

Geographics of Identity in *Faultlines*

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My life is history, politics, geography. It is religion and metaphysics. It is music and language

(Paula Gunn Allen "The Autobiography of a Confluence")

Meena Alexander is picking the shards of her variegated life experiences in her celebrated memoir *Faultlines* (1993). It is her history, politics, geography, religion, metaphysics as well as a quest for all these fixities. Geographics of identity is a purposeful usage to signify the technique of mapping an identity and its execution in the memoir. Smith and Watson spot memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency as the constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity (15-16). In *Faultlines* they are associated with diasporic studies, postcolonial theory, existentialist philosophy, feminism and the reliability of language.

Professor Meena Alexander is a prolific writer cum academician par excellence. Besides the memoir she owes nine poetic anthologies and two novels to her credit. *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth and Shelley* (1997) is the ample testimony of her erudition. Looked at in unison all her creative works unveil her passionate spirit of enquiry into the subaltern psyche. In *Passage to Manhattan* (2009) it is said:

However, Alexander's literary output does not just record the lingering burden of colonial epistemic violence: it charts a creative transformation of the experiences of alienation and fragmentation of languages and cultural legacies into a unique hybrid aesthetic that combines the intellectual, linguistic, and cultural traditions of both her colonial education and the indigenous traditions of her Indian and particularly Kerala roots. In fashioning this hybrid poetics, Alexander is following in the footsteps of her poetic predecessors in the postcolonial world, including poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Okot p'Bitek, and Derek Walcott.... (5)

Meena has won various accolades namely the Alturas International Award (1973), MacDowell Colony Fellowships (1993, 1998), a PEN Open Book Award (2002) and a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Centre (2005). Now she is Professor of English at the City University of New York. Born of an English educated meteorologist father and a devoted Christian mother Meena has been constantly on the move, moving houses and institutions across India (Allahabad, Tiruvella, New Delhi and Hyderabad) and the globe (Asia, Africa, Europe and North America). She has criss-crossed landmasses, oceans and civilizations. Like the geographical fault lines on earth arising out of stress on the rock strata, the incessant uprooting and re-rooting has engendered lacunas on her psychography. So is the name *Faultlines*.

The memoir can be bracketed with the cross cultural autobiographies like Jo Sinclair's *The Seasons* (1992) and Toni McNaron's *I Dwell in Possibility* (1992). It is not a monolithic narrative on one's life like Gandhiji's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927) and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925). It is a pastiche of an ecriture feminine, a travelogue, a diasporic text and a mixture of all. Meena is appropriating the western

genre, autobiography to suit her needs. She inscribes her own story (not his-story) in it. The centrality of the autobiographical 'I' renders a structural cohesiveness to the pastiche. It is not the grand narrative celebrating her sovereignty. Rather it's a woven fabric of umpteen mini narratives culled from her life. She asserts through the memoir her own agency. While a telephonic conversation with her friend, Roshni she calls the project of her memoir as "About being born into a female body; about the difficulty of living in a space" (3).

Faultlines is Meena's avid attempt to claim a voluble subjectivity. She is quite reluctant to be a meagre immigrant writer thriving in the US. In the words of the renowned thinker, Gayatri Spivak the subaltern speaks here. Obviously, Meena finds articulation an uphill task, as it is customary to any subaltern. She lacks a vantage point to situate herself. What is she? Nothing but a stack of plural selves. She is a polyglot and a global citizen, "a woman cracked by multiple migrations" (2). The memoir is not a concocted blander collection of cock and bull stories. It is the graphic image of her scorching odyssey to a self. She is in her pupa phase during the idyllic childhood at Kerala. The various remaining phases of her metamorphosis are narrated in the memoir. To safeguard it being a paltry sycophancy of Ilya, her dotting maternal grandfather Meena appended the Book of Childhood to it. Thus, a second revised edition of *Faultlines* with a preface by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o came in 2003.

Through the memoir Meena is documenting her genealogy, the roots nurtured her despite the scorching heat of the Sub-Saharan desert and the chilly numbness of Anglo-American winters. It is a deconstructive distillation in which each and every experience of her lifetime, no matter how gratifying or traumatic it is, is boiled in the cauldron of her enlivened psyche to reach at the essentials. In remembrance of the things past, Meena pictures herself a body caught in the economics and politics of plural cultures. She is a woman, an Asian immigrant in America, an Indian by birth, and a Keralite by lineage and so on. In essence the memoir is a profound revelation of what is to be when ossified in between nations and cultures. It is the poetics of her dislocation. Her mindscape navigates diverse cityscapes scattered on different continents namely Khartoum, Delhi, Hyderabad, Nottingham and New York. A space to anchor upon is the leitmotif of the memoir. Meena has felt herself a fissured thing, a body criss-crossed by fault lines. The dislocation has its reverberations in her unconscious too. In her dreams she peoples the subway with cousins she had not seen for decades, ancient aunts from Kerala and the workers bound for the Gulf – they are all migrants jolted by time.

