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## **Body, Memory and Diasporic Identity in Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines***

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**Abstract:**

*In this paper I argue that memory assumes a distinctive role as a trope for performance of diasporic identity. I trace the function of memory and relate it to the body to indicate a correlation with ethnic identity. The issue of memory and its relation to ethnic identity becomes clearer upon understanding its variable influence over one's sense of self. Ethnic identity in such a case becomes dynamic and seems able to transform itself into newer, different forms after registering, acknowledging and finally coming to terms with past identities. Past identities are transfigured through memory. Remembering thus becomes an act of self-transformation. I posit that through remembering and even creating her own memories from the past, the female ethnic self succeeds in relating the past to her present and extend this relation to future. The gaps and fissures in memory and conscious, as well as unconscious attempts to forget past incidents also help in assertion of the current self. Memory becomes a process whereby a subject narrates the past and eventually gains a sense of agency and power over the world inhabited by her. Memory thus successfully becomes a mode of performance of identity.*

**Keywords:** *Memory, nostalgia, diasporic identity, syncretic identity, ethnic self, female body*

In South Asian American writer Meena Alexander's memoir *Fault Lines*, memory assumes a distinctive role as a trope for performance of diasporic identity. In this paper I trace the function of memory and relate it to the body to indicate a correlation with ethnic identity. The issue of memory and its relation to ethnic identity becomes clearer upon understanding its variable influence over one's sense of self. Ethnic identity in such a case becomes dynamic and seems able to transform itself into newer, different forms after registering, acknowledging and finally coming to terms with past identities. Alexander underscores the classic problem of immigrant literature: what to do with the previous identity and how to deal with the new identity that shapes up as a result of migration. She shows a fragmentary concept of identity that is not necessarily pessimistic. Such a fragmentary concept is apparent in her reference to diasporic identity as being composed of bits and pieces. Her memoir predominantly deals with a fragmented, immigrant self that needs to be reconstructed and recovered. The fragmented self is recovered through remembering and the past identities are transfigured through memory. Remembering thus becomes an act of self-transformation. I posit that through remembering and even creating her own memories from the past, the female ethnic self in Alexander's memoir succeeds in relating the past to her present and extend this relation to future.

Alexander's art of storytelling adheres to what Walter Benjamin suggests in "The Storyteller" as the social use of memory: "Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes on a happening from generation to generation...in the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end." (Benjamin, 1977: 98). The recollective function of memory that creates a chain of tradition in Alexander's memoir serves to provide a sense of heritage and thereby attribute meanings to the immigrant experiences.

I also focus on the concept of writing the female body in relation to memory and migration in *Fault Lines*. For Alexander, the process of writing becomes an act of remembrance. My argument traces a relation between sensation and perception, corresponding to the physical and mental faculties, to highlight how ethnic memories contribute in shaping dynamic, multiple identities. Furthermore, I also explore the concept of memory as a gendered trope whereby the acts of remembering and forgetting are seen as gendered acts. In Alexander's case, for instance, the body and its relation to personal memories, including embedded collective histories, is significant. The act of writing itself becomes a performative, gendered act whereby the female diasporic self struggles to reconfigure a new identity. The female ethnic, immigrant self is encoded in multiple stories, histories, hybridities, homes and cultures. Alexander demonstrates how the body becomes instrumental in identifying useful memory and its relation to the ever-changing diasporic identity. The act of remembering thus also becomes an act of reclamation. In Alexander's writing memory transforms everything. *Fault Lines* reveals different instances wherein the memories are symptomatically conjoined with the body. As such the past is not an isolated entity; it rather *activates* the present and the future.

Alexander's approach to memory effectively represents the complexities of the act of remembering. She demonstrates how ethnicity's interaction with the dominant culture produces new, hybrid cultures and radical changes. The possibility of a meaningful cultural dialogue in ethnic narrative introduces the concept of dynamic, fluid diasporic identities. As Michael M. J. Fischer comments in his

essay, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," "the process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralistic, multidimensional concept of self: one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism" (Fischer, 1986:196). This multidimensional concept of self can be traced in Alexander's memoir where she struggles with fragmented ethnic selves to make sense of her life in America. The self needs to be remade and very often this is possible through accepting pluralism.

