
Language of Dislocation and Fragmentation in Meena

Alexander's Memoir and Poems.

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Meena Alexander, an internationally acclaimed poet, scholar and writer, describes herself as a “South-Indian woman-poet” who writes in English, a post colonial language (The Shock of Arrival, 127). As a Third- World-woman-poet, she is an exemplary of a number of South Asian American women writers who thematizes her own multi-lingualism and multi migrations.

Born as Mary Elizabeth (a combination of her grandmothers' name) on 17th Feb 1957 to George and Mary Alexander. Representing her multi-lingualism not only in her works but even in her suggests it – Meena. She has been called ‘Meena’ since her birth and officially changed her name to Meena not only to get rid of the colonial burden which her original name suggests but also to show her truer self.

Although belonging to a Syrian Christian family from Kerala, Meena was born in Allahabad. Somehow her birth in Allahabad foreshadows her future- a future of multiple migrations. At the age of 5, Meena moved to Sudan with her family where she started writing poetry at an early age of ten. She enrolled in Khartoum University in 1964 to study English and French literature. Against the wishes of her mother to get an admission in Madras University, she again crossed the borders to reach to Nottingham University for her doctoral studies. She earned her Ph.D. at the age of twenty-two in 1973 on the construction of self-identity in the early English poets of the Romantic literature.

Having felt a sense of intense dislocation and alienation in England, she came back to India and taught at the Universities of Delhi and Hyderabad. During her five years stay in India, Alexander published her first poem collections- “*The Bird's Bright Ring*” (1976), “*I Root My Name*” (1977), and “*Without Place*” (1978). Here, she met David Lelyveld, a Jewish American historian with whom she fell in love and decided to marry him. This marriage took her to America “a country she had read about but never seen” (FL 157). Currently, she teaches Ph.D. program at the Graduate Centre and the MFA program at Hunter College.

Since her first publications, she has published eleven anthologies of poetry, two novels and a memoir, *Fault Lines*.

Alexander's writings reflect a tension created by the influences of the several languages and cultures and serve as a way to derive meaning from her wide range of experiences. Writing across various literary genres, Alexander has fictionalized her personal experiences and has claimed that she explores the same issues- issues of displacement, migrations, growing up in a female body and being a woman writer in a racialized world in the United States (Ali Zainab and Dharini Rasiah, "Interview with Meena Alexander"). These issues are very well represented through the use of language and supported with various rhetorical devices to provide her writings the ebb and flow of lyric.

Rhetorical devices like alliteration, anaphora, epiphora and anadiplosis are used to emphasize certain ideas in her writings. Examples:-

Alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds)

"...That's all I am, a woman cracked by **multiple migrations**..." (FL 2)

"...His eyes are open, worn with **fatigue from fighting for** breath..." (FL 31)

Anaphora (the repetition of a single word or as long as an entire phrase in the beginning of successive clauses. It can be used with questions, negations, hypotheses, conclusions and subordinating conjunctions.) One of the wide use of anaphora was done in one of her poems entitled, *Fragment*, in praise of the book published in *Al-Mutannabi Street Anthology*.

"**Book** made of leaves from a mango tree

Book of rice paper tossed by monsoon winds

Book of pearls from grandmother's wrist

– **Book** of illiterate heart –

Book of alphabets burnt so the truth can be told

Book of fire on Al-Mutannabi street

Book for a child who wakes to smouldering ash

Book of singing grief

Book of reeds vanishing as light pours through"

Epiphora (the counterpart of anaphora. The repetition of the same word or words at the end of successive phrases or sentences.)

"...Not **areal place**. It didn't look like **a real place**..." (FL 240)

"...coughing **children**, feverish **children**..." (NR 10)

Anadiplosis (the repetition of the word of a line or clause to begin the next.)

“...I seize on this living **hand, hand** of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it to the *qalam*...” (FL 236)

“Memory is a red bird perched in a **bush, a bush** with roots swirling in a current of water...” (FL 254)

Allusion which means to refer to some famous person, event or place and could be drawn from literary, history, Greek myths and the Bible is used very often in Alexander’s writings. It is linked with a major theme ever present in her works: the theme of multiculturalism versus nationalism. This conflict is ingrained in Alexander’s own personality. This duality is concerned on one hand with Alexander’s yearning to be fixed in a particular culture and tradition. On the other hand she does not want to stay within the boundaries of the stereotypical role assigned to women in her Keralite tradition. She wishes and even has achieved her goal of being an independent woman who is capable enough to maintain a balance between her professional and personal life. The duality is further emphasized when she looks up to her ancestral figures, her grandmothers: Mariamma and Elizabeth whom she idolizes in her memoir and poems.

Mariamma, her paternal grandmother was not well educated yet was the power of Kozencheri House. Grandmother Elizabeth or Eli or Kunju as Alexander calls her, was her maternal grandmother whom she has never seen in form. She was an M.A in English literature and an active participant in the struggle of Indian independence and had also fought for the issue of women education in her days while grandmother Mariamma seldom set foot out of the boundaries of her house. If grandmother Mariamma is a symbol of domesticity then grandmother Kunju represented the spirit of freedom while both women were firmly rooted in culture and tradition, the roots Alexander has curved for since her early childhood. In comparison to them, Alexander describes herself as a “woman with no fixed place.” (FL 15)

The selection of words especially the kind of proper nouns Alexander uses depict the conflict of world and home not only in her poems but also in her memoir and novels. Sometimes she even quotes whole phrases and lines written by some famous author or poet.

