

**Revisiting ‘indigeneity’: A study of Meena Alexander’s selected writings:
*The Shock of Arrival, Poetics of Dislocation and Birthplace with Buried Stones***

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Abstract

Contrary to popular assumption about ‘indigenous’ being synonymous with tribal, indigenous ties also signify the interconnection between people, their land, and culture. In postcolonial scenario of India, both “modernity” and “indigenous” are complicated and consistently contested terms. Moreover, colonial modernity has ruptured the notion of indigenous, even as the Indian postcolonial space longs for its indigenous past. The present paper endeavours to focus on the problem of modern transnational community in the selected poems of Meena Alexander. At the same time, it will also attempt to examine how far the poet has justified modern anxiety with the indigenous past. Alexander’s poems show a new generation’s nostalgia for past, longing of the lost moments and its oscillations in recurrent memory connected to the homeland. The paper would hence, venture to explore Meena Alexander’s treatment of the elements of migration, identity, and memory in her poems. She has dealt with transformation of nationalist homogenized identity to a dual or mixed identity where the ‘in-between-ness’ keeps interrogating the existence. Memory in time and space is the sign of modernity. In diasporic sense, where availability is also a new unavailability, where being globally connected leads to distancing oneself from the very root, return to the root is the only option left. However, Meena Alexander through her poems has not only revealed a traumatic-self but also a troubled identity of the immigrants. As an immigrant and as a poet writing about ‘India’, Alexander has marked her return to her ‘indigeneity’, metaphorically.

Present paper addresses specifically the relation between modern postcolonial self and indigenous culture in Meena Alexander’s poetry and essay collections, *The Shock of Arrival* (1996) and *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009) and *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013).

Key Words: Modernity, Indigenous, Migration, Identity, Memory

“To build is in itself already to dwell.” – Heidegger

Indigenous signifies a person in a close proximity to his/her culture. Catering to popular belief, most of the time, the word connotes aboriginal. A little twist can lead to get another meaning. Being close to the root(homeland) and being close to the identity(cultural) in the context of belongingness is indigenous. In other words, being native is being indigenous. In the realm of postcolonialism, this term reflects nostalgia of a native for his/her homeland-connectivity outside its geopolitical spaces. Border-crossing is not restricted to contemporary phenomena. People have been on move since ancient days for trade, for religious preaching, for war etc. Under colonialism, border-crossing was involuntary. Catering to the need of labour for

plantations after the abolition of slavery, then colonised were forced to migrate and work as bonded labourers in British colonies. However, things in contemporary times are different and people are shifting voluntarily. To what extent this voluntary shifting is voluntary is a question to ponder. Whatever be the time period, migration phenomena are a play of three things: migrants, homeland and hostland. Hence, space and place play a vital role in the discourse of dislocation. Narratives belong to this discourse traces how a loss of one location creates nostalgia. Dwelling between a past memory and present alien place, migrants negotiate the loss of place and space by creating an identity of their own. Longing for the lost place becomes a scar which cannot be undone, a moment which cannot be erased and a memory which is so deep that it holds a large part of identity. Migrants with their craving for their culture become indigenous and then attain the status of being 'diaspora'. Thus, being indigenous signifies a connectedness with the root whereas being modern manifests itself in delinking with the root and accepting newness. Hence, being modern and again being indigenous are two contested terms.

Oxford dictionary gives meaning to the word 'indigeneity' is the fact of originating or occurring naturally in a particular place. as Mathias Guenther puts it,

"Indigenous' is a term applied to people – and by the people to themselves – who are engaged in an often desperate struggle for political rights, for land, for a place and space within a modern nation's economy and society" (*Concept of Indigeneity*: 17).

