a religious experience. This is Ramanujan's version of the rites of passage and return. The narratives of passage and return, the one literal and the other metaphor are deeply inscribed in all diasporic writings. In this chapter, we take up the poetry of Meena Alexander who creates her own characteristic version of diaspora and dislocation weaving together the threads of her birth in India and upbringing in Africa, Europe and America. She is, in her own words, "a woman cracked by multiple migration. She says that her two worlds, "present and past, were torn apart", and she became "the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation"². In a 1997 Hyderabad interview with Sachidanand Mohanty, Meena Alexander dwells at length on the issues of diaspora, exile and border crossing and its impact on her creative imagination:

The idea of diaspora and border crossing is a very old one in Kerala. You know it's a very ancient idea in Indian thought and culture. That you go away from home made to gain knowledge. So the idea of exile is not a post-modern one. On the contrary, it is a very ancient one. If you look at the great mystic poets of the Sangam period, you know, in the canonical literature, many of them go on journeys. Look at Meerabai. In fact, I have been recently reading a lot of Meerabai.... So I imagined Meerabai coming to New York city. What would it be like? Therefore I think, this border crossing, these diasporas were something that is not necessarily alien to what we think of as the complex fabric of Indian society.³

Her exposure to various cultures, disciplines and languages appears to have had a considerable influence in shaping her diasporic consciousness. Her poetic works are born out of this multiplicity, and are the outcome of the interaction with a variety of environments in which she has lived and about which she writes. In an interview published in Dispatch, the journal of the Centre for American Studies, Meena Alexander says:

I carry that world around with me. Sometimes I find myself sitting on the Upper West Side on 113th street [in New York city] and writing poems that are rooted in this soil and this landscape, in a village in South India. It's as if by doing this I can reconstitute what is critical for me and nourish myself.⁴

The above comment is a reflection of Alexander's creative process and her connection with India. As her poetry is mainly concerned with the construction of the expatriate self and its

relationship with memory, nostalgia and identity, it is relevant here to discuss in brief the ideological, geographical and spatial boundaries of her diasporic lives.

Meena Alexander was born on February 17, 1951, in Allahabad (India). Her father was an employee of the Indian government. He was sent to North Africa when Meena Alexander was five years old, and consequently her childhood was split between two vastly disparate worlds. She would spend six months at a time in each continent but this perpetual movement across the continents notwithstanding at the emotional and psychological planes she remained permanently anchored in the ethos of her home and family. Her mother was a homely lady, a traditionalist whose world centred on domestic responsibilities and religious rituals. But her grandparents, and her maternal grandmother in particular, played a very important role in shaping her literary sensibility and the emerging ideological consciousness. But this family had its own orthodoxies, despite the liberal values espoused by the family members in public, specially when it came to women and their roles in the larger social and cultural space. Meena has tried to interrogate this predominantly male ethos of her family through the image of her grandmother who represents for her the multi-layered alienation of women in patriarchy:

Can I live in grandmother's house? Do I live in grandmother's house? Not yet. But you know, I am haunted by the feeling that of my life is to be real I must learn to live in her house. Perhaps not the whole length of my life, but for a crucial portion of it. Suffer the imprisonment she suffered. Walls, a husband who was given to her and a God so distant that his rage was the rage of her own father. You see, I don't think mercy was any portion of that existence. And the knowledge that came, was mute. I must release that knowledge. I feel it is crucial to the survival of the body. Perhaps this is why I am so close to my poetry, with all the consequent shortcomings. Is my poetry blasphemy? It must be. For it is sinful for women to speak. I was brought up with that notion, branded into me. My strict Syrian Christian upbringing. When I was very young this scared me so much that the only place I felt at ease writing poetry, in my father's house, was in the toilet.⁵

For Meena writing poetry was not only an act of defiance of the ageless norms of patriarchy but also a sacred duty to open up the female muteness and to release the bottled up energy even if it meant courting disapproval and ostracisation. The looming presence of the grandmother in Meena's poetry and prose is thus not only a poetic image, a store-house of memories but also a profound cultural statement. In many of her interviews Meena Alexander points out her grandmother's role in sharpening her cultural and literary vision. In an interview with Ayisha Abraham, Meena Alexander says:

My maternal grandmother was quite politically active; she was a Gandhian and served as the first woman MLA in Travancore state. My paternal grandmother was extremely traditional; she married and never left the compound in which she lived. That was her life. My two grandmothers lived within twelve miles of each other and this knowledge haunted me. Coming to America I felt that I didn't have a history and wanted a female ancestral figure and so made one up, as in so many poems in *House of a Thousand Doors*.⁶ Alexander's grandfather was an idealist and through him she explored the world at large entering the university of Khartoum at the age of

thirteen. It is important here to mention that it was her grandfather who taught her to read. Significantly enough, it was her grandfather who was responsible for much of the feminism that distinguishes Meena Alexander's poetry:

I was brought up by my grandfather and I never wanted to study any of the feminine arts like cooking and sewing and so forth which my other grandmother,...my father's mother, thought was appropriate. So I was always running away. Alexander passed out her B.A. (Honours) in 1969 from the university of Khartoum. By the time she was fifteen, her poems were being translated into Arabic and published in Sudanese newspapers. It was during these highly impressionable years that Meena became aware of the larger social and political issues that threatened to destroy her childhood world of fairy tales. Living among her Sudanese neighbours who loved and admired her, she nevertheless always remembered that she was a child from Tiruvella. It was during these few years that she realised the forked power of the language she had acquired: English. She could not read or write in her mother-tongue Malayalam and she could not read and write in the language that she heard being spoken around her: Arabic. English could be the only mainstay of her creativity:

Later, as I became a teenager, I realised the forked power in the tongue I had acquired: English alienated me from what I was born to; it was also the language of writing. Through it, I dared to hope, might someday unlock the feelings that welled up within me.⁸

A little later in the same book from which the above lines have been taken she makes a very significant remark which applies not only to her but to all bilingual diasporic poets who are cut off from their mother tongue but who write in the acquired language, making it malleable and flexible in syntax and grammar so that they can express in it what does not naturally belong to it: Through an inability to read and write the script in Arabic, and even in Malayalam my mother tongue, I maintained an immediacy of sound and sense in those two great languages of my childhood years that enabled me to dissolve and dissipate, if only in a partial, paradoxical fashion, the canonical burden of British English. And so a curious species of linguistic decolonization took place for me, in which my own, often unspoken sense of femaleness played a great part. I set the hierarchies, the scripts aside, and let the treasured orality flow over me. After all, that was how Malayalam had first come to me: in chants, in spoken voices that held a community together. Perhaps deep within me was a fear that learning the script would force me to face up to the hierarchies of a traditional society, the exclusionary nature of its canonical language. Wouldn't that script imprison me? How then would I ever be restored to simplicity, freed of the burdens of counter-memory?⁹

Thus English was the only language with which she could bridge the distance that separated her from her country and her own people. With English she could also make contacts with the world in which circumstances had thrown her. It was thus a moment of discovery for Meena Alexander, the person and the poet. This discovery had a profound impact on her poetic sensibility even later in life when she had left Khartoum:

Living in Khartoum as an expatriate Indian child, I had to learn English. How could I possibly have received an Arabic education? What would that have equipped me for? And in any case the

Sanskrit and Malayalam tutors were far away, across the burning waters I had traveled with amma. Bit by bit I realised that the form of the poem offered something I needed, a translation out of the boundaries of the actual, a dance of words that might free me from my own body. And I took to reading poems day and night so that history might not consume me, render me dumb. But the realization came slowly when, years later in North America, I had to strip my partial knowledge away so that I could learn to write the truth of the body, pitted, flawed, unfinished.¹⁰ At the age of eighteen, she was awarded a scholarship by the university of Nottingham for her doctoral research. Her stay in England, however, left Alexander with a deep sense of dislocation, which profoundly affected her creative experience. In 1973, at the age of twenty two, she came back to India after completing her doctoral research in English. Part of her purpose in returning was to reclaim and to preserve her Indian identity. Her Ph.D. thesis developed into the book entitled *The Poetic Self: Toward a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979) which also provides some hints of ideological and philosophical strengths which shape both her experiential material and her approach to poetry.

From 1974 to 1979, Meena Alexander lectured at many Indian universities including University of Delhi, University of Hyderabad, Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad. In 1976, she published her first volume of poetry entitled *The Bird's Bright Ring*. However, she left India for America in 1979 along with her husband David Lelyveld. She lives in New York and works both at Hunter College and the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York where she is Professor of English and creative writing.

Reminiscent of her period of stay in England, the now familiar sense of dislocation was amplified by a great sense of loss. In recent writings and interviews Meena Alexander has identified herself as having serious problems in New York bringing her life together as a Third World immigrant woman writer. That dispersal from one's roots causes deep and probably permanent scars on one's psyche is a fact, which Meena Alexander has repeatedly confirmed in her memoirs and conversations. In such a condition, the question of identity becomes a crucial one. The peoples and places that dot the itinerary of the migrant threaten his/her given identity and he/she has to contend against the surging waves of loneliness and unbelongingness but this also gives him/her the resolve to rise above the elegy of names and not allow the identity to be submerged by them because at one level identity too is a construct, a textuality in which streets and borders are crossed:

People were passing us on the traffic island and giving us little stares. But I felt it was all right to be there, a New York City housewife on a bench after dark, chatting to her friend. But I needed to explain something to Gauri. "You know, I don't think I could survive if I didn't write. Just now reading the poem set in the Tiruvella of my childhood, and in Kozencheri too, standing in a small bookshop on the Upper West Side, I felt I was breathing again. But it stings me to write all this. In India, I rest, I just am, like a stone, a bone, a child born again." Then I added hastily, "if my husband saw us he'd think us bag ladies."

“That’s all right, Meena.” She was very gentle with me. “We have the right to change our identities.” I think we were happy in that moment, Gauri and I, on a city bench in Manhattan, the great island city where the poor cry out of tunnels, and the rich frolic in their limos and luxury penthouses, where just as in my birthplace children hunt for scraps of food in waste heaps.¹¹

In “The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity”, she reported that in her first experiences in New York, a basic problem was “not just how to appear – saris,... jeans,... women’s issues... – but the very fact of appearing, of existing for the eye. To what extent...was my sense of self-identity invaded by the gaze, the look of a world to which I was Other.... It was what I was and in many ways am, this perpetual reconstruction of identity. What might I be to myself in a simpler, clearer time, in my mother’s house in Tiruvella...? Was there a sense in which this question could be anything more than merely nostalgic?”¹² And what she says about life in Manhattan may be taken as a metaphor for describing the life of a diasporic writer anywhere:

In Manhattan it is hard to make the bits and pieces hold together. Things are constantly falling apart. The city is dispersing itself, jolting, juggling its parts. There is no ideal of poise in its construction, just the basting together of bits. Sometimes bits burst open, split apart, and one does not quite know how to go on. How to construct a provisional self to live by. How to make up memory.¹³

And from this perplexing issue emerged the two prominent long poems – The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts (1989) and Night-Scene, The Garden (1991). In these poems, the poet was struggling with these questions of meaning and dislocation” brought on by multiculturalism in America that has sharpened her wits, forced her back to her own post-colonial heritage. John Oliver Perry comments:

Being forced back, however, does not mean that she rests there nor certainly that her motivations or identifications are mainly as a post-colonial writer. The one most overwhelming fact about post-colonial life in India is surely its multiculturalism, more long-running, wide-reaching and deep-delving than that in America.¹⁴

Meena Alexander too dwells on this point while discussing the term ‘post-colonial’ with regard to America, the Third World and diaspora. She has explained:

I think the word ‘post-colonial’ is relevant not just to a country like India which is currently celebrating its 50th anniversary, it is also extremely relevant to countries like the U.S. where the issue of a multicultural nation is not just hotly debated but is a reality.... Now the question of ‘post-colonial’ in the U.S. has different connotations, obviously a different meaning than it has in India or the India diaspora. Perhaps what we really mean the term is the fabrication of a particular kind of knowledge within which there exists a tension between the newness of what is being made and an older way which may be covered over or masked.¹⁵

Meena Alexander’s memoir, *Fault Lines* (1993) is a significant book for understanding her diasporic creative self. Using memory as a trigger of creativity, the book longs for a nostalgic recovery of self in the course of multiple migrations. In this autobiographical narrative, Meena Alexander charts her movement across many locations and seeks to exploit some of the still-

living traditions of contemporary India as well as those of the West in order to stretch her female expatriate imagination and expand a constricting social fabric. But ultimately her objective is to exploit a multitude of relational selves derived from her interactions with the several places where she has lived. She reports tellingly that in *Fault Lines* she was writing about “being born into a female body,...living without fixed ground rules, moving about so much....” Thus, like an older Indian diasporic writer V.S. Naipaul, Meena Alexander has struggled to ‘create’, rather than find, spaces where interactions can go on, an imaginative opening, brainpan or womb, for bearing human relationships. In responding to such a life, Alexander sometimes attempts imagining her existence like a symbolist poet, without a locatable meaning. Meena Alexander writes:

What does it mean to carry one’s house on one’s back? I face myself squarely, wash my hands free of ink and think: the old notions of exile, that high estate, are gone; smashed underfoot in the transit lounges, the supermarkets, the video parlors of the world. The voice tricks itself. History is maquillage. No homeland here.

But another voice replies as if heedless of the full frontal, shoulders-squared-over bit: over and over again you fabricate a homeland, a sheltering space in the head. You can never escape into the ceaseless present that surrounds you. What you need, in Frank O’Hara’s words, is “Grace/to be born and live as variously as possible.”¹⁶

The poetry of Meena Alexander offers an interesting insight into the many aspects of the diasporic identity. Her poems chart the memories of diaspora through mingling moods and modes and provide a foretaste of the essentials of the dislocations of living in diaspora. At the back of her diasporic consciousness is the trope of migration made well as those of the West in order to stretch her female expatriate imagination and expand a constricting social fabric. But ultimately her objective is to exploit a multitude of relational selves derived from her interactions with the several places where she has lived. She reports tellingly that in *Fault Lines* she was writing about “being born into a female body,...living without fixed ground rules, moving about so much....” Thus, like an older Indian diasporic writer V.S. Naipaul, Meena Alexander has struggled to ‘create’, rather than find, spaces where interactions can go on, an imaginative opening, brainpan or womb, for bearing human relationships. In responding to such a life, Alexander sometimes attempts imagining her existence like a symbolist poet, without a locatable meaning. Meena Alexander writes:

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Poetry for her becomes a means through which she can objectify her various selves and see them for what they are. It is an act of confronting herself in an effort to read its genealogy and to attempt, if possible, its future evolution. Poetry offers a metaphoric fixity in a world of flowing mutilating identities:

Poetry is place
Reach out and touch your fingernails,
your skin
weep, weep at sightless wings
that dare
your quivering body through vacuities
it cannot image
cannot name
to a century
in her ivory season—
frail mastodon
with cracking tasks
out of those sinking grooves
spring
lon-toothed lilies
flaring mud.

(“She Sings to Herself”, Pt. 2, Sec. II from “Songs Without Place”)

That Meena Alexander’s problem of identity is substantially different from that of, say, A.K. Ramanujan or Agha Shahid Ali, is immediately clear when she tells us that what she is searching for is the truth of her femaleness, herself as a female body. Aware of her elitist class origins, and the constant crossing over of disparate borders. An attempt is being made in the following pages to analyse Alexander’s exilic configurations and her experiences of diaspora in *House of a Thousand Doors*.

Meena Alexander brings to her works a varied range of landscapes—India, Sudan, and England, America—as well as a strong sense of being a woman and a minority/black poet in a primarily white American society. A central dynamic in her poems involves an imaginative comeback to the ‘actual place’ where she lived, though the ‘actual place’ is, of course, not one, but multiple, thousand-doored, ultimately a set of sites scattered over four continents. Her *House of a Thousand Doors* tends to have a languorous feel about the diaspora. The poems are an expression of a self-contained private emotional world. In *House of a Thousand Doors*, she continues her

search for home, self and place while moving between countries and cultures. Meena Alexander herself comments on the poetic composition of this collection:

The volume of poetry *House of a Thousand Doors*, I think of as a beginning. The grandmother figure in it is drawn from memory and dream, she stands as a power permitting me to speak in an alien landscape. The sense of newness, of the persistent difficulty of another landscape, another life, becomes in those poems part of a search for a precarious truth.¹⁷

Alexander's scholarly training, her Syrian Christian background and her feminist consciousness are all apparent in *House of a Thousand Doors*. Again the themes one tends to associate with the writings of diaspora—a sense of social and cultural alienation, crisis of identity, search for roots, yearnings for the homeland, the difference between expectation and reality—all are present here. The events described in the poems are in the past and her mind always turned to Kerala and the Tiruvella House. Reality and identity are rearranged to suggest the possibilities of life.

