CHAPTER 5

"DIFFICULT TRUTHS OF BODY AND LANGUAGE": SUBTERRANEAN REGIONAL FLOWS IN MEENA ALEXANDER’S POETRY
I have come to the Hudson’s edge to begin my life
to be born again, to seep as water might
in a landscape of mist, burnished trees,
a bridge that seizes crossing. (“River and Bridge”; River and Bridge 6-9)

Deeply interested in a phenomenological study of poetry, Meena Alexander continuously attempts to identify the inexplicable relation between the self and the world at large. Experience and language criss-cross into a pattern of voice and silence, a sort of creative dialogue between the self and the other. It is quite clear that this attempt would be largely culture-based since there is a general shift in literary studies from the text to the context in the postcolonial scenario. Doubtlessly, writing offers a legitimate space for the immigrant writer to encounter and to come to terms with “otherness”. In the immigrant discourse, a whole lot of rewriting is done and the very process of shaping identities has to be historicized. The fluctuating realities get enmeshed in a new consciousness, catapulted by the subterranean forces of regional (socio-political changes) in erstwhile colonies.

In the case of immigrant poets, especially the Asian-American poets, the postmodern angst of dislocation and border crossings can vibrantly be portrayed in their writings. But, the border lines shift constantly and walking on their edge can at once be thrilling and hazardous to the border crosser.
While the above quoted lines taken from the title poem in the collection, *River and Bridge*, published in 1995 clearly underscore the question of uprootedness and dislocation, it is undeniable that along with it, the growing estrangement experienced in contemporary society by the individual also affects the poetic sensibility and writing. As far as Alexander is concerned, there is an overpowering impact of dislocation (*Fault Lines* 193) as she calls herself “a woman cracked by multiple migrations” (3). Alexander projects the image of a postcolonial writer hurled into the swirling issues of ethnicity and language.

The post-independence migrations within and without India have generated a particular kind of knowledge born of a tension between the newness of what is being made and an older way that resists its emergence. Consequently, the diasporic writers who are not confined geographically to India try to make a home/homeland as an affirmation of a history that is both personal and collective. For example, when Alexander tries to paint the multicultural metropolitan New York, it is set against the Syrian canvas of Tiruvalla and Kozhencheri. Perambulating between a woman poet hailing from South Kerala and an Asian immigrant professor/academician/poet in America, Alexander bodies forth a yearning to fabricate “a sheltering space in the head” (193). In an interview with Susie Tharu, she identifies the kernel of her poetry as the “making of a house/habitation” (Tharu 69).
As for Alexander, many languages got “compacted in her brain” (FL 2) through multiple migrations—Malayalam, her mother-tongue; Hindi, she learned as a child in Allahabad; Arabic, from her years in the Sudan; Marathi she imbibed during a short span in Pune; “Old shards survive, French; English? (2). Uprooted so many times, she bemoans that she does not have a precise “tradition and history” (15). Definitely committed to dealing with her life as a woman poet of color in America, Alexander debunks the conservative move to essentialise and generalize identity traits. While Distinctiveness and Alterity endorse the multivalent postmodern concept of identity, she realizes that being colored and female in America is an incendiary experience that has extraordinary valency.

A continual exile moving between countries and cultures and a student of philosophy, Alexander encounters these new challenges of immigrant life through a retrieval and mythicizing of the family heritage. In other words, her poetically constructed myths of her Keralite familial roots are repeatedly appealed to, in order to confront her with “cultural unhousedness”. This, she achieves, through a body of basic symbols- symbols that work as images--though the act of writing is equally imaginative and based as much on wishes, memory and fantasy, as much as on fact.

Alexander’s work has been featured widely in India, the US and England and has been translated into several languages including Italian and German. Her writing spans a variety of literary genres--ten collections of
poems and prose-pieces, two novels, a memoir and a critical work on Romanticism. There is the constant criticism against her poetry that it is highly personal or even private and hence very obscure; as John Oliver Perry remarks, “narcissistically uncertain, ambitious, ambivalent” (“Meena Alexander’s…” 86). It is true that her works need two to three careful readings in order to arrive at that “zone of radical illiteracy, the curious place beneath the hold of a given syntax, a zone to which words do not attach, a realm where syntax flees” (Alexander “Poem Out of Place…” 6). But the literary work is no longer a self-enclosed unit of purely aesthetic elements, and as she explains in an interview with Maxey:

I really feel that I write stuff that is not easy to read. I think people read my work, but it is difficult because it is always politically a little bit edgy. I am very happy if even five people read what I write. I am not going to change. I am not going to exoticize what I write. I do not want to dilute it. (2)

Whether it is the political edge or whatsoever the reasons for her obscurity, her writings reflect her own lived diasporic experiences- uprooting and exile, migrant memories and trauma, separation and loneliness- all the way from India to Sudan and America.

The Indian women poets, in a way, address and negotiate the gender issues through digging into their ancestry. But for Alexander, the task is even more hazardous since “place names splinter” (“Gold Horizon”; Illiterate
Heart 50) on her tongue such as Allahabad, Tiruvalla, Kozhencheri, Pune, Khartoum, Nottingham, Beirut, Jerusalem, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Dubai, London, New York and she has to “stitch” her “days into a patchwork garment fit to wear” (FL 15). Memory becomes the glue that links all the fragments together and it thrives in the sequestered realm of a garden—the garden of her grandmother’s house. Garden, totally cut-off from reality, becomes a pretty artifact but distinctly works as the primary space.

“I needed to make up that memory which did not exist, a conversation that had not occurred, for that was the only way that Khartoum could come back to me” (FL 190). Perhaps more so, with Tiruvalla and Kozhencheri. With barely four years of childhood in Tiruvalla, her reservoir of Kerala memories is scanty, “bedimmed” by the passage of time. Still she makes annual visits to Kerala and the images are buoyed up by her powerful poetic imagination.