In the debate concerning 'indigeneity', it is mandatory to explore the concept of identity. Tracing an indigenous attitude and reinventing it in the contemporary scenario has become a need of the hour. Multiculturalism provides a threat to migrants' native culture and identity because of assimilation. Native versus non-native confrontation goes on and the need to preserve cultural roots becomes essential. However, indigeneity should not be confused with being traditional. Both are non-identical so far as their ideology is concerned. Indigeneity can be further termed as 'neo-traditional' or 'authentic' so far as return to the root is concerned. At the same time, this indigeneity is not against 'modernity' rather holding onto root while being modern. So these two concepts are two sides of the coin called 'contemporary Indian identity' outside India's geopolitical space. Modernity and indigeneity are essential but not primordial as discussed by Guenther. He further adds, "such notions 'reproduce themselves historically by risking themselves in novel conditions'" (18). Hence, indigeneity is a rupture as well as a continuity.

"Being contemporary, reinvented and negotiated constructs, indigenous definitions of indigeness are necessarily always 'hybrid constructions... both tribal and modern, local and worldly' (Clifford 1997: 154, 157). The essentialism inherent in indigenous definitions of what constitutes their traditional culture may thus actually turn out to be more apparent than real." (Guenther:19)

Shifting is not only physical rather an emotional one. Most of the time shifting accompanies a baggage of homelands memories. Moreover, the marginalization and '*Other-ing*' (Emphasis added) of non-natives by the natives of the hostland aggravate this longing. Furthermore, a sense of alienation interrogates migrants' belonging. Hence, in colonizer/colonized binary, being indigenous is to reclaim cultural roots long suppressed by colonizers during colonization. Though the centre is shifted from British to somewhere else, the

‘White’ persists forming the centre. Self/ other, white/non-white, authentic/mixed, pure/impure, native/non-native dichotomies are all pervasive in this context.

“Waldron is saying that “aboriginality” is synonymous with “indigeneity;” therefore it follows that, if aboriginality is the “quality of being aboriginal,” then indigeneity can be defined as “the quality of being indigenous,” which itself describes the quality of being born or produced naturally in a land or region. Furthermore, I must point out that none of the terms heretofore mentioned should be confused with another term that routinely gets tossed around.” (“The problem with indigeneity”)

When modernity allows people for a voluntary migration, longing for homeland or being nostalgic about the lost space makes them indigenous. Hence, both attitudes go together with border-crossing. Arjun Appadurai writes,

“Modernity belongs to the small family of theories that both declares and desires universal applicability for itself. What is new about modernity (or about the idea that its newness is a new kind of newness) follows from his duality” (*Modernity at Large*:01).

Imagination being a ‘constitutive feature of modern subjectivity’(Appadurai:03), migrants imagine of an ideal homeland. This imagination though in the beginning confines to an individual, becomes collective with shared memory. Hence, migration creates an ethnicity which is a collective phenomenon. Ethnicity or collective identity has brought collective imagination where media plays a great role in bringing them in close connection with memories. Movies carry flavours of homeland and bring about a collective sentiment. Looking at modernity in the Indian context is looking at the changes in the field of literature, culture and society at large. In the arena of literature, modernity as expressed by E.V.Ramakrishnan and Udaya Kumar in their article “Modernism in Indian Literature”,

“Modernism in Indian literature, like Indian modernity, resists tidy definitions. Just as experiences of modernity outside the Western world have prompted accounts of ‘alternative,’ ‘colonial,’ or ‘vernacular’ modernities, literary modernism in India calls for a recognition of historical and locational specificities. A perplexing diversity of languages, communities and literary cultures, the continued life of oral traditions and uneven levels of literacy, and complexities of political and economic realities in postcolonial India confront attempts to chart modernism’s career in India. The category itself is Protean, displaying multiple meanings and accents in various regions and contexts; what follows is no more than a preliminary map aimed at an initial orientation” (Web).

Hence, looking at indigeneity in the context of modernity is like looking at two different concepts which are not only contradictory but also complex. However, there is no denying of the fact that modernity brings the feeling of indigeneity among a mass. Though indigeneity begins as an individual phenomenon, mass media makes it collective.