House of a Thousand Doors has three distinct parts, which are linked together through stories, characters, images and symbols to form a circular pattern. The poems and prose pieces of the first part of the book centre around the lives of Meena Alexander's two grandmothers. Part II of the book explores the immediate history of the narrative persona of the poet herself. The third part returns to India under British imperial power and sketches the fictionalised life of the last Emperor of the Qutb Shahis of Hyderabad State driven insane and ultimately wrecked by the colonial powers. Moreover, *House of a Thousand Doors* adds up to more than the individual parts, although the unity is often the result rather of repetition than of logic. Alexander delineates a wide range of characters through the use of memories, dreams and brings forth memorable voices of women who meaningfully struggled at different times in history.

Alexander's remembering through poetry assumes the shape of childhood reminiscences in which women—mothers, sisters, especially grandmothers—appear significantly in the creation of self. The most important members of her Indian family remembered are two grandmothers, one political, the other domestic. Alexander herself explains in the 'Note' of *House of a Thousand Doors*: In the poems and prose pieces about my grandmother there are two grandmothers, their distinct selves bent into the refractions of writing. Grandmother Kanda, I never knew; she died before I was born. She was the political grandmother. The letters at the very end are recreated from her own. The other grandmother, Mariamma. I knew well. My father's mother. She was housebound. Her life, in all its pent up power, was lived within the rim of the domestic. It was she who would sit by the well in the lower garden. Both my grandmothers came from Central Travancore, in Kerala. They grew up within a few miles of each other.¹⁸

The title poem sets the tone, with its symbolism of fixity, shelter and rootedness (the house) contrasted with the multiplicity of possibilities and identities. It is a dream poem about a poeticised grandmother. Alexander unravels the lives of her two grandmothers and then weaves them back into the fabric of one poetic life. The political grandmother whom Alexander never knew represents the feminist side of the poet's consciousness while the domestic grandmother represents the poet's longing for the root in the face of multiple migrations. As the two

grandmothers dissolve into one woman in the poem, we are left speculating as to which grandmother is it, the one in the British prison, the one imprisoned in her home, or the union of the two who kneels at each of the thousand doors whose bronze sills are three feet high:

This house has a thousand doors
the sills are cut in bronze
three feet high
to keep out snakes,
toads, water rats
that shimmer in the bald reeds At twilight
as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast. (HTD, p. 3)

But as we keep on reading this, and some of the other poems, the questions about the specific house and the specific grandmother are answered by an experience of generations of women portrayed as the one eternally and poignantly recognisable woman who kneels at the thousand doors,

paying her dues
Her debt is endless.
I hear the flute played in darkness,
a bride's music.

A poor forked thing,
I watch her kneel in all my lifetime
imploping the household gods
who will not let her in. (HTD, p. 3)

Obviously what has deeply touched and is still touching the poet about the grandmother is her habit of prayer which is never answered. If the gods did not let her in when she was alive, things were no different when she died. She remained a poor forked thing, driven away from one house (her parent's) and seeking and being denied entrance into another house (her in-laws' house). Thus the woman, in persona of her grandmother offers the poet the paradigmatic image of her present diasporic condition. This experience of being disowned, of being left in-between is what constitutes the female self and diasporic writer. The poet clings to the memory of her grandmother because that alone is left of her:

As young goats leap over cracks
in the garden wall,
as the cicada shunts sparks
from its wings. remember her.
She died so long
before my birth
that we are one, entirely
as a sky
disowned by sun and star

a bleakness beneath my dreams

a rare fragrance

as of dry mulberry

pierced by this monsoon wind. (HTD., p. 5)

In *House of a Thousand Doors*, Meena Alexander often seems to reach out into the past through a kind of lineage—her grandmother in Tiruvella, an old photograph with men standing in rows wearing ties and coats over their dhotis. In the poem entitled “Salt Spray”, the poet speaks of the house she will inherit from her grandmother:

Her house I inherit.

Plaster quick with spray from the Malabar coast

the cross beams dripping salt.

With what sort of alphabet should I inscribe it

that the huge mask of God might turn

quiver to the blank that grows in her stone,

hot white at the heart,

first flash of the dice into the real? (HTD, p. 8)

Poem after poem in the first section of *House of a Thousand Doors* refers to the haunting presence of her two grandmothers. In poems like “Her Garden”, “Looking Through Well Water” and “Grandmother’s Mirror”, the poet is trying to join together her two grandmothers’ complementary personas in order to discover her own self identity. The grandmother figure is drawn from memory and dream. She stands as a force permitting her to speak in an alien soil. Meena Alexander writes: was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak. I skipped a whole ring of life and made up a grandmother figure, part ghost, part flesh. She was drawn over what I had learnt of grandmother Kunju. I imagined her: a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had lived to witness the birth pangs of a nation.¹⁹

For Alexander, the recovering or uncovering of personal and cultural history through poetry is archaeological, and the mother or grandmother is a figuration of that unearthing. “Her Garden” is a nostalgic recovery of the poet’s self in her grandmother whose ideal place for spending her time was either the well or the mulberry tree and when death came she simply gave away her body and “crept into her soul/and she slept”.

The poem “Looking Through Well Water” brings forth the memories of home through the figure of the grandmother. Here memory becomes a mode of survival in an alien world. In order to dilute the fragmentation of the poet’s sense of identity, nostalgia oozes out of the poem. The interplay of the past with the present evolves through the buried landscape of memory. Moreover the poem is shot through with the ‘rainbow spirit’ that lights up her home and ultimately explores an effective identifying relationship between self and place. Mudbound in memory, the poet attempts to discover the meaning through looking into the grandmother’s face:

I hear grandmother singing,

She is singing in well water.