Alexander's use of the female body for delineating the various concerns such as migration, multiplicity of homes, memories--- both individual as well as collective --- recall the feminist urgency to express emotions and write through the body. Such a strategy then becomes a performance of identity that surpasses the Cartesian mind-body duality. As she explains, "Sometimes I think I have to write myself into being. Write in order not to be erased. What should I write with? Milk, blood, feces, spittle, stumps of bone, torn flesh? Is this mutilation? ... each might be a perfect blossoming" (Alexander, 1993:73). In *Woman, Native, Other* Trinh T. Minh-ha explains: "We write--- think and feel--- (with) our bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts. It is a perversion to consider thought the product of one specialized organ, the brain, and feeling, that of the heart" (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989:36-37). Woman's writing, according to Minh-ha becomes "organic writing" resisting separation (38). She also invokes what H el ene Cixous calls "writing the body." Cixous asserts that a woman "vitality defends the 'logic' of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true. She exposes herself. Really she makes what she thinks materialize carnally, she conveys meaning with her body." (Cixous, 1994:152). The collective body as a whole then "speaks" up instead of only the mind. Alexander's memoir delineates a similar 'logic' of her discourse with her body. Issues of race, ethnicity, gender etc. are related to the dilemma of being born in a dark, female body. Alexander "feminizes" her writings; she is able to articulate through the body multiple displacements or "fault lines". The body is not merely a metaphorical reference; it is also a medium of writing. The acknowledgement of the female body in fragmentary terms triggers a fragmentary concept of self, an embodied subjectivity that needs to be put together through writing. Writing about the body therefore acknowledges a disembodied self and becomes an act of embodiment, of giving body to such a self. Alexander's focus on the female body and its relation to the mind recalls the predominant concerns in feminism. Alexander joins contemporary feminist thinkers and writers in opposing Cartesian dualism by making the female body a site for struggles. As Elizabeth Grosz claims in *Volatile Bodies*, "Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and a historical term, the body may be seen as the...site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles" (Grosz, 1994:15). Alexander successfully portrays the female body as a site of contestation struggling amidst multiple dilemmas to refashion a new syncretic identity.

Alexander's dilemma of not having a viable history to define herself is beautifully evoked in the metaphor of fragmentation:

- What would it mean for one such as I to pick up a mirror and try to see her face init... What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? How many different gazes would that need? And what to do with the crookedness of flesh, thrown back at eyes... My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadences, shouts, moans, the quick delight of bodily pleasure, allrising up as if the condition of being fractured had freed the selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body. (Alexander,1993: 2)

The act of reflection, of picking up a mirror and seeing one's body is akin to the conscious act of remembering past memories. Remembering becomes an act not only of a mind but also of a female body looking at itself, as well as other bodies. This passage also acknowledges "the condition of being fractured," having multiple selves locked in the body. The attempt to address the question of difference, within and between bodies becomes an important theme in Alexander's memoir. As the body's expressive character is emphasized, her notion of the body becomes a signifier of temporal, fluid and variable identities.

The diasporic self is depicted as a fragmentary self that needs to be reconnected with other fragmentary selves. The delineation of a postcolonial female subjectivity struggling to attain the meaning of her existence is present in *Fault Lines* through issues of a usable past, race, gender and identity. Born in India to Syrian-Christian parents, Meena Alexander has undergone multiple migrations – to Sudan, Britain and America. These displacements and dislocations have assumed a crucial meaning for her own displaced self at odds with continually changing concepts of self, home and identity. The issues of gender roles are also a significant concern with Alexander. Weaving different childhood experiences across the tapestry of border crossings and displacements, Alexander redraws her childhood spent half in southern India and half in Khartoum and links it to her adult life in America through the trope of memory. As she says in an interview with Lopamudra Basu:

- Though sometimes I feel I just want to write about childhood, I sense now I cannot afford the luxury of writing about a world enclosed. Still, I need to dig back. *The personal past has to be knotted up in the present.* I must carry it as a bundle, bear it as a migrant might a blanket tied up with all her worldly possessions. So in this way I feel very intimately the necessity of artistic work. It is what I am called to do. In a very simple way I have found my work. Or my work has found me. [Emphasis mine](Basu, 2002:33)

Remembering, the act of delving in memories then implies a digging, an excavation. In "Excavation and Memory," Walter Benjamin introduces a similar idea about memory. He suggests: "Genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers; in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through."

(Benjamin, 1999: 576). Remembering thus becomes an associative process and memories are transformed in the process. Thus images from the past assume a renewed significance in the present and remembering becomes a transformative act. A similar dynamic is traceable in Alexander's treatment of memory in *Fault Lines*. The act of remembering is portrayed like excavations. Alexander's approach to memory thus expands the scope of remembering by implying that past is not necessarily a time that has gone by or is unrelated to the present or future. Her representations of selves that remember their pasts thus do not acknowledge their selves only in a pre-determined way; remembering helps find new identities. Memory is treated dialogically and thus provides a basis for the

continuity of the self. Alexander thus frequently draws our attention to her displacement and need to search for the ultimate meaning of her being, as well as home. In doing so, she skillfully moves the text beyond a 'personal' narrative:

- How shall I start to write myself, configure my "I" as Other, image this life I lead, here, now, in America? What could I ever be but a mass of faults, a fault mass?

...That's all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing.

Her words are all askew... What I have forgotten is what I have written: a rag of words wrapped around a shard of recollection. A book with the torn ends visible. Writing in search of a homeland.

(Alexander, 1993:3-4)

Writing about the self, in other words, is seen as a dilemma of performance of identity. Past identities and homes are important for Alexander—important enough to write about them. Remembering becomes an enforced task that she must undertake. There is a ceaseless struggle between the past and present: "My right hand reaches through the mirror with no back, into a ghostly past, a ceaseless atmosphere that shimmers in me even as I live and move...But my left hand stretches into the present. With it I feel out a space for my living body." (Alexander, 1993: 7). Once again, remembering is expressed as a physical activity of stretching both hands and performing the body as reflective of mental turmoil. As the mind remembers the body responds correspondingly. The memories are represented through the body.

The past is not necessarily only nostalgic memories looking for a stable referent; it is also part of her present life. Alexander shuttles back and forth between her past life in India, Sudan and Britain and her present life in America, trying to make sense of that past and present. The metaphor of a fault line represents her displaced existence: "My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation" (15). In order to make sense of her displaced existence, remembrance thus becomes a necessity. Sometimes, the memories are deliberately constructed. For instance, Alexander never met her maternal grandmother Kunju who died before she was born. In order to understand her own dislocation, she must recreate memories of grandmother Kunju: "I was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak" (15). The grandmother is recreated as a woman with tradition and history—aspects that Alexander needs to find for herself.

Alexander is aware of two kinds of memories: "Sometimes I am torn apart by two sorts of memories, two opposing ways of being towards the past. The first makes whorls of skin and flesh, coruscating shells... A life embedded in a life, and that in another life, another and another. Rooms within rooms, each filled with its own scent..." (29). This past vividly represents Alexander's memories of places and events that seem disconnected with her present life and denotes a sense of nostalgia for lost experiences. Then there are other kinds of memories:

- Another memory invades me: flat, filled with the burning present, cut by existential choices. Composed of bits and pieces of the present, it renders the past suspect, cowardly, baseless. Place names litter it: Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri, Pune, Khartoum, Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Dubai, London, New

York, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, New Delhi, Trivandrum. Sometimes I think I could lift scraps of space and much as an indigent dressmaker, cut them into shape. Stitch my days into a patchwork garment fit to wear (30).