Raw Silk (2004) is one such anthology where she weaves the home and the world together to present a picture of the aftermath of 9/11. She clubs “her memories of other places, wars and acts of violence to lead a penetrating shadow to the way she looks around her damaged city.” (Jacquelyn Pope)

“I am **Sita** and **Iphigenia**, **Demeter** and **Draupadi**.

I am not fit for burning” (L – 19-20, Dialogue by a City Wall)

“What a circus with **Frantz**
and **Mohandas**

squabbling onshore.” (L 19-21, Hard Rowing)

“Somewhere you wrote: **Despedida**,

If I die leave the balcony open!” (L 13, 3. Central Park, Carousel)

“-**Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit...**

cette paisible rumeur-le that sort of thing

and the town was literally blazing:” (L 5-8, Raw Silk)

Not only proper nouns but every single word clubbed with punctuation marks in a phrase, fragment or full length sentence depict the complexity of Alexander’s life. The combination of the bits and pieces of sentences that is the short sentences or fragments with more complex slowing structures promote the exploration or representation of fractured identity. They represent her inner and the outer reality which she has often tried to link. Therefore, most of her writings demonstrate a conflict between internal and external bringing the postcolonial diasporic subject to the forefront.

“And what of all the cities and small towns and villages I have lived in since birth:

Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, all within the boundaries of India; Khartoum in the Sudan; Nottingham in Britain; and now this island of Manhattan? How should I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?” (FL, 1)

This paragraph starts with a conjunction ‘And’ which is generally used to link two or more words, groups or clauses. Besides this general function of ‘And’, here it performs the role of linking two words or phrases that are same in order to emphasize the degree of something, or to suggest that something continues or increases over a period of time. In this context, ‘And’ is used to emphasize the degree of fragmentation experienced by Alexander through her movements across several continents.

However, when ‘And’ is used at the beginning of a sentence in order to introduce something else in addition with what is already said. But some people believe that starting a sentence with ‘And’ is ungrammatical. But it is now quite common in both spoken and written English.

To look at the kind of punctuation marks used by Alexander in this paragraph, she uses colon and semi colon. Colon is used to inform the reader about what follows, clarifies, explains etc. Alexander uses it to explain in which cities, towns and villages she has spent her life.

Use of semi colon indicates the link between two independent sentences more closely than they would be with full stop or period. She uses semi colon as she does not want to break the connection by an abrupt use of full stop.

This paragraph proceeding this paragraph ended with the words “multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body”. In the phrase, she personifies the experiences of her life, emphasizing the impact each has had in creating her identity crisis. This current paragraph is a continuation or explanation of the “journeys of one body”. Here the use of ‘And’ is an attempt to collect or stitch the fragments of these “broken geography” to come to the conclusion of a whole self.

“When I arrived in America in 1979, five months pregnant, newly married to David, whom I had met in Hyderabad, I felt torn from the India I had learnt to love. In those days I was struck by all the differences between Hyderabad and New York. I could not get over how little dust there seemed to be in Manhattan. Then why pack up the vegetables, celery, broccoli, cabbage, in plastic? My own soul seemed to me, then, a cabbagelike thing, closed tight in a plastic cover. My two words – present and past – were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation.” (FL, 15)

Starting the sentence with a subordinate conjunction ‘when’ followed by ‘I’ as its subject and ‘arrived’ as its verb moving to the expression of specific time period of her pregnancy, Alexander adds another adverbial phrase ‘newly married to David’ to this sentence which is further explained by ‘whom’, a relative pronoun. The last phrase is a noun phrase mentioning Alexander’s feelings of being away from India.

The second sentence is a prepositional phrase with ‘in’ at its beginning ‘those’ ‘days’ as being determiner and noun respectively. After prepositional phrase Alexander begins a noun phrase but she does not interrupt the flow of the sentence with the use of comma which is usually marked after a prepositional phrase.

Third sentence is a noun phrase with ‘could not get over’ as its verb phrase and two adverbial phrases, ‘how little dust’ and ‘there seemed to be’.

The fourth short interrogative sentence starts with ‘then’. When ‘then’ is used at the beginning of a sentence it is to introduce a comment or an extra piece of information to what

has already been said. Here Alexander comments or to say questions on the use of plastic bags to keep the vegetables in when there seems to be no dust in Manhattan.

Alexander makes a comparison of a cabbage with her soul in the fifth sentence of this sequence. She feels that her soul is wrapped up, is not able to open up in this new environment as she is feeling alienated.