Her earlier poems, or rather her pre-American publications- The Bird’s Bright Ring (1976), I Root My Name (1977), Without Place (1978) and Stone Roots (1980) display a quest into interiority, solipsistic sojourns, “possession of self-in-world” (Perry “Sexual Identity…” 2) and hence make use of deft and extremely private symbols like “cactus-man”, “frog”, “plum”, “river of crystal” and “Lamb” which renders the volumes a vague and hazy vision and unsure execution. Still, they should not go without a word since they surely shed light on a better understanding of later poems. Her first volume which is
but a “long poem” as she herself calls it, *The Bird’s Bright Ring*, appears to be a dramatic monologue, and the verses turn out to be puzzling riddles, though at times, artfully evocative and suggestive. Song and lamentation recur as if they are interchangeable. The governing mood of the second volume, *I Root My Name*—her first “collection” of poems (divided into 18 short poems) again is, sad and melancholic. But the clearer conception and firmer grasp of the subject in this collection is rather relieving. Further, the poet has stepped out to the larger world outside and often the grimness of the Indian social scene is captured in an unfailing manner in some of the poems. *Without Place* is a versified dedication to Umashanker Joshi and has the semblance of a dramatic structure, with a Prologue and Epilogue. Imaging Queen Cleopatra’s tumultuous passion for the “hot heavy Antony” (80) at her lacquered and perfumed feet, Alexander ushers in the pagan picturesque details. Cleopatra’s love for Antony is allegorically interpreted as the Oriental Muse in love with the deceptive lover. It might be Alexander’s own love with the English verse which itself prompts her very often to look back to her homeland and its language. It is always difficult to see oneself or even the age one lives in because one is too close to it. *Stone Roots* contains 33 poems that reveal the urge to reach out to one’s roots. But, the route to roots is stony and the tree in the garden “whose bark is burning into alphabets” (“Sometimes I’m in a Garden” 2) conjures up her poetic faculty and the script itself.

Though she tries to root her name, Alexander finds herself without
place as the language (of which, the script is known only to her) fails to annihilate racial and gender prejudices. “She hovers in a dark doorway…at the threshold to find a balance, to maintain a home at the edge of the world…” (“Poem out of place…” 9). But when it comes to the post-American collections, the “words” that are “veined” branch out and propel a new search for moorings in her ancestry.

Consequently, a woman who can “connect nothing with nothing” (FL 3), Alexander discovers her fractured or rather fragmented self in grandmothers, stating that “in my quest for an imaginative source sufficient to withstand the pressures of life in a new world, I made up a grandmother figure” (“Tangled Roots”; The Shock of Arrival 35). This figure is inscribed on the palimpsest of memory through which the rich vein of being could be tapped. The ancestral figure, “part ghost, part flesh” would permit her to “speak”. “There seems to be no one else…from whom I can draw both the lines of ancestry and poetry. And she both is real and is not real” (The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity 81). A series of poems that revolve around the grandmother figure interweave into the fabric of her poetry. Poems like “Poem by the well side”, “Her Garden”, “House of a Thousand Doors”, “Looking through Well Water”, “Salt Spray”, and the prose fictions “Burnt Hair” and “Grandmother’s Letters” (all from the collection House of a Thousand Doors) become the warp and woof of this fabric of writing.
Cast into the colonial past of the feudal Kerala, she traces the path of her nationalist, maternal grandmother Kunju (who had passed away long before her birth) battling against colonialism and social injustices and of her home-bound, paternal grandmother Mariamma. “Both were born into an era of great social change for women in India, yet how differently their lives had marked them” (*The Shock of Arrival* 36). Their memory becomes the springboard on which she tries to replenish her present fragmented self. Grandmother Kunju is both fact and fiction, “I never knew her and that is the most brutal fact to have about her as she enters me and my life” (*FL* 10). With regard to this Gandhian follower grandmother, she remarks with admiration:

> I was filled with longing for ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak…I imaged her: a sensitive, cultured woman…who had a tradition, and a history--precisely what I lacked; a woman who had lived to witness the birth pangs of a nation”. (15)

Grandma Mariamma, on the other hand, who hardly left her Kozhencheri house, was the silent strength of the house. “She was the power in the Kozhencheri house. Appa could never raise his voice in her presence” (26). In her domestic sphere, she reigned supreme. Many a time, Alexander attempts to coalesce the two grandmothers’ complementary personas in bringing forth her own identity. In the forthcoming poems, sometimes she
disentangles the two grandmothers and at times, twists them together into one poetic self. This sort of perpetual reconstruction of identity was inevitable for Alexander as she faced the problem of “not just how to appear—saris,…jeans,…women’s issues…”, “But the very fact of appearing, of existing for the eye” (“The Poem’s Second Life”…77) in her initial years in New York. At this juncture, when her sense of identity was “invaded by the gaze, the look of a world to which” [she] “was Other” (78), the notion of a conceptual reality, a geographical space and a female power was necessary which would have culminated in resurrecting and immortalizing her grandmothers. But, this imaginative U-turn to her ancestral house is not that easy, since she has to cover not one, but a series of sites scattered over four continents. After opening the thousand doors, finally as she reaches her “actual house”, whether it is the paternal grandparents’ house in Kozhencheri, or the maternal grandparents’ house in Tiruvalla (separated only by a few miles), the poetic resurrection of this living space is conceived as a means of full-throated self-discovery. While her adolescent years were divided culturally and linguistically between the Sudan, Pune, Khartoum and Nottingham, the childhood she spent in Kerala becomes “the imaginative opening, the brainpan” (Perry “Sexual Identity…” 71) of her creative endeavors.

The self-definition through matrilineal connections is explicit when she expresses her wish in an interview with Tharu:
I am haunted by the feeling that if my life is to be real, I must learn to live in her [my maternal grandmother’s] house...Suffer the imprisonment she suffered. Walls, a husband who was given to her and a God so distant that that His rage was the rage of her own father. (70-71)

Thus, she finds that the dissonance or the “cacophony” of her present life in New York City can be negotiated only through the “green roots” of her Kerala inheritance.

Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
Splintered and raze my page
That out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me
I may claim
my heritage.
The green tree
battened on despair
cast free
The green roots
kindled
to cacophony. (Night-Scene, the Garden 13, 1-12)

The grandmothers and other women in Part I of House of a Thousand Doors (published in 1986/88) try to enter the houses, to possess and
to control their own homes, which are often their own bodies, (multiple identities) they tell stories of a vengeful Jehovah and of mirrors and relationships. “They write letters to and from prisons, they rail against injustices…and in the end merge into one nameless woman who has no past” (Rustomji 90).