Faultlines is the book of Meena's genesis. Its dedication to her 'appa and amma', the two pillars supported her substantiates it. She endeavours to answer a wide catechism on her origin, "Where did I come from? How did I become what I am? How shall I start to write myself, configure my "I" as Other...?" (2). The chapter two of the memoir, *Mirror of Ink* is a detailing on her lineage as we see in the beginning of the New Testament. However, Meena articulates a matrilineal lineage unlike the patriarchal one of the Bible. She is the proud granddaughter of Kunju, a post graduate in English and the first lady member of the Travancore legislative assembly. On her Amma, Meena comments, "Without her, I would not be, not even in someone's memory. I would be a stitch with no time, cap less, gloveless, sans eyes sans nose the lot.

Lacking her I cannot picture what I might be" (7). She carves her own slot in a free space outside the labyrinth of patriarchy. Its links are with her Amma and Kunju, a matrilineal bonding. She says, "I was born out of my mother and out of her mother before her, and her mother, and her mother, and hers. Womb blood and womb tissue flowing, gleaming no stopping" (21). Further, this matrilineal linking is suggestive of the longing for her mother tongue and motherland. She is christened as Mary Elizabeth Alexander. At a very tender age of fifteen the blooming poet renamed herself as Meena. She is happy to be called so for it is her pet name. This is a deliberate act of erasure upon the tablets of patriarchy. The entire article uses this name rather than Alexander, her surname for the researcher respects her individuality as it is signified by the term.

Visible signs of the throbbing heart of an adventurer are perceptible in Meena in her childhood itself. Her audacity has made women of uneven charm and vigour her idols. Kunju, though dead before her birth, is her heroine who had challenged the orthodoxy for the female cause. Meena sabotages the angel/whore dyad through eulogising the whore. It is to be noted that once Amma scolded Meena for her independent airs by calling her *perachathe*, meaning prostitute in Malayalam. The stone eating girl of the streets and the fire eating girl in the Gemini circus enthralled her mind. She often fancied herself a *rakshasi* (demon woman) of Ilya's stories. Rather than angels and saints, Meena adores witches and whores. She has felt a deep kinship with the goddess, Kanyakumari for her unrelenting oath on virginity. In nut shell all these fascinations for the outlaws extraordinaire are redolent of Meena's aspirations. All those aspirations are portrayed in the memoir. Indeed, "Autobiography is a personal performance, an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for that action and how it is performed" (Bruss 300).

Sunil Khilnani propounds, "All autobiography is an act of self promotion, a calling-card solicitously slipped through the letter box of history" (171). The issue of historicity comes to the fore in any autobiographical writing. In the words of Smith and Watson, "When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making "history" in a sense" (10). Meena is encrypting her story using the fragile architecture of language. Henceforth it becomes the *écriture feminine* of Simon de Beauvoir. According to Smith and Watson, "In Greek, *autos* signifies "self," *bios* "life," and *graphe* "writing". Taken together in this order, the words denote "self life writing," a brief definition of "autobiography" (1). *Faultlines* is thus a female artist's self in black and white. Her scribing is in the female language of the marginalized, the devoiced and the dislocated. Once in an interview with Professor Susie Tharu, Meena Alexander remarked that her writing is just like the making of a house. Henceforth, the issue of corporeality becomes all the more pertinent. She divulges Tharu, "It's crazy to say it, but as a woman I feel that the only materials I am allowed to use are the elements of my own body; blood, which is so close to any woman; bones though I do not speak of them and use stone instead, and flesh, which I locate, I think in trees" (Tharu 11).

In modern feminist parlance she is writing the body. Meena states that, "I learnt again that the body remembers when consciousness is numbed, that there is an instinctual truth of the body all the laws of the world cannot legislate away" (242). She has a wart at the tip of her nose and is averse to remove it. To her it is the proud mark

of an identity or, better a distinction. The memoir is a daring attempt to acknowledge this truth of her body. When she utters, "What could I ever be but a mass of faults, a fault mass?" her corporeality is foregrounded (2). Narrating life often necessitates a link with one's body. According to Smith and Watson, "... the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge, as well as a textual surface upon which a person's life is inscribed. The body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects" (37).