The last sentence serves as a major comment on Alexander's situation. Two independent clauses are linked with the conjunction 'and'. Here she uses em dash. The common types of dashes used in writing are 'en' dash and 'em' dash. They are so named because they are the same width as the small letter n and the capital letter M, respectively. She uses 'em' dash which is most often used to indicate a break in thought or to set an appositive off from the rest of the sentence. The dash works somewhat like parentheses or commas, but it is used where a stronger punctuation is needed. It can connect an independent clause with the 'interrupting' thought like independent clause – thought – independent clause. Here the use of em dash clarifies what Alexander means by two worlds.

In this paragraph Alexander begins by specifying her present location which compels her to make a comparison between India and Manhattan. Due to this comparison, she realizes that her past which was India and her present which is Manhattan is divided serves as the cause of her dislocation.

Apart from showcasing her fragmentary self in her writings, Alexander is also preoccupied with the notion of putting her feelings and intense emotions in a colonial or foreign language. She confess in her memoir that "English alienated me from what I was born to (Malayalam, yet) was also the language of intimacy and bore the charged power of writing."

"Sometimes I think of the English language as a pale skin that has covered up my flesh, the broken parts of my world. In order to free my face, in order to appear, I have had to use my teeth and nails, I have had to tear that fine skin, to speak out my discrepant otherness." (FL, 73)

The first sentence contains an adverbial clause and an adjectival clause: first starting with 'Sometimes' and second with 'the broken'. In the first clause 'pale', an adjective is modifying the noun 'skin' and in the second 'broken' acts as a modifier on the noun 'parts'.

The second sentence is a chain of phrases. Alexander uses the subordinate conjunction 'in order to' to begin her second sentence. Here subordination creates unequal emphasis between ideas and emphasizes a major idea in the independent clause, while placing minor ideas in

subordinate, or dependent, clauses. Thus the emphasis increases on the main clause in which she says that she has to use physical force so as to be free of that fine skin of language so that her real self could be seen again.

Alexander employs a metaphor of skin to her knowledge of the English language. “She fulfills this metaphor by claiming that she must use her teeth and nails, also biological parts of herself, to break free from the ways in which linguistic discourse has subjectified her by masking her ‘discrepant otherness’, following the metaphor we are led to see how the act of speech forces Alexander to wallow in an ambivalence since she must utilize different parts of her own body, nails and vocal cords, against one another to escape the internalization of colonial ideology that accompanies knowledge of the colonizer’s language. This ambivalence is enforced in the very next paragraph when Alexander writes “Sometimes I have to write myself into being. Write in order not to be erased”. This shows how the English language works as hegemonic discourse that has consumed Alexander’s identity to a certain extent but nonetheless the medium that allows her to write, which, in turn permits her to disclose her colonial experiences. This leads to the realization of author’s frustrations with those dualities that characterize the life of an immigrant woman of Third World origin” comments Rahul Krishna Gairola.

“As a child in India, I had learnt to speak English along with Malayalam and Hindi. Syllables, phrases, sentences of English flowed along as part of the river of my experience. In Khartoum, however, as a young child of five, cut from the fluidities of my Indian world, I had to learn English all over again. Now it was not just one language spoken among many; it was the most important one and I was an outsider confronting it.” (FL 111)

Starting the first sentence again with a subordinate conjunction ‘As’ to put an extra emphasis on the independent clause which identifies English language as one of the many which Alexander learnt during her childhood.

The second sentence lacks conjunctions but is linked with the punctuation mark, comma. All the three segments of this sentences are noun phrases. These segments in collaboration elucidate on an experience of learning languages as a whole in which all the languages were given equal importance and were equally important Alexander.

The third sentence brings in the contrast with the previous two sentences. Developing with the noun ‘Khartoum’ and interrupted by the adverb, ‘however’, the third sentence moves on to the noun ‘child’ modified by ‘young’ to another verb phrase “cut from the fluidities of my

Indian world” to a simple sentence which has ‘I’ as its subject, ‘had to learn’ is the predicator and ‘English’ as its object.

The fourth sentence in this chain is a cleft sentence. The sentence structure is- it + was + not + just (adverb) + one language spoken among many is the emphasized phrase. This phrase is connected to another cleft sentence with the use of colon and connected to the noun phrase “I was an outsider confronting it” with the conjunction ‘and’.

This paragraph is a comparison between the experiences of learning languages. The first two lines note Alexander’s experience of studying English beside other languages of her childhood. Whereas the other two sentences mention about the pain of a five years old child, who has to learn English not as an addition to her already known languages but as an authoritative one. To make Alexander learn English with all its correct pronunciation and accent, her parents even employed a tutor. Her English tutor, Mrs. McDermott would make her repeat the words over and over again until Alexander pronounces them correctly. It was not that she did not know those words but she knew them in her Indian Malayalam accent which the tutor tried to replace with the “right model”. These lines not only demonstrate the physical pain “my mouth hurt” but also the psychological torment which Alexander has undergone.

On the face of constant agonies of displacement and hopes of relocation, Meena Alexander attempts to discover her self-hood in her present postcolonial situation. Lavina Dhingra Shankar comments that her style reveals an interesting blend of romantic sentimentalism and post-modern self-reflexivity and her constant is a search as well as a denunciation of the lost and new homes.

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