This house is based on Alexander’s ancestral home in Tiruvalla where her maternal grandfather Kuruvilla, her beloved but dictatorial “Illya” grew up. It is a dream house where the “key” predominates over the “door knob”. Alexander tries to find a house, or rather a home in anything that moves, and shelters it in a poem. There is an urgency or immediacy of appeal which is at once powerful and personal in this collection.

While her earlier four volumes published in a short span of twelve years are slimmer in size, this one, which is also her first collection published in America, “brings to the limelight a full-fledged poet playing the role of her own Boswell” (Raja 40). It has an interesting cover design which shows an old woman looking underneath; within a latticed doorway is an orchid. The old woman is obviously her grandmother[s] and the orchid could be the womb (Paranjpe 43). Chosen carefully with a pattern in mind (and without a similitude in titles compared to earlier books of poems), the poems spring mostly from the imaginative fabrication of her childhood spent in South Kerala. Part I of the three-part volume begins with a dream-like sequence. In the title poem, which she says is a dream poem, we feel that the two
grandmothers--the political Kunju/Kanda as well as the domestic Mariamma--dissolve into one or rather, “In recreating their lives, she metamorphosizes the two grandmothers into the figure of one ancestress” (Rustomji 87).

Unmistakably, grandmother is a major link with the past for immigrant women poets (not only for immigrants, taking into consideration Kamala Das’s almost obsessive attachment to her grandmother). For example, Uma Parameswaran, an Asian immigrant poet in Canada, remembers the time when she could string words as easily and gracefully as her grandmother strung luminescent, many-colored glass beads. Now seeking for correct words through a series of voices, she asks “where shall I begin?” (“Trishanku” 1).

Alexander chooses to begin her work with the past, while Uma would:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Begin with here} \\
\text{Not with there} \\
\text{Begin with the world that is} \\
\text{Through the worlds that were} \\
\text{And worlds that will be} \\
\text{Clamour and hammer} \\
\text{To enter. ("Trishanku" 49-55)}
\end{align*}
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But one gets confused with this relational space - Here? There? Is it the bewildering new land? Or the world constructed through memories? In any case, for Uma too, the multiplicities of imposed selves open to inharmonious termini as “clamor and hammer” denote.
As earlier mentioned, the six poems and three prose pieces which constitute the first part of the collection *House of a Thousand Doors* are mostly about the two grandmothers (fused into one). While building a poem is analogous to building a house for Alexander, this poem has clear echoes of Kamala Das’s poem “Blood”, discussed in detail in the previous chapter. As Alexander explains in her memoir: “How early that poem had entered into me and remained: a Kerala woman’s tracing of her blood ties. I think that poem was within me when I looked backwards to my grandmothers, forward to my son and daughter” (*FL* 75).

The title poem sets the tone, with the house denoting fixity, shelter and rootedness contrasted to multiplicity of possibilities and identities. As Satpathy aptly remarks:

> Of course the search for roots is neither as comprehensively sociological nor as intensely emotional as in the case of Alex Haley’s. Alexander’s poetic self sends her on a hunt of a more homely kind and for a less distant ancestry—namely, the two grandmothers. (82)

In fact the poem opens as “This House…” (“House of a Thousand Doors…” 1) and all the subsequent actions are in the simple present tense like “that shimmer” (6) / “the sun burns down” (8) / “waves lilt” (14) / “She kneels” (17) / “I hear the flute” (21) / “I watch her kneel” (24) which are user-guides for the reader to scan the poem not as a flashback but something that is still live in the poet’s consciousness. To put it otherwise, though she is
factually in exile most of the year, it is her homeland and people--Kerala and mother/grandmothers--that live in her present poetic consciousness. May it be dreams, memories or imagination--Alexander, undoubtedly succeeds “in taking the house from past to the present” through her skillful fabrication. “To imagine is to be; but such being is to enter a door created by desires” (79). The past is essentially dug out from longings and fragments. But one thing to be noted is that her self-conscious fictions are not playful. Especially when we sympathetically understand that she can never really be “at home”, since “home” for her is eternal movement and not a static shelter.

The house’s antiquity is similarly highlighted with a looping of nostalgia in the lines:

the sills are cut in bronze
three feet high
to keep out snakes,
…………………………..(2-4)
The roof is tiled in red pitched with a silver lightning rod,
……………………………………..(9-10)

Though Alexander does not show the vehemence in portraying her noble lineage or the legacy of her “grandmother’s house” that Das overtly does, there is obviously a reverent awe heard between the lines. For one thing, they share the matrilineal heritage of Kerala, and Das’s mother, the
noted Malayalam poet, Balamani Amma was a close friend of Alexander’s Syrian Christian grandmother Kunju who has been an inspirational source for this collection. Anyway, unlike her regional compatriot, Alexander does not strategically bring in her grandmothers to rebel against an indigenous patriarchy; or her Kerala background to lift the foreign yoke enforced through the formalities in social custom and language. Rather, she makes use of these subterranean regional flows as an attempt to define her inner space. It is a search which will take her beyond the “narcissistic insecurities of identity” (Perry “Meena Alexander’s …” 2), far beyond that “exile consciousness” where her “body cannot appropriate its given landscape” (Alexander “Exiled by a Dead Script” 2).

The last stanza is quite arresting in which the grandmother portrayed as an eternally and poignantly recognizable woman kneels at each of 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

    imploring the household gods

    who will not let her in. (“House of a Thousand Doors” 19-26)
Apparently, the sills are built three feet high to keep out undesirable creatures like “snakes, / toads, water rats” (4-5). But in actuality, the grandmother is also added to this list of unpleasant beings as she is seen imploring before the forbidding, rigid gods of society to be let in. Her life is an eternal kneeling, a stooping to be “heard”. It also denotes all the bitterness, humiliation and alienation which she “mutely” swallows. It is paradoxical that “it is her house… / Plaster quick with spray from the Malabar coast / the cross beams dripping salt” (“Salt Spray”; *House of a Thousand Doors* 42-44)--that the poet-narrator, her granddaughter inherits and into that house the very denizen is denied entry. Pandey remarks in this connection: “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 parents) and seeking and being denied entrance into another (her in-laws’ house) house (166)”.