When Wordsworth explored, “I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity,” it denoted that a poem is the expression of emotion. When T.S. Eliot challenged that “poetry is not a turning loose

of emotions, but an escape from emotions; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”, it signified that a poet’s personality is kept aside while writing. Wordsworth was a romantic poet who privileged emotion and imagination and T.S.Eliot was a modern poet who emphasized on poetry being free from the personality of the poet. In the context of modern poetry where the theme is the memory of lost place and space, it is the amalgamation of both poet’s emotion, migrants’ emotion and a collective ethnic imagination yet not imaginary. That emotion is real, concrete and felt. Poems have always been a medium of carrying memory. Melody and rhythm bear longing and hence, appeal to the heart as carrying the saga of heart. Memory lies deep in heart and poem serves as the perfect medium. Poetry, memory, and identity maintain a strong connection between them expressing each other whereas memory and identity giving tone to poetry. To quote Alexander,

“Poetry takes as its purview what is deeply felt and is essentially unsayable; that is the paradox on which the poem necessarily turns. A poet uses language as a painter uses colour, a primary material out of which to make art. But the language that is used all the time and all around us—in sound bites, advertisements, political rhetoric, newsprint—needs to be rinsed free so that it can be used as the stuff of art. The poem in its act of meaning-making turns away from the literal, its truth bound to what can be evoked. And evocation is sparked by memory” (Alexander: “What Use is Poetry?”)

Meena Alexander, a renowned poet and acclaimed scholar who writes in the context of ‘postcoloniality’ generally focusing especially on the trauma of dislocation, memory, belongingness and diasporic negotiation. Many a time her focus stays on postcolonial female subjectivity. Her own displacement as she has stayed in India, Sudan, and England before immigrating to the United States in 1979, coloured her imagination. She is undoubtedly one of the finest poets of the postcolonial realm.

"I am... a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing."(*Fault Lines*:74)

"I am a poet writing in America. But American poet? An Asian-American poet then? A woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman who makes up lines in English...A Third World woman poet...?" (*Fault Lines*:173)

Her prose writings on trauma, migration, and memory collected in *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience and Poetics of Dislocation* (1996) are seminal texts on postcoloniality. Ujwala Vijay in his dissertation says,

“Meena Alexander’s poetry is a complex interweaving of the Indian and immigrant experiences. Her poetry emerges out of the consciousness of hanging between two worlds, between memory and present experiences. The issues of identity formation and retention are crucial for her. She skillfully joins contradictory geographies, matrilineal tradition of home and her intimate thoughts and feelings” (“Themes and techniques in the poetry of Meena Alexander”).

As the name suggests, Alexander's book deals with varied postcolonial experiences. It further emphasizes problems of gender in the postcolonial context, religion, and diasporic sentiments. Her essays are not limited to one place. Publisher's Weekly writes,

"Her essay " Well-Jumped Women," about a poetry reading she gave in England for female Indian refugees from Uganda, deserves to become a feminist classic; " Translating Violence" spotlights Hindu-Muslim conflict transplanted to New Jersey."

Being a writer of exile, she has presented a thoughtful yet very expressive account of the postcolonial experience. Oana Sabo writes in "Creativity and Place: Meena Alexander's Poetics of Migration" that,

"*The Shock of Arrival* (1996) and *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009)—texts that explore the author's diasporic travels and her shocking realization that she is perceived as a racialized minority in the United States" (67).

When V.S.Naipaul's *Enigma Of Arrival* gives an autobiographical account of his arrival to an English town of Wiltshire, Alexander has documented various experiences. Alghadeer explores diasporic writing as,

"Through close readings of several literary texts addressing the migrant minority experience in contemporary South Asian American women poetry, one seems to encounter at the crossroads, different settings, languages, histories, traditions, and genres alongside a fusion of diverse cultures... Apart from cultural, regional, and historical differences, many South Asian American women poets explicitly share prevalent subject matters and themes including identity formation, migratory experiences, predicament of dislocation, loss of homeland, ethnicity, and memory. In so doing, not only do they enrich the landscape of minority poetry in America, but also contextualize the complexity of migrant minority experience in a foreign country" (85).