I see her face as the waves stir
over cloudy white pebbles. the well's mouth
fern fronds dark as hair
on an infant skull
nibble into stone.

She didn't give birth to me
but when I look into the well
It's her face I see, slight
freckled bones bent into water. (HTD, p. 6)

But despite the strong longing for the grandmother the poet also knows and painfully that there is something which stands between her and the dead old woman:

I'll tell you what divides us:
a ridge of cloud, two oceans,
a winter in my fireless room
high above Van Cortlandt Park
also death, the darkest water
crashing through pebbles, fern
fronds, bits of speckled shell.
I hear the koil crying in well water
its beak is glazed with blood
it's tilted on a nest of clouds
afloat and burning. (HTD., p. 6)

Alexander is attempting to arrive at a notion of reality, a real conceptual as well as geographical space that might give meaning and shape to her diasporic life. In the poem "Grandmother's Mirror", the longest poem of Section I, for example, the old, physically broken grandmother with her sharp wisdom and insight, silently inspires the speaker in her discovery of life. The poet says:

have saved her mirror,
set its cracked legs in my room.
Your sight was always keen
you were dazzled by very little.
To get a little closer
Imagine becoming like you
a rasp to the toil of light,
difficult to snare
no silver rim of you,
just freckles of black stuff
– a pomfret at night –
birthed right and stanching. (HTD, p. 16)

Poems like “Grandmother’s Mirror” and “Her Garden” remind us some of the poems of Sujata Bhatt, a woman poet of Indiadiaspora in Germany. In Bhatt’s “For My Grandmother” and “Living With Trains” the image of grandmother figures out very prominently. While honouring the importance of her heritage, Sujata Bhatt seems to be striving to discover who she is. The poet fosters forth the values of her birth place and her western self-confidence, but at the same time reveals her sense of alienation in the environment of the country of her domicile. “Living With Trains” like “Grandmother’s Mirror”, attempts to relate the poet with her birth place and it is the sights and smells that make the connections. The trains of East Berlin and her grandmother trigger Indian memories:

It was in East Berlin that all the trains reminded me
of all the trains in India. Old wood,
Old paint, old tracks drumming against wheels.
And the whole time I wanted to take photographs (forbidden)
of these railway stations. Later land
as we stared at the cemented land grew dark, the wind kicked slowly
and the trees on Unter den Linden smelled of 1966 Ahmedabad.
We turned sniffing, sniffing, surprised and
circling the wind until I jumped to grab some Linden leaves.
Aaji, in my dreams why do you
still walk along the railroad tracks by the Ahmedabad textile-mill
holding my mother’s hand?²⁰

As for Sujata so for Meena the grandmother is only a distant image, something seen in the mirror of memory. Identification with this image, however gripping, can be only temporary. The hard laws of reality are there to be kept in view and thus the concluding section of the long poem “Text from the Middle Earth, for Two Voices”, spoken by the Voice II (the poet’s own) sets forth the reasons for their remaining separate:

I cannot see my face in the steep well my grandmother made
though before dawn, as she went blind
I woke and climbed her mute slope till reached the
slough soil. When blindness grew as rust grows in clear metal
clogging all her sight, she shut her eyes and died.
Four strong men from the great church came
they laid her blameless body out in white,
they hammered the casket, their slow nails
stammering through a ceaseless time
each stroke telling, telling my name.
My only claim is that I tried to join my face to hers, spent images.
(HTD, p. 12)

The grandmothers in Alexander's poems do not retreat and thus keep on speaking and influencing the world around them. One narrates stories of Jehovah while the other with her glaring eyes, judges against the picture of the Good Shepherd; one writes letters from her political jail and later when freed writes to her imprisoned husband. She rages against the imperial power and the blatant display of wealth by her own folk. She writes in "Grandmother's Letters":

Aamma's daughter's naming ceremony was done with
such splendour, you might have thought us in Babylon or
some such pagan city. Silver, a huge city, mound on
mound, from candle sticks to pepper pots. Porcelain,
glittering in the sunlight. Lace table clothes! And on the
floor, for guests to eat off piles of banana leaves. A whole
forest wasted, to name child. (HTD, p. 22)

The consciousness of the poet slips easily from present to past through the voices of women who speak of children, birth, death and the song of the koel, and thus the connections are constantly being made between events removed in space and time. The grandmother writes: "The koil sings in its own light. Those who listen will never forget". And her granddaughter, the poet, adds:

Did she really hear the dun coloured bird cry? Or is she
like myself, inventing a great deal? How I wish I had
known grandmother. She was dead fourteen years by the
time I was born. By the time I was born in 1951, India was
already independent, a republic already for three and half
years. (HTD, p. 19)

Underlying the poems of the second part of the book is the sense of uprootedness and nostalgia for a past. Alexander has mentioned that her poems are "tied to places". Longing for the mother and the home left behind, descriptions of cities, rivers and friends, and movements in different countries, appear in the second section of House of a Thousand Doors. From the voices, portraits and mirrors of grandmothers, the poet moves towards a stronger first person narrative voice. Multiple birth dates ripple, sing inside her, as if a long stretch of silk were passing through her fingers. She thinks of the lives she has known for forty years, the lives unknown, the shining geographies that feed into the substance of any possible story she might have. As she makes up a katha, a story of her life, the lives before her, around her, weave into a net without which she would drop ceaselessly. They keep her within range of difficult truths, the exhilarating dangers of memory. The poem "After the Wedding" which begins this section, continues to rescue and recreate memory:

I sit rod straight, limbs stiff, chin up
staring hard and cold the sun

in his newt burning eye.
I did not think I would try to die
When yesterday they harnessed my hands
in the patterns of stars and moons
and flowers of joy. (HTD, p. 35)