This experience of being disowned of Indian women, of being left in-between (like Uma Parameswaran’s depiction of “Trishanku”), is reappearing in the poem “Text from the Middle Earth, for Two Voices” (already appeared in *I Root My Name*).

In the middle where I am, is no beginning

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To the middle there is no end. (89-92)
All the Five Elements, the *panchabhoothas* conspire against her towards the recuperation of her much torn and fragmented memory which is but, so precious for her as “the memory of my blood / and once was food to [her]” (“Text from…” 6-7). Her constructs of diasporic consciousness are remarkably captured when she mourns:

> Where I am I cannot be

> My young soles cannot pace here

> with ordinary metre … (25-27)

The poet’s initial inadequacy to appropriate the place she has willingly chosen to inhabit—whether it is the geographical, cultural, linguistic or creative—can be countered only by recapturing a “semblance” of those “imaginary homelands”. Imaginary, because that is also a fictional construct, as Alexander admits in the interview with Maxey:

> For me Kerala is very much real. But we all live very uneasily in this place. We love our lives, I know, there is always plenty of pleasure about it. But there is always that edge, of not quite really knowing where we are, you know? For us, the challenge is bringing these worlds together and fusing them because when you make a work of art, you do make a fusion of multiple worlds. (5)

But there is no other way to negotiate for these border-crossers other than engaging themselves in a process of self-preservation through resorting
to history and memory- that is exactly what Alexander does:

So I try and stop my ears

with both my palms, thinking on my mother.

What kept her from harm shall keep me. (“Text from …” 20-22)

This unconditional belief in their ancestors works as a gauntlet for these “othered” poets and the last lines quite assuredly highlight their longing to be one with them. She merges wholly with her grandmother so that she can see her image in the well no longer as the grandmother went blind.

Alexander successfully weaves the life of those submissive women of Kerala who are not in possession even of their own body, into the fabric of this enchanting poem. The thousand doors could be still indicative of the many relocations that she encountered as a youth and subsequently she kneels down to forge an ultimate self.

Thematic consistency persists as in the earlier volumes, but there is a cosmos of abstract symbols used without qualifying words. There are four generations portrayed in the collection- that of Alexander’s grandmother, mother, herself and her baby.

The second poem of Part I of this collection, “Her Garden”, carries forth the loneliness and ostracism of the grandmother--“…entirely / as a sky / disowned by sun and star”. The whole poem is lit by her desire to recuperate that alluring atmosphere of the garden in Central Travancore where:

137
I imagine her sitting
under the mulberry leaves, (10-11)

..................
I like to think
she died… (23-24)

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from its wings,

I remember her. (39-40)

Alexander is able to “think space” “through” her “blood and bones” in this poem and this space has granted the poem the cadre interieur that she speaks of in her essay, “Poetics of Dislocation” (9). Time and again, “rock” becomes an icon of “non-place” for her and even when many landscapes layer over one another, she “swims” to that “rock that is black / and bare” (“Her Garden” 19-20) to assert that this garden of her grandmother in Kerala and “nothing / else” (21-22) is her “homeland” (22). “Ten thousand miles away and three decades after [her] grandmother’s death”, (“Poetics…” 8) it is still Pamba that flows through this immigrant poet’s mind, and not Hudson, even with its physical proximity. One should be skillful enough to fabricate place for all these images to exist, not as fragments, but as a coruscating harmony, which Alexander makes possible, up to a certain extent.

“Looking through Well Water” is her masterpiece, in this collection. Well functions as a trope in the poem and it echoes her voice, but the echoed
voice is not hers, but her grandmother’s. It is also notable that her grandmother is “singing in well water” (2), whose voice becomes a “cry in the wilderness”. Towards the end, the grandmother merges into the image of the Koil, “the once-mythical but eventually discovered, killed, stuffed and decorously mounted bird with a dot of blood on its beak” (Rustomji 370):

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. (20-23)

Mud-bound in memory, she looks back--far back so that this variedly dislocated poet figures forth herself not from the immediate ancestry, that of her mother, but from a little more distant one, that of her grandmother:

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. (9-12)

As in the first poem where the grandmother is seen kneeling like a “forked thing”, here also she is rather “bent” into water. The poet is also bent while she is looking into the well-water which reflects her image. They are one with each other:

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,…(13-18)

In reclaiming the past, the poet ruefully understands that there is something that stands between herself and the dead woman. But thankfully there are only spatial divisions or separation between the poet and her great ancestress, there are no temporal divisions indicated. Even death is not viewed in temporal terms. The significant image of the poet looking into the well water reflecting her own image as grandmother is sumptuous with female articulations.

“Grandmother’s Mirror” dedicated to her mentor Jayanta Mahapatra, perhaps the longest poem in the first part, again illustrates her grand heritage where the mirror which was “oval, / rimmed in silver” (1-2) as well as the antiques “a four-poster bed carved out of rosewood / a wicker chair, a footstool / inlaid with ivory” (7-9) denote the legacy she is cherishing in her mind. The old, physically broken grandmother, whose room is but “immaculate” (6), with her sharp perception and insight “silently” guides the poet in her diasporic discovery. In this poem also, there are faint echoes of Kamala Das’s earlier mentioned poem, “Blood” especially when Alexander expresses penitence for having not cared her grandmother for some time and later on realizing that she “erred through the unlit house” (64), she swears
“never to forget” (76). As in the well, her face gets reflected in the mirror, but again, the image reflected is that of the grandmother. In both the cases, it is essentially a discovery through reflection. Her longing to capture grandmother’s image in her mind’s eye reaches its crescendo in the lines—“I imagine becoming like you” (111), but only to realize with a jolt that “You slip through my eyes” (121). As in Das’s poem, here also, the grandmother collapses along with the house’s demolition. Each does not have an independent existence of its/her own without the other. The poem’s last lines are specially arresting:

The koil without a skin
cries into my water.
Will I fall
to the sounding
of your blood? (132-136)