The memoir strings together an intricate mesh of dislocation. The incessant dislocation bestows the memoir a circular dimension. Like a postmodern novel it can be read from any page. Nothing lies either in the chronology of the events or even in the chapter numbers. Nancy K. Miller opines, "Memoir is fashionably postmodern, since it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public, subject and object" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 198). Perhaps this circularity is an attribute of the womb in *écriture féminine*. There is an adept execution of analepsis and prolepsis. Sandra Ponzanesi remarks, "In *Fault Lines* Alexander makes frequent use of two strands of memory: linear and circular" (51). Once she is a writer at New York, then a child at Tiruvella and in next time she may be in Khartoum. Moreover, she peeps and saucers the narrative with her own poems. The circular character makes the memoir a text beyond summarising. Needless to say the entire dynamics of feminism fulminate against the linearity of androcentric texts. Meena has her own politics in narration. Her Amma is the envoy of patriarchy in her life. She often mumbles a woman's place is in her husband's home. She instructs Meena on female decorum and encourages studying embroidery and music. All these are part and parcel of the paraphernalia to mould Meena an angel in the house. But Meena transgresses all these rigid bonds and cramping conventionalities. Her very act of self naming is the beginning step of a thousand miles journey to an asserted selfhood. The name meant different things in different languages. 'Meena' is fish in Malayalam, jewellery in Arabic and port in Sanskrit. It corresponds to the fluidity of her identity as envisaged in various continents. In addition, it aptly conveys the existence of multiple selves or fragments within her.

Meena's plunge into the intricacies of being born and living in a female body and that too in a male dominated society, is haltingly centred on marriage and subsequent uprooting. Coming up with an intense critique on sexism *Faultlines* undermines the old world order prioritising the male over the fair sex. Her marriage with David Lelyveld, an American Jew incited a storm of opposition from all quarters. It is a small gathering by the two at Delhi and Chiranthan, a Rajasthani colleague is the only witness. Meena views marriage as a transportation of the female body sanctioned by culture. She ruminates, "But for a woman, marriage makes a gash. It tears you from your original home. Though you may return to give birth, once married you are part and parcel of the husband's household" (23). The memoir abounds with partings and farewells. Marriage is a parting and parting is the trope of loss.

Through the memoir, she is weaving the multiple fragmentary threads of her of identity in respect of sex, nativity, nationality and cultural belonging. "Identities are marked in terms of many categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class, generation, family genealogy, and religious and political ideologies, to cite the

most obvious" (Smith and Watson 33). Meena was born at Allahabad, taken to Khartoum at the age of five, graduated there, acquired a doctorate in England, taught in India and later in the US. She has encountered, partook and assimilated dissimilar cultural milieus and essence but remained an amanuensis to none in particular. "Life narrative, then, might best be approached as a moving target, a set of ever shifting self referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present" (Smith and Watson 3). This holds true for *Faultlines* also. The ever changing mi`se-en-scene of the narration on a transcontinental basis fascinates the reader. It's an uprooted female artist's search through the meandering courses of incidents in life, casual and calculated, using certain syntax to bare her soul and credentials for assuming a culture. Ponzanesi comments, "In this memoir her poetic memory investigates transnational identity, womanhood, and ethnicity. By fusing poetry, prose, and critical thinking Alexander conveys the intricacies of being a female postcolonial writer through a genre, the autobiography or memoir, that challenges traditional notions of subjectivity" (51).

Meena's is a straddled existence. Her transnationalism is the sole reason behind this. The memoir is an ebullient venture on her teleology. Her wounded subjectivity has gotten bruised with her academic pursuit on the Romantics. She has written profusely on Mary Wollstonecraft and the feats of her marginalized heroine Maria. There is an unseen parallel in the structures of identity of the Romantic women writers and Meena. The erudition has created a terrible realization of her life as a basket with things thrown from different places. To eke out a human existence she starts writing the memoir. While she met David, Meena "was fascinated by the sense that through narrative he was making up his life, his autobiography" (147). Besides she is inspired by the autobiography of Rassundra Devi, *Amar Jiban* (1876), who taught herself read and write, scratching out the letters on the sooty wall of her kitchen.