A central principle in Alexander's *House of a Thousand Doors* is the sense of place. As the most literally unhoused of post-colonial writers, Meena Alexander reveals in her poems her repeated fixation not only for her two ancestral homes in Kerala but all manner of other spaces wherein human relationships can occur. The sense of place is one of her imperatives of being, an imperative increasingly being dislocated through extra-territoriality. In this context, we take the two poems of the second section—"Sidi Syed's Architecture" and "To Li Ch'ing-chao" where history unfolds itself through constructions of space and dislocation. The poem entitled "Sidi Syed's Architecture" evokes powerfully the "fit elaboration of a man unhoused" (HTD, p. 59). Sidi Syed, the sixteenth century architect brought to India to construct tombs, mosques and palaces for the great Moghul and Afgani Kings is depicted by Alexander as a person struggling to put together many disparate settings 'loosed between twin earths', who had been uprooted from his own soil by the imperial rulers' whims and thus destined to create his homeland in a series of architectural designs. The poet empathises with him because her own predicament is so much like his:

I sometimes wonder what he was like
Sidi Syed, a small man
come all the way from Abyssinia,
his skin the colour of earth
before the waters broke loose
from the Sabarmati river.
It was Ahmed's city then, in the year 1500.
Loitering by the river
he watched infants with blackened eyes
swinging in their cradles,
mothers with chapped hands laundering.
He saw skins of cattle and deer
laid out to dry
on the sharp rocks;
heard voices in them calling him,
crying out
as if home were nothing
but this terrible hunger
loosed between twin earths,

one underfoot by the river bed
the other borne in the heart's hole. (HTD, p. 58)
He was an artist, skilled in replicating reality not only of material objects
but even intangible emotions and feelings. Was he not replicating only
himself in the series of stone-structures carved and built by him, the
poet asks but the question relates to herself as well: Was it for him
this starry palm
with vine on vine still tumbling,
a tumult of delight
struck from a stonecutter's hands?
Fit elaboration of a man unhoused
yet architect of himself,
his genius still smouldering?
The mosque was hollow though
like a sungod's tomb;
it tracked his hunger
the madness of stretched skin
still so close
on those noisy river beds. (HTD, p. 59)

Given the fact of diasporic existence and its occupation of the intervening space, it is perhaps necessary to create a centre or a subjectivity. This is what the poet does in the poem "To Ch'ing-Chao" taking recourse to Chinese poetess Chao's diaspora. Li Ch'ing-Chao was a celebrated Chinese poet of the late Sung Dynasty. In 1127, the Tartars attacked Manchuria and she was forced to flee for her life. Finally she reached Nanking. The journey was harsh but her dislocation provides her a "precise" vision. In the concluding stanza, Alexander writes:

Li Ch'ing-chao, only the heart survives.
Forced now in middle life
into the cold, commit yourself
to the long trek south,
the iron anchorage of Nanking.
Do not forget the Tartars you flee
they are desperate men
slaughtering even geese. In time's desolation
be as precise
as you have been before.
The ache of a foot
bound in sackcloth
sinking in ice.
Your visionary eyes toxic with cold. (HTD, pp. 86–87)

Among the memories of India, there are even false memories, made-up histories and tales; this is a past created from documents, myths, longings, politics and fragments. Many of the poems articulate their provisionality and fictionality. The poet's self-conscious fictions, unlike those of many other poets, are not playful. Alexander is conscious that the fanciful in the creation of verse is also part of the creation of the self. To imagine is to be; but such being is to enter a door created by desires. One of the moving poems in the second section of the book is "Kabir was a Weaver". The poet's desire for her beloved home is described in a twentieth century variation by taking recourse to the life of Kabir:

Kabir says: look I have burnt my house
I shall burn the house of anyone who follows!
Did Kabir hear the birds this morning?
In the cold back yard I stretched out a sari,
I had never washed Tusso silk
with my own hands before.
Through the knots of pale silk
the eyes of a weaver shone at me.
Let them wrap me in this
head to toe. even the eyes covered,
let them ship me home! (HTD, p. 79)

Later poems in the collection deal with the poet's relatively innocent, even naive mother's death – "Narcissus Never Knew Her" – with her own travails as mother, wife and woman in New York City, and with her efforts to return to, to appreciate a shape for her present identity, her family past on both male and female sides, and their Keralan place, as in the poem entitled "Poem by the Well Side":

Body, you're a stranger here
I dare not touch the scars
of stippled flesh
milk left when it fled,
a dry worm belly,
palms filled with dark water (HTD, p. 83)

In order to explicate the non-strident, accepting quality of Meena Alexander's feminist stance, it is pertinent here to mention that Kerala uniquely maintains an archaic form of matrilineal family trees, providing unusual status to the female line. That Alexander comes from a Syrian-Christian background as well, is a reality that accounts for her Anglicised, patronymic, compounds her felt alienation from her impoverished sisters, also culturally deprived by their extreme economic and sexual marginality which exposes them to horrifying abuses as in the poem "She and I":

Startled in her nests of sheets
a child of eleven,
blood dots her sleeve
I cannot bear to listen to her weep

her life and wine are twined
 blades on a butcher knife raised at dream point
 in the mind
 nothing sinks
 nothing
 draws itself
 back. (HTD, p. 38)