It is crystal-clear that she would like to shed her present “Other skin”, and being bare, “willingly fall” into the ancestral pool of blood. Alexander invokes women poets like Dorothy Wordsworth, Balamani Amma and Sarojini Naidu—along with her grandmothers, their contemporaries and even poets of distant history are her “stone roots”. This could be the reason for her interest in the study of women poets in the Romantic Age. In any case, the looming presence of the grandmother seems to be a “silent” but profound cultural statement of Alexander.
The prose-poem “A Note on a Woman, Running” leads to the second part of the Book. *Part II* brings us closer to the poet’s own narrative persona with the history less distant. Some pieces are from the earlier volumes, *I Root My Name* and *Stone Roots*. In this section, focus is shifted to the next generation, that of Alexander’s mother. Her own generation is sometimes interspersed as in “After the wedding”. Her mother’s words about the dark room are followed by short pieces where the pangs of waiting motherhood are poignantly captured. “Young Snail” is about “A body cupping a body” (1) before the birth of Adam Kuruvilla. And the fourth generation arrives and in accordance, the scene shifts to America; after the two prose sketches, the poet’s own country- India – reappears for political comment and also figures in personal reminiscences. The political grandmother, speaks through “blood”. As her country has now new oppressors, the poet takes it upon herself to speak out. In the “Theatre”, roles are reversed between politicians and the dacoits:

as the politicians rose

wiping his knife in slow motion

and thieves knelt back in their hovels and wept. (29-31)

Regarding the prose-pieces in this collection, the following remark is worth quoting: “The prose pieces mostly justify their presence as glossary to the poetry, for they sharpen our appreciation and understanding of them, especially where the two grandmothers speak through the poet” (84).
This proves to be true for the piece, “A note on the writer Balamaniamma” would alone bear ample testimony to her commendable command over language and its right execution. Even after closing the book the following lines ring in one’s ears for some time:

‘It is a house, a poverty, my flesh is a history she murmurs. ‘But it has no dates. I cannot point to it and say ‘that’, ‘there’, ‘then’, ‘and then’. I am plunged in it’…Balamaniamma, famous author of the Uprising of Uloor, grandmother’s contemporary, will never finish her history. (50)

The earlier mentioned diasporic experience—of being positioned in the middle—is explicitly rendered in the last quoted lines: she never finished her history; she would not have ever properly begun her history either. Imaginatively visionary, Alexander tries to prophesy through Balamaniamma that no Indian woman caught in the horrid contemporary realities would be allowed to complete her history as is portrayed in another prose-piece, “Mosquitos in the Main Room” where a poor woman named Rameeza gets gang-raped: “Do they know that her story is not finished?” (51-52). The question is rather left open-ended. The mythical allusion in the statement, “Her mouth is filled with dust” (52) (Lord Krishna had filled his mouth with dust, to mystify his mother) is further paraphrased by Pandey: “The awareness of the myth has now turned into the tragic history of lands where bodies are brutally conquered and are turned into dust” (167-168). Alexander charts out
the horrors of the contemporary realities as she brings in another legendary character Draupadi of the Mahabharata in the same prose-piece. But, most ironically she puts that there is no “mystic fabric” to guard the virtue of this modern Draupadi--Rameeza.

Another masterly poem in the collection, “Poem by the well side” stands out from the rest, as images of death crowd the poem, almost stultifying its meaning. The poem examines the strange predicament of the diasporic writer who cannot ignore the subterranean flows of her homeland and its language and at the same time finding it difficult to cope up with the present milieu either. Acutely aware of the fact that “Body, you’re a stranger here” (1), the poet hears her mother’s voice “in the coil of [her] ear” (44)--“I am a hungry old woman/I must live!” (41-42). But the poet sincerely does not want to listen to her and “perish” (20), “burn / as wild grass is burnt / at nightfall, in [her] mother’s country” (56-58), since she and her mother know that “We are poor” (47), “Women from a poor country” (49). Though she knows that there is no “real” entry into one apart from her mother-country, the prospects of “another land” lure her so that she is scared whether she will be forced like her grandmother to adopt that totally submissive posture--“Will I kneel in this patch of sunlight? / Will I pray?” (27-28).

“Narcissus never knew her” winds up her own queries on border-crossing with a singular solution:
Watch carefully:
they’re washing her now
over and over
with water from an ancient
spring,
their palms are angels. (34-39)

The last poem of this section “Homeward” is replete with her intense longing for “homecoming”, being fed up with the stifling life in America: “I take my turn, closing the wound of America” (6).

It is different from Parthasarathy’s homecoming who “had spent his youth whoring / after English words” (“Exile”; Rough Passage 7-8), and “learnt” that “roots are deep” (10). Significantly, Alexander does not mourn like him that her “tongue” is “in English chains” (“Homecoming”; Rough Passage 1). and she does not consider it a “tired language” (Alexander “Homeward”; House of a thousand Doors 7) but as a potential one to articulate “the female murmurations of her heart”. Her coming back is only to the geographical, to the cultural and the creative “home”.

Part III tells the story of the insanity and death of an emperor caught within the forces of colonialism and history. The story of the emperor and the beloved bird leads to the concluding long prose piece of the book, “House of Mirrors”. We see a girl-child instead of a woman imploring the household Gods. We see reflected in the girl’s adventures and terrors, sorrows as well as
the constant courage and the sporadic triumphs of the women who have preceded her in the book.

The narrative of Alexander’s childhood in Kerala becomes part of the larger process of social changes. It is also a tale of great social upheavals that had followed the advent of Communism in Kerala. In FL, she recollects the night-prayers sung by the bedside of Valiappachan where she, a mere child, watched with wonder the transformed feudal lord weeping out aloud, “reciting prayers for the salvation of the soul” (68).

The Syrian community in Tiruvalla, like other communities was divided in its loyalty to the British. Alexander’s maternal grandparents--K.K. Kuruvilla and Elizabeth--were actively involved in the nationalist movement. She was confused with different adult responses to colonial rule. Though “illya” and grandmother Kunju were dedicated Gandhians, the other members occupied distinguished posts and were compliant with the foreign rule.