In the memoir, Meena picks a little from the torn fabric of her past, femininity and ethnicity and clubs them together. Her vocation is to evoke it all in tandem than in strands. As a typical post modern writer she celebrates her fragmented identity. She is guided by Frank O'Hara's words, "Grace/to be born and live as variously as possible" (qtd. in Alexander 193). In America what is she? A poet! But not of the pure American stuff. Neither a Frost nor a Stevens, or at least a Dickinson! Nay. She ponders, "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... Everything comes to me is hyphenated" (193). Meena is beyond any bracketing. She is neither an Indian English writer nor an Asian American Writer but she is both at once. She finds it hard to place herself somewhere else. The question of existence broods over the narrative. There comes the philosophy of existentialism. Meena muses on whether she has an essence preceding existence or the other way. She recounts the several threads of her existence from the myriad facets of life she has encountered: dulcet reminiscences on her Tiruvella childhood, adolescence amidst the sweltering sand dunned Khartoum, the chilly mornings of the English mining town of Nottingham, confinement in a Manhattan apartment as a mother and as a University teacher in New York and so on. Undeniably, "Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing" (2). The result is a cluster of void slots in Meena's

psychography. According to Ponzanesi, “Her ethnic consciousness criss-crosses the whole text, intersecting with the more chronological narration. The result is a mosaic of open-ended selves, existential moments that the author tries to catch in language but which is instead constantly metamorphosed. This structure is called upon to express the ontological uprootedness experienced by migrant” (52).

Paradoxically Meena, a fault mass is narrated into coherence using language. Can this system be entrusted? If Roland Barthes is to be trusted we are nothing but a heap of language. Meena says, “Sometimes I think of the English language as a pale skin that I have 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” (73). Language is the evergreen problem in her dislocations. To articulate in a language is definitely the act of claiming that culture. Here she is thrown into the winds. On the usage of language Kari Gibson elucidates that “Language – both code and content – is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity” (1). For Meena, identity itself is in doldrums and thus the problem of language is two folded. Languages become the matter of choice before her.

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in his preface to the memoir views the grave issue as, “She dwells in many languages, and which language she shall make use of her many crossings? Malayalam, the language of her Kerala childhood? Arabic the language of her home in Africa? French and English, the languages of colonial imposition?” (xii). She debunks the enslaved monolith of English language. She carnivalizes English through inserting Malayalam as well as other Oriental language terms. Perhaps carnivalized English may render her a voice to speak. George Alexander, her father is the lovable ‘appa’ and Mary Kuruvilla, her mother is ‘amma’. The juxtaposition of “*Amma, noke, noke, nyan a nyan a*” with “Look, look, it’s I, it’s I” (though the latter is English translation of the former Malayalam words) is another instance of flouting the authority of English (302). This is what we may say the appropriation of the colonial language. Meena hopes to discover a new self in supple folds of her English using the turbulent waves of her memory. According to Tamara M. Valentine:

Realizing that colonialism is intrinsic to the burden of English in India, she feels robbed of literacy in her own mother tongue (Malayalam). The burden of British English exposes the relationship between linguistic decolonization and her sense of femaleness. English becomes a part of her reaching out for this new world. She goes so far as to propose that such predicament incites the female imagination into realms of almost inconceivable freedom. (200)

Faultlines is a solo song sung by Meena on the cliff of liminality. It is an open ended narrative for she is still alive and there is much to append it. Moreover, this openness is Meena’s deliberate strategy not to become a totalitarian clinging to orthodox ends and means. Is it justifiable to call it a memoir? Of course the 1993 edition is subtitled so. Nevertheless Smith and Watson view, “A mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant; the memoir directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator... In contemporary parlance *autobiography* and *memoir* are used interchangeably” (198).

Then, is it an autobiography alone? Nevermore, but is a tossed salad of multiple theoretical and non theoretical issues on a plethora of subjects.

To conclude, Meena has an amorphous identity. It is a discursive one which trespasses the confines of all rigidities. She is an orthodox Syrian Christian at Tiruvella, an Indian student in Sudan, an Oriental fellow at England and an Asian American professor at New York. It is an identity in process and she relishes in it despite all its huddles. Beneath the lines of *Faultlines*, a vigilant reader can decipher her process of becoming. However the possibility of an absolute being is null and void. That is what Smith and Watson said on identities:

They are constructed. They are in language. They are discursive. They are not essential—born, inherited, or natural—though much in social organization lead us to regard identity as given and fixed... the subject comes to consciousness through multiple identities and multiple voices. This is why, as Stuart Hall argues, identity is “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” (33-34)

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