The very expression of Alexander's shocking tale of arrival connotes her return to Indian root and belongingness. Having done that, she has challenged her diasporic racial minority status and put herself in a global framework. Displacement is a painful phenomenon both in ancient time and in the contemporary context of migration. Furthermore, concepts like double or triple migration, issues of citizenship, and dwelling in between many identities complicate it. Migrants struggle to keep one identity in a cosmopolitan ambience. Diasporic writings, today, deal with a mass dislocation to various places where the focus lies on the troubled identity of migrants. However, Alexander has privileged one place, the United States and a shared experience, a collective experience of being diaspora and diasporic writer and feels that "America has...all the energy and excitement of novelty" (*Poetics of Dislocation*: 194). In her view, migration to one place also deals with complicated and contesting identities of migrants. Alghadeer explores this hybridity what theorist Homi Bhabha addresses as 'third space',

"...various concepts including hybridity, difference, mimicry, and ambivalence address cultural

intersections that go far beyond the polarity of the self and the other, and East and West. Therefore, cultures do not exist in isolation but rather interact and overlap within a 'hybrid space' which Bhabha calls; "the third space of enunciation" (p. 36-39). In this 'third space,' he observes, "a temporal movement and passage" occurs while diverse cultural identities merge together into "a connective tissue that constructs the difference". He further asserts that this 'third space' tends to "open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" and consequently reshapes the definition of a new cultural identity" ("Exploring Third Space":84).

With the rise of states, the concept of nation confronts a constant interrogation. Contradictory cultures have made migrants adopt a hybridized identity. Sudesh Mishra expresses,

"...the whole question of diasporic identity ends up being linked to situation-specific becoming...rather than to the tensional pressures exercised by bipolar nation-states" (17).

Alexander's return to her roots signifies ingenuity whereas her unproblematic assimilation to the United States marks modernity in her welcoming new-ness. In this local/global and homeland/hostland realm, consciousness has sprung from realizing the difference, interrogating identity, and compelling to connect to root. Both her *The Shock of Arrival* and *Poetics of Dislocation* focus on diasporic sentiments and physical displacement leading to an emotional one. *Shock of arrival* explores the shock of the poet at arriving the new hegemonic centre, America. Furthermore, it explores place and memory where the 'place' is the place of arrival or hostland and memory is connected to the homeland. G.Yamini explores,

"*The Shock of Arrival* elaborates Du Bois —concept of double consciousness when she explains her creative process: —It is from the consciousness of unselfing that I create my work. This consciousness reflects itself literally in Alexander's hyphenated identities, —everything that comes to me is hyphenated: a woman-poet, a woman- poet-of-color, a south Indian woman-poet-of-colour" (Yamini, "DISLOCATION AND DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE POETRY OF MEENA ALEXANDER":150).

The fragmentation that she has used in her *Shock of Arrival* like fault lines, palimpsest, collage which are symbolic of geographical displacement and being uncomfortable with that. She calls herself, "the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation" (15). Moreover, in *Poetics*, she asked for a paper to make a boat which will look like a tent. She believes that a poet is free-spirited. Hence, the poet leads a nomadic life and her use of tent is symbolic of poet's gipsy but art-inspired life (IX-X). Hence, a poet and an immigrant have an unsettled life. However, as Sabo rightly points out,

"Alexander's self-depiction as "a perpetual immigrant, a woman with nowhere to lay her head" is problematic in its conflation of literal and metaphorical homelessness and its intimation that the author's and the homeless woman's are analogous experiences. The issue of empathy suggested by Alexander's rhetoric of homelessness overlooks class disparities, especially given the context in which the author writes the poem: as a newly arrived immigrant who observes a homeless woman from the height of her apartment that she rented in order "to have the quiet in which to write" (71).

Hence, overlooking class-based asymmetry, Alexander can be interrogated at many levels: how does then her attitude become diasporic when one stratum of society is overlooked? How can it address the mass when she has already missed a crucial part?