Part II of *House of a Thousand Doors* contains two striking prose pieces. Here Alexander interweaves more immediate personal memories and gives voice to her developing feminist stance. “A Note on the Writer Balamaniamma” is about “famous author of the Uprising of Ulloor, grandmother’s contemporary” (HTD, p. 50) who knows that she will never finish her story while she watches the British armies take over the emperor’s garden for the task of scrubbing and boiling potatoes. The concluding statement, “She sees a child cry, its mouth horribly open, filled with dust. She knows her body is a ‘house’” (HTD, p. 50). The meaning of the word ‘house’ is deliberately left vague and ambiguous. A house is a place to rest, to be born into and finally to die in. The female body thus is a house and has its sanctity but this sanctity, like the sanctity of a house is vulnerable and precarious because like the plundering and burning of houses the female body is also always threatened. This threat is timeless. Words like ‘that’, ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘and then’ have no meaning for it. That is why Balaramaniamma never finished her history; probably she never ever properly began it but only picked it up somewhere in the middle. The reader familiar with the myth of the child Krishna’s mouth seemingly filled with dust which in reality gloriously contained the whole universe is puzzled by the stark realities of the present. However, it is not so in this piece. The awareness of the myth has now turned into the tragic history of lands and bodies brutally conquered and turned into dust.

The second prose piece of this section entitled “Mosquitoes in the Main Room” continues the history of suffering, of the debasement of the land, women and children as it occurs in post-colonial, independent India. The narrative is focussed on the true episode of a woman gang-raped by a group of policemen and then imprisoned by her rapist. This bizarre incident took place in Hyderabad in 1978. This prose piece talks of “Rameeza [who] is almost my age, just a year and a half younger”. (HTD, p. 51) Rameeza’s mouth is also filled with dust. She is numb, behind bars, her sari in rags, dark with blood. She is the caged koel with the spot of blood on its beak, unable to sing. The koel of the present piece is the same as in the closing stanza of “Looking through Well Water”, the image of the poet’s grandmother who mutely and unprotestingly had swallowed all the bitterness and alienation to which a woman is subject. When the suffering becomes intolerable, the poet brings in the memory of another legendary character Draupadi of the Mahabharata who was saved from dishonour through the design of the Almighty, the Lord Krishna. But Rameeza’s fate is different; she is not saved. Yards and yards of protective saris and divine voices against the rapist do not appear for Rameeza. The poet concludes:

Her sari hung under her, a mere rag, dark with blood. She
 does not have Draupadi’s luck. Would the blessed

Draupadi have survived a rape, outside a police station?
Would the mystic fabric have guarded her virtue,
shimmering as it bound her flesh and burnt the hands of
the miscreants? (HTD, p. 51)

Alexander looks into the horror of the contemporary Indian reality through the diasporic framework and thus abandons the heroic Indian legend of Draupadi. The garlands of mosquitoes surround the portrait of the modern saviours and freedom fighters of India, Gandhi and Nehru, hanging in the rooms of the police station. They have made a hole in Gandhi's glasses and have probably eaten up Nehru's phonline to future. The piece concludes:

Both these visitors from our history watched as the
mosquitoes shimmered over her wrist, then as she was
tossed into the cell, her knees folded under her, saw the
mosquitoes flock, beating their wings, hovering over her
mouth seeking entry. Do they know that her story is not
finished? (HTD, p. 52)

Rameeza, the poet's contemporary, thus joins Balamaniamma, the poet's grandmother's contemporary who could not finish her story. Balamaniamma was thus prophetic in not finishing her story, not applying any final closure to it.

Women like Rameeza, "married women burnt in their homes", are conjured up in the poem "Brief Chronicle by Candle Light". As the poet lights a candle at her door, there is an echo of Diwali, the festival of lights which celebrates the homecoming of Sita, the heroine of Ramayana. It is Sita, who, in some versions of the story, refuses to have her chastity tested by fire twice, and who in the last chooses to disappear from the bonds of marital and social rules and demands. The poet wonders:

I thought the wind howled in the badam tree.
In a forest of bamboo once bent to a storm. I heard hundreds of whispering feet,
Countless women, their hours lent
to pounding grain
massaging the ankles of strangers,
their necks spent with bearing bricks
sticks, straw for fires that could one day consume them
Would they perish at the muddy centre
of all our gathered lives? (HTD, p. 53)

The poem "Homeward: To Jayanta and Runu Mahapatra" is a complex evocation of inherited class guilt and deep personal shock at the death of her grandfather, who was crucial in shaping her intellectual make-up. The predominant feeling, of course, is not Judaco-Christian guilt so much as tribal, family or caste shame alongside awe at the grandfather, all framed by gratitude for the support in making the confession given by her listeners, the dedictees, in their cosy home in Tinkonia Bagaicha, Cuttack. As, in effect, foster-father and mother, the Mahapatras help her to "close the Wound" of exile years in America and, more important, to own up to the horrible

guilty separation she once unquestioningly enjoyed from her even more oppressed sisters. During her birthing pains in New York these women come in dream to deliver her. The poem's final threat of violent retribution, though in the key of protest rather than appropriation, deserves to be quoted:

You come armed with ten thousand sickles
crossed knives.

You come under the shelter of flags
coloured with blood.

Joined with you

We uncoil from flesh, station and name.

Like fern leaves etched to a garden slope

we rise from the mercy of dark water (HTD, p. 93) The implied analogies proliferate between many "exiles", particularly those arising from using, perforce, the English language and from living an independent existence within a woman's body far from the confinement and safety of Alexander's family home. In a review article, John Oliver Perry concludes that Alexander "has embodied the full particularity of her many senses of exile into a substantial vision of struggling beyond suffering or mere survival toward a dynamic of integration".²¹

The third and the last section of *House of a Thousand Doors* contains prose-pieces. Many of the pieces here are concerned with dreams, almost nightmares, in which the poet is alone. For our purpose, we discuss here only the prose-poem "House of Mirrors" which is a dream-like sequence of stories. Using superstitions, history, dogma and legends from India, France and Ireland, Meena Alexander builds a magical hall of mirrors which is at the same time an illusion and a real place. "House of Mirrors" brings together the poems and prose pieces of *House of a Thousand Doors* in the figure of a child. The girl-child mounts a cart and moves on to see different events in history and legend. She sees Dierd[e] of the sorrows and the pram built for Jeanne d' Arc, a pram constructed in such a way that the child warrior-saint could not move her head to see her burning visions. Under the pram is a plaque which reads:

Deidre imprisoned for love

Jeanne for her visions.