The Storm (1989) and Night-Scene, the Garden (1992) work as long companion poems. While the former relates to the tearing down of her father’s house in order to be rebuilt or rather replaced by a second one, the latter poem is about her mother’s house. These two houses are, in fact, located in the landscape of her childhood--in Kerala--only twelve miles away from each other. Alexander reveals a nostalgia for close family ties and in writing of the houses of mothers and grandmothers affirm the matrilineal rights distinctive of that society. But, as far as craft is concerned, she is very
much a product of Western literary education.

The “homes” diasporic communities build, “in a process of self-presentation through an act of transformation [are] partly real and partly imagined” (Pandey 161). Alexander, being one of the major diasporic women writers of the new Indian diaspora, is in eternal search of these constructions and reconstructions of “house”. Both the poems under discussion illustrate this quest splendidly.

The ten-part Night-Scene, the Garden, is a poetic sequence in several voices and has been performed on-stage. Into this long poem-play is woven the delicate strands of relationship of a mother and her daughter, caught in the vortex of social changes. The illegal possession of the house by others, its repossession and its subsequent partition among the family members get braided into the poem’s body. The poem opens with some sensuous details of a night-scene in the garden of her grandmother’s house. All the names of flora and fauna work as spotlights on a Kerala platform- “hungry myna in the jackfruit tree / a loudmouthed crow or two/blue black koil… / … bats / in the jamun bush” (2-6). The scene is enthralling with its dreamy ambience. The poet emphatically puts that the link with her ancestry is essential for both--for her present dialectical existence in a much migrated milieu, for the ancestress’ existence in the successor’s memory. That is why:

I grip her hand—

to let her go

would cut and kill us both. (14-16)
This reminds us of the lines from the earlier mentioned poem, “Grandmother’s Mirror” where the poet strenuously tries not to slip through her eyes the image of her grandmother. She knows that, if this link is lost, the whole past will be erased from her memory which would be death-in-life for her. She summons up the spirit of her mother with a lantern and makes her speak: and “mother turns at last / and whispers as the broken shadows play” (19-20). The pain of being severed from the roots is still fresh, even after years, as “The stump still raw / oozes in her hand” (29-30). The night-scene is full of exotica like the ancient *pala* tree:

Once cobras crested here
drawn in waves,

the heavy scent from flat
white petals lapping

at their animal skins. (31-35)

Ultimately, the house which was the warp and woof of her existence is “riding its own grave” (43). Boundaries get blurred and the dilapidated house becomes “No Man’s land / no woman’s either” (68-69). The poet still tries to resist the colonial powers essentially through a postcolonial response to the neocolonial forces of racism and gender bias, but only to realize: “I stand in the middle / Of my life” (70-71).

The long legal battle fought against the crooked broker who “was drunk with money / from the Gulf, he had goondas in his hire” (8. 3-4) over the ownership of the Tiruvalla house by the narrator’s father is also the
affirmation of an emotional bond with the “dark, resinous soil”, the swelling incense tree with its hard, brown fruit, shining leaves and dipping blossoms. The narrative breaks into the dual voices of the child and the adult; the desolate feelings of the child recur in the adult narrator. But the most striking lines asserting the mutually complementary personalities would be:

  Two women
  searching for a lost parallel,
  drawn by the dim
  confusions of our blood. (IV. 4-7)

In *The Storm*, the narrative spins through various stages in the poet’s life and the poem blasts throughout like “Shelley’s orientalized west wind” (Perry “Meena Alexander’s…” 5). The poem opens with a mix of drama and sorrow:

  Father’s father tore it down
  heaped rosewood in pits
  as if it were a burial
  bore bits of teak
  and polished bronze
  icons and ancient granary: (1-6)

Alexander acknowledges not only her heritage through the matrilineal line, but the patrilineal (not patriarchal though) as well, as “father’s father” denotes. This is better explained in an interview with Susie Tharu: “Surely
that is the whole point of being a slave, you are exiled, in perpetuity, from the father's house” (71). This could account for her deployment of “two grandmothers”. Talking of the “walled houses” (*The Storm* 8.12) and “widowed houses” (9. 33), the poet pauses to comment on the drastic change that real estate boom and Gulf money have brought out on the middle class life in Kerala:

I see the movie theatres
built with black money from the Gulf,
air-conditioned nightmares
                       ..............

Next door in a restaurant
Food is served on white cloth. (29-31, 36-37)

After her long walk through the torn “first house” somewhat like a pilgrimage, the poet clears space for a direct “sensuous apprehension of thought”:

I stoop
I touch the soil
Of my homeland
I taste it on my tongue. (22. 11-14)

Different from the earlier works, *The Shock of Arrival : Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, published in 1996 works from more than an interpersonal perspective and is a consolidation of meditative essays, selective
personal memories, polemical introductions and speeches, postmodern academic discussions and also some nostalgia-based lyric-dramatic poetry. It has an overture and a coda. The epigraph from Kadambari strikes the keynote of this long piece of postcolonial musings. In “Accidental Markings”, a prose-piece in the collection, the theme of ancestry revisits the second generation of Indian immigrants in America.

In this collection too, key poems like “House of a Thousand Doors”, “Night-Scene, the Garden”, and “Ashtamudi Lake” (earlier in River and Bridge) reappear. Alexander makes an honest attempt to explore the challenges- mainly those of race and gender, but also linguistic--faced by the postcolonial immigrants in America. In fact, her diasporic discourses offer fresh outlook and alternative perspective especially into female realities. It is an interesting study from the cultural vantage point since “significantly enough, they attempt to balance precariously between honouring and breaking traditions while building expatriate lives” (Pandey 161). In the poems as well as prose-pieces of this volume, she does unleash a ferocious energy particularly while interrogating the stereotypes. The poet opens out that her attempt is to confront the experience of “the difficult truths of body and language” (“Exiled by a Dead Script” 2) in postmodernist phenomenological terms.