“As in the case of Naipaul, for Alexander, to arrive in America constitutes a point of departure for new affective ties to subjects who bear the burden of a similar history. Paradoxically, then, Meena Alexander’s locating herself in America—as an Indian immigrant and as a new American poet—involves her return to India, South Asia, Africa, and indirectly, through Naipaul, to the Caribbean, and her understanding of her Americanness through postcolonial lenses. The shock of arrival carries then the necessity of return, if only through memory and appropriately redefined literary affinities.” (Sabo:78)

Her *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013) explores a travel experience which is not only fragmented but also reflects migrants’ in-between identity. ‘In-between’ identity signifies an identity that dwells in between no more belongs to the homeland and has not yet turned a native of the new place. *Birthplace with Buried Stones* is a poem in five parts. The style of the unrhymed couplet and frequent dislocations allows us a flow of thoughts that is continuous and varied. Non-fixity of poem’s lines signifies a flow of discontinuity, rupture or break. A break that migrant suddenly encounters from previous society, system, culture, language and everything rests in memory but never rests in peace. Poems exhibit a traveller travelled from India to New York where reference to mythology and rituals of India are all pervasive. The poems continuously travel between materiality and mystery. In a collection of poems like *Birth Place with Buried Stones*, *Morning Ritual*, *Question Time*, *Migrant Memory*, *For My Father* and *Karachi 1947*, she has given a picture of travel, fragmentation, the question of identity and memory,

“Through the portals of that larger chaos,
What we can scarcely conceive of in our minds –
We’d rather think of starry nights with biting flames
Trapped inside tree trunks, a wellspring of desire
Igniting men and gods, A lava storm where butterflies dance-
Comes bloodletting at the borders,
Severed tongues, riots in the capital,
The unspeakable hurt of history:
So the river Ganga pours into the sea.” (*Birth Place with Buried Stones*: iv)

Poetry is a subjective experience. Using a personal medium, Alexander explored a subjective diasporic experience. Contemporary diasporic literature has moved from centre/periphery debate. The focus is now on individual’s third space navigating through two or more than that cultures with contradictory confrontations. Most of Alexander’s poems have ‘I’ as addresser which supports this stance. Alexander’s poems and essays recollect her cultural

identity which is manifested by a series of memories and constantly oscillate between past and present. Her poems can be categorized as confessional poems looking at the judgments she makes, an extended consciousness which dwells in between materiality and mystery and a confined and sublime arena. In her travel writings, her autobiographical elements along with shared experiences of people she has always talked both about connecting to the root in modern time. She searches for her own identity being a migrant in the world that consistently labels people. Nostalgia, ethnicity, culture etc. are the concepts difficult to define. Yet, to a poet's eye that defies every convention, these things can be addressed. When non-Western literature is homogenized, it highlights nothing but one the Eurocentric outlook. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak mentions of a contemporary category of diaspora,

“In this era of global capital triumphant, to keep responsibility alive in the reading and teaching of the textual is at first sight impractical. It is, however, the right of the textual to be responsible, responsive, and answerable. The planet` is, here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible. It is such collectivities that must be opened up with the question —How many are we? when cultural origin is detranscendentalized into fiction—the toughest task in the diaspora. (*Death of a Discipline*: 101-2)

People shift voluntarily in search of prosperity but the alien ambience creates a need to return to the native. The ‘native’ does not restrict itself to the geographical place. It is a space where one enjoys being oneself. In a modern sense, she has given expression to transnational shifting and assimilation. At the same time, being nostalgic about the lost time, place, culture, she has attempted to be indigenous. Travelling between indigeneity and modernity, she has never lost control over her poetic self and has never failed to provide the reader an experience of melody, a melody which is of his/her own. To conclude, in her own words where she has connected her creativity with decolonization and ethnicity,

“And so the questions of colonialism bleed into an era of decolonization, into the complicated realms of American ethnicity. Then too, walking down a crowded sidewalk, descending the subway, there is always one's own body, which is marked as other in this country. Ethnicity can draw violence. And this is part of the postcolonial terrain, part of the sorrow and Knowledge of our senses” (*Shock of Arrival*:72).

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