The latter, laid in this pram

from the instant of her birth

for the sake of her neck. She was not allowed to move her
head for fear the visions would burn
her.

This pram has been brought from the
courtyard of the Chateau de Chinon,
through the courtesy of the French
Friendship Society. (HTD, p. 122)

The pram and the old cart lie abandoned in the courtyard. The child is not content to hear Krishna's flute; she imagines that she can play the flute and make her world dance. And the poet

concludes, for the time being, her exploration for words to express that which smoulders beneath the surface.

This prose piece maps out the internal geography of this much-travelled, supposedly “unhoused” diaspora poet. Without denying the importance of her Syrian Christian heritage, Alexander rejects Christian and Cartesian dualisms of mind and body in adopting an intensely personal and expressive English Romantic tradition.

It is this brooding spirit which comes with it, a whole wealth of memories of a life lived with an intense awareness of the complexity of one’s birth that hovers over the majority of the poems in *House of a Thousand Doors*. These memories constitute the core of Meena Alexander’s poems. Like Ramanujan, Alexander also relies for her themes on her memories: memories of family, of culture, even of politics. Whether the poet is in Tiruvella or London or Manhattan, she is conscious of this one constant—her changeable, protean but core self.

The indestructible self which goes back to not just a lineage, but a self that is alive with a sense of place, even the smell of flowers and fruits and The earth which have lingered with her since her childhood. The most abiding memory of course is that of the unforgettable maternal grandfather whose end denotes to her the end of an era. In an interview with Govindasamy, Meena Alexander explains her vision of home and diaspora:

I think there is always a confusion that is attached to a separation from home, whatever home is, and for me I think the landscape of Kerala and those shores provided that home emotionally. So that on the one hand I think I tried to look at the shift and the multiplicity and the constant change of the world, as I have been travelling from one place to another, as something that gives me access. At the same time, there is this need always to return, sometimes to a place that is constructed in the mind, I mean the shelter. Shelters are actual but also become part of what mind makes up, almost imaginary homelands, if you wish.²²

This remark of Meena Alexander about home, by extension, refers well to the other diaspora poets too. This reminds us a poem by Sujata Bhatt in which she defines her notion of home:

What does it mean to feel at home?

Sometimes when you walk into a house
and wander through the rooms until you feel the doors
and windows snug around you,
when you walk across the wooden floors and feel
blood clots in your throat then you know
it’s the wrong house.

What if it’s the wrong country?²³

We can say that the poems in the *House of a Thousand Doors* are open texts with several themes, several desires, having their own associational structure. Generations of women, houses and traditions,

The enigma and realities of love and death, the age-old rituals, myth and legend, all appear and reappear in *House of a Thousand Doors*. The poems, letters and prose-poems of this collection are also connected through recurring emotions which move back and forth between fear and joy.

Very often they allude to feminist and nationalist concerns, the difficulties of living in an alien culture and exile, the question of the old and the new and her marginal bits-and-pieces existence. The poet is struggling with these issues not only in her poems but also in her own life. In an interview Meena Alexander says about her struggle:

In my own life, there's this painful edge of struggling all the time, to keep the truth of what is fragmented, broken and unresolved, even violent. In one way, it's a kind of immigrant living almost at the level of metaphor. Of course, at the level of actuality, that happens too, and that's how one writes... There's always the constant crossing of borders. For me, finding meaning comes very much through a sense of identification with what is struggling rather than what is fully formed.²⁴

The above comment of the poet is interesting because very often she writes about these critical and unresolved issues of her diaspora. That is why, *House of a Thousand Doors* is an open-ended diasporic text which is, to quote Kerns "is neither an easy nor an exotic book....[It is an] important literature from a wide range of experiences".²⁵

Meena Alexander has lived away from India for most of her life. Her literary output almost entirely belongs, as far as origin is concerned, to the West but she has never felt at home out there because there you have to constantly explain and answer questions about your origin, colour and profession. With all the recognition and adulation she is always ill at ease:

As much as anything else I am a poet writing in America.

But American poet? What sort? Surely not of the Robert Frost or Wallace Stevens variety? An Asian-American poet then? Clearly that sounds better. Poet tout court? Will that fit? No, not at all. There is very little I can be tout court in America except perhaps woman, mother. But even there, I wonder. Everything that comes to me is hyphenated. A woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a postcolonial language, as she waits for the red lights to change on Broadway. A Third World woman poet, who takes as her right the inner city of Manhattan, making up poems about the hellhole of the subway line, the burnt-out blocks so close to home on the Upper West Side, finding there, news of the world.²⁶

Thus, Meena Alexander's sense of diaspora in *House of a Thousand Doors* takes on a form, scale and intimacy all its own created through memory, nostalgia and desire. We see aspects of belonging and un belonging, rootedness and transience, physical and mental travel, diasporic dislocation—all explored with power and poignancy. The poems in general are marked by the twin metaphors of loss and recovery. While the loss is real in terms of spatial and temporal distance from the motherland, the recovery can only be imaginary or at best aesthetic. For Alexander, home is not merely an address or a point on a map but an internal identity. It is indeed gratifying that Alexander has not only the right idiom at her command but also a native sensibility to articulate a variety of diasporic experiences with striking originality. References Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993), p. 3.

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