The past self in this case is perceived as the Other that must be embraced in order to assert itself: "But when she approaches me, this Other who I am, dressed in her bits-and-pieces clothing, the scraps cobbled together to cover her nakedness, I see quite clearly what I had only guessed at earlier: she has no home, no fixed address, no shelter. Sure, everything else looks fine... But it is clear she is a nowhere creature" (30). There is a hidden paradox in remembering this self. She has no home because home is constantly changing. Seizing the present, this past

self is thus not disconnected: "I am here she thinks. No elsewhere. Here, now, in the New York City." (30). What Alexander presents in this description of two ways of looking at the past is the need to revisit it without getting framed by it. The first kind of memory for Alexander is essentially nostalgic and fixated on a home that has been irretrievably lost. The second kind of memory tries to make sense of connections between the multiple homes and identities. The second kind of memory can also be related to what Benjamin refers to as "genuine memory." As mentioned earlier, such a memory yields an image of the person who remembers in an archaeological method; we not only learn about the memories but also how they transform the selves through association.

The role of imagination is significant in coming to terms with one's past and also ascribes a positive value to such writing. This does not imply that the act of remembering only leads to transformation; memories that recur as enforced can cause pain and victimization also. Nostalgic memories are abundant in *Fault Lines*. For example, Alexander's memories of her childhood in Tiruvella in India are unattainable experiences. Alexander's memoir also depicts the strength and ability to transmit and reconfigure the past in new ways. Alexander uses the archaeological mode to transform the nostalgic memories into something more meaningful. Thus even though remembering enforced memories and nostalgic moments may cause torment, writing about such memories in an archaeological mode becomes a transformative act.

The role of imagination in the process of remembering is revealed in Alexander's reference to the urgency behind the need to make up memories. Living in Manhattan, Alexander has to face the fragility of human emotion trying to hold it all 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 makeup memory" (177). The "bits and pieces" sense—a sense of being fragmented and fractured is are curing emotion for Alexander. She feels the need to clarify the complexity of dealing with mental turbulence in a life of consecutive displacements. Sometimes the memory is only abstract and assumes existence through the written form. An example is given in how she creates an imaginary memory of an elaborate conversation. In order to write an essay and recall her experiences at Khartoum, she creates a conversation with another poet-friend. Unable to revive her past in Khartoum by herself, she takes recourse to

imagination. As she admits this authorial set-up: "I needed to make up that memory... for that was the only way that Khartoum could come back to me. I needed his spirit to listen to mine so the lost years might rise up again like a mist between us, so I could live in the here and now of America" (190). Remembering becomes a construction where the gaps are substituted with fragments of imagination that are stitched back as per convenience. The imaginary conversation provides a way for the past to be connected to the present life in America. For Alexander, concerns about the past are replaced by her ethnicity in America. Through the process of re-narrating her past experiences she attempts to identify a historical vantage point from which to imagine different futures.

The memoir ends with an epiphany wherein Alexander finds peace in a natural setting in her grandmother's garden. By remembering her childhood, she is able to make sense of her past and connect it with her present. What Alexander offers in her memoir then, is the promise of a recovered self that remembers the past and at the same time learns from them. In *Fault Lines* the final impulse points to the reconstructive aspect of memories and the need to transcend their nostalgic effect. Remembering in Alexander's writing becomes an intrinsic part for the ethnic self in order to pave way for syncretic and constantly evolving identities. She also deftly demonstrates how the thematic treatment of memory can be instrumental in bringing new innovative techniques of literary narrative. Memory interrupts linear, conventional narratives in order to make room for multiple voices and perspectives. Alexander's memoir illustrates such interruptions of conventional narratives through memories and posits not one but multiple perspectives. Her focus on memory has dual functions: through memory she not only remembers the personal histories of the selves represented but also connects these histories to their present, current selves. She suggests that the gaps and fissures in memory and conscious, as well as unconscious attempts to forget past incidents also help in assertion of the current self. Memory becomes a process whereby a subject narrates the past and eventually gains a sense of agency and power over the world inhabited by her. Memory thus successfully becomes a mode of performance of identity in *Fault Lines*.

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- x.