The Shock of Arrival, like V. S. Naipaul’s Enigma of Arrival intersects with the themes of language, writing and diaspora in the light of the
contemporary world of violence, racism, neocolonial intervention and the female experience of the “body”. The angst of dislocation is framed by the migrant sensibility in Alexander’s poetry as she seeks to pierce the dazzling and the humdrum surface of reality in order to arrive at the core of experience through a “relocation” of her childhood memories. This is much evident when she writes of certain cults which are elusive and rather un-paraphrasable. For instance, she expresses the impossibility of translating the swirling snow of New York, “into the white space of the page” (10) as she is haunted by the fact that she never “knew” snow as a child. Here, one encounters the dialectic of language and reality. Malayalam is a “treasured orality” for her, the primal language unpolluted by the rapacious hold of writing. Unlike Das, there is a conscious and cautious distancing from her mother tongue as a written script. Besides, it would be quite arduous for Alexander who had “spent barely four years in Keralam” to be at home in Malayalam as a creative language since it is a discourse enriched by its films, folktales, riddles, parody songs, nursery rhymes, political speeches, tea shops humour, kathakali and a long literary culture. Subsequently, she seems to firmly believe that it is a futile attempt to appropriate space and the historic present in a language that resists the vital flow of her sense-impressions.

Though Malayalam remains only a spoken language for her, she affirms the presence of its rhythm in her poetry. (“Poem Out of Place; Zone of Radical Illiteracy” 2). “The hot unease I had first felt as a small child learning
to repeat English words” [and] “a shame of being improper…” (114).

Apparently, all the splintered voices form the collage of a postcolonial identity. Proficiency in English made her stick out as a foreigner or madamma among her Tiruvalla cousins, for she could speak the language in ‘sssss’ like a veritable “Madamma” (112). She was taught English “with the sternness of colonial pedagogy” by a Scottish tutor in Khartoum and her English was always braided with other languages. Though it is a facile attempt to compare between two Indian English women poets like Kamala Das who is at home with English as well as Malayalam and is firmly rooted in India (though not Kerala), and Alexander who is an immigrant and not precisely a bilingual writer, we can sense the clear distinction in their sensibilities. And Alexander delicately justifies her choice as: “English alienated me from what I was born to; it was also the language of intimacy and bore the charged power of writing. Through it…I might some day unlock the feelings that welled up with in me” (FL 56).

Alexander explicates this linguistic ambivalence in the essay “Language and Shame”: “My mother tongue approaches the condition of dreams. Its curving syllables blossom for me in so many scripts” (11).

Though she considered the script of her mother-tongue too confining, the rhythms of that “dream-language” inadvertently pass on to all other scripts—the plight of all diasporic writers. This idea is best expressed in an earlier discussed poem, “Text from the Middle Earth…” from the volume House of a Thousand Doors.
The arms of the mother were like wings
In which it sheltered, murmuring
Over and over in curved syllables
Reaping a sense which leaps as babble
Leaps to the flail of a set script
Before that script was set the child was born. (67-72)

She continues in the essay that, as a child, she used to “hide out to
to write in Khartoum” (12): the only place where she could write in peace was a
toilet for no one would thrust the door open on her. Her mother, typical of an
orthodox Keralite woman, scared of doing something innovative or creative,
always disapproved of her “writing”. She learned to write in snatches partly
because she was conscious of her mother’s disapproval over her poetic
efforts. Hence, her early attempts at writing poems had an aura of “something
illicit” and shameful. Most probably then, the poet in Alexander would prefer
to voice and body forth her intense feelings and thoughts in a language that
does not carry the burden of intimacy and accountability: “I’ll never be locked
in a cage of script” (105-106)--but, no doubt, whatever script she resorts to,
cannot escape the musty vigor of Kerala soil.

This accounts for the de-familiarization that occurs when the heat of
emotions is couched in a language other than the mother tongue. Once having
ironed out all traces of the non-English, Alexander found herself an
“outsider”, though she could speak English almost perfectly. It is the starting
point of realization that “Slowly, painfully, we must learn to return to where we are, the place where we live, and grasp its finitude to ourselves- only then can we use this language and not be exiled” (“Exiled by a Dead Script” 3). “Exiled” is in no way to be mistaken as marginalized. In fact it clearly denotes “the exile conditions dictated by her female body and by the powers of integration” (Perry “Feminist Strategies…” 8). In attempting a cultural integration in her memory’s milieu”, what is appealing about this poet is that, though the relationships are suffused with nostalgia (with regard to her South Indian cultural connections), there is no nauseating agony or despair in a struggle with the present. Rather, as a creative writer, she knows “where the people dwell that we must come”--to this zone of “occult instability”.

River and Bridge, which appeared in 1995 is her fifth book of poems and is divided into four parts, and she tries here to maintain a sort of lyrical equilibrium between interior and exterior worlds, rather exemplified by her deployment of a domestic and a political grandmother throughout. Laxmi Kannan remarks that as different from her earlier works, “There is a certain restlessness in the literary persona, and a nervous energy in her poems” (86) of this collection. Complexity of one’s birth--“birth is always bloody” (“River and Bridge” 13) is spilling over the four sections--“dissolving, mixing and unmixing as the poetry flows along” (Kannan 87).

As in the earlier works, dreams are afloat in the memory river, and obviously grandmother becomes the bridge to cross to the other end--to that
“four hundred year old house in Kozhencheri on the west coast of Kerala”
(“Poetics of Dislocation” 7) where she spent her paradisiacal childhood. It is synonymous with her longing to recapture the rhythms of her mother tongue, the “Lost Language” (*River and Bridge*) that:

… comes in flight

towards me

brushing against

an old stone wall

father’s father raised

Language so fine

it cannot hold the light. (1-7)

The feeling that she cannot set deep roots is sometimes unnerving to the diasporic writer--“syllables cluster” (28) / … “Their routes invisible / to me” (31-32). At the same time, she cannot find nesting spots, or at least a morsel of space in this “new land” too: “Ten years later still stranger here / I hunch by a forked stump set into soil (“Palpable Elysium” 1-2).

Wandering alone, exposed and still without any concrete space, she confronts “*la nuda vita*”, naked or bare life” (“Poetics…” 14) and, “A child with a shovel in her hand / raising clumps of clay” (“Palpable Elysium” 17-18) becomes the icon of the diasporic woman digging her ancestry until she finds “the clear light of a native land/without which exile is inconceivable” (“I Dream of Niagara” 12-13).
“Blood Line”, dedicated to her one-year-old daughter Svati Mariam, celebrates the elemental power in the female psyche through her girl-child; at the same time, she is the precious link along the matrilineal line:

She is my mother’s
mother who cries in me,
my line of blood
our perpetuity. (9-12)

Alexander hits a distinctly postcolonial/racial note in repudiating those “ancient hunters / who stumble westwards / broken bows in hand” (26-28).

Similarly, her imagination takes off only from her childhood memories in Kerala; “I saw wings of bone/pale as the stones of Kozhencheri” (“South of the Nilgiris” 21-22) and it does not crash-land anywhere between generations but safely return to the same place: “My son who is young / just six this year / knows the red soil of our land” (1-3).

Another tour de force of the volume, “Ashtamudi Lake” centers on a 1986 railroad-bridge disaster in her home-state of Kerala in which over hundred persons were drowned. Delicately contemplated and woven into the fabric of the poem is the accident that the poet herself met with while speeding over Ashtamudi Lake, thinking of the cold of a distant Brooklyn. But the poet loses focus as other incidents in history both remote and immediate, like Vasco da Gama’s arrival in Kerala in 1498 and “Columbus heading West / dreamt of the Indies” (125-126) get mixed up in her
contemplation. Still lines like “At Kayankulam the fish plates / lie in a stack / worn doors ripped / massed in a shining heap” (22-25) and “in wayside stations / bus halts where hot tea is sipped / from thick ceramic cups” (67-69) spell out those signposts of Kerala ambience, lending character to this poetic artifact.

Sometimes, Alexander looks back to her very recent ancestry also as there are some mother poems like “Her mother’s words” (I Root My Name), “Letter to my mother” (House of a Thousand Doors), and Night –scene, the Garden. In “After the Wedding” (I Root My Name) the intricate design of dreams in the mind of a young woman on the wedding eve is captured in “when yesterday they hennaed my hands / in the patterns of stars and moons / and flowers, for joy” (5-7). But, the lines “I did not think I would try to die” (4) take the poem to an altogether different plane where the poet is acutely aware of the much common harsh realities followed by an arranged marriage in a rigid society like that of Kerala. The sheer immediacy of maternal warmth is beautifully captured in the sixth section of the poem, “Night-Scene, the Garden”.

The collection Illiterate Heart, which appeared in 2002, is dedicated to her father who was a meteorologist, and her familiar concerns about the self and the world prevail, at times breaking fresh grounds as well. The poems here largely embody some of the defining characteristics of the (Indian) diasporic sensibility and the postcolonial experience. “Memory serves as a
medium and a metaphor” (Mohanty 40) and “kaleidoscopic images emerge from the past and jostle for the possession of the self, always fragile, unstable and precarious” (40).

The attempt to make sense of the present essentially by a return to her grandmother’s “Garden of Eden” in Tiruvalla through the crucial use of memory and landscape is punctuated with the postcolonial angst of disjunction. The Malayalam words employed in the poem, “Muse”, Penne, (9) pusthakam (16) and maram (19) are not only signposts that point to the steep curves of language, but also the “melting pots” consisting of complex histories, tortuous past and uneasy present. In an interview with Ruth Maxey, she talks about the idea of heteroglossia, which is very important in her work since many other languages form part of her creative process when she is writing in English.

It probably works at the level of rhythm…thoughts are given to us at an almost pre-linguistic level. They come to you without words; an idea can come to you quite early in life…Some of my poems have been translated into Malayalam and people have sometimes remarked on how certain kinds of rhythms in a poem are from Malayalam. (5)

This would mean that one can be comfortable with a particular sense of being in a world even though it may not be linguistically accessible. It is a very good hedge against “the presumption of linguistic clarity or
transparency” (5). “Port Sudan” tellingly suggests that words are not fixed inanimate terms of reference:

Now I know the truth of my tongue
starts where translations perish.

Where voices cease (14-17)

But for this realization that language is both fluid and explosive,
Alexander emphatically puts that her memories of Kerala are crucial, bringing in the image of Pharaoh:

the one who murmured at the hour of his death,

throat turned toward the restless waters:

If I forget Upper Egypt,

Cut off my right hand.

Here lies memory. (19-23)

The writing of the seventies and the eighties reinforced the linguistic concern, an almost obsessive preoccupation with language, as revealed in Alexander’s anxiety of being caught between “the terror of babble” and the “terror of nonsense” (“Exiled by a Dead Script” 1). Iyengar’s observation that these poems respond to “English language than to the urgent need to communicate a perception (709)” seems to be true with a deep excavation of the poetry of the seventies.

Makarand Paranjpe’s remark is also relevant in this connection that “A new generation of poets have been working diligently, away from the
limelight and the fuss, keeping alive the flickering flame of this marginal, but significant poetic tradition” (41). While he assesses that there is the continuing health and viability of Indian English Verse, there is a different trend emerging:

First of all, the return of emotion, of involvement. The poetry of the 1960’s and 1970’s was dominated by the note of ironic detachment, skepticism, and emotional restraint encapsulated so self-congratulatingly in R. Parthasarathy’s *Ten Twentieth century Indian poets*, first published in 1976. (41-42)

He further observes that the new poets like Alexander seem to have shed this complex altogether to inhabit a more relaxed, even happier world, a world in which they are involved—“In a word, these poets do not suffer from the painful self-consciousness of their predecessors” (42). There are recurring notes of loneliness and longing for love and security, but there is no self-dramatization of these aspects of life. But it is true that Alexander often lacks an air of ease and affability. Though it is rich in texture, her poetry is highly academic. Besides everything, Paranjpe remarks in connection with a discussion on *House of a Thousand doors* that, “there is a feeling of verbosity, of wordiness in these long narratives… (46)

However, Alexander’s singular achievement as an immigrant writer is that she tries to “create” rather than “find spaces” and in this creative effort, “Memory serves as a medium and a metaphor” for her (Perry “Meena
Alexander’s…” 71). Her poems exemplify the challenges, trials and interactions that energize the writing of a gifted Indian artist living “in another land”. While these works confirm the high regard in which she is increasingly held today, she does not hesitate to admit that, “multiculturalism in America that has sharpened my wits, forced me back to my own postcolonial heritage” (“Language and Shame” 89).

John Oliver Perry has summarized the quality of her works in his words-- “[They] inhabit fractured and multiple cultural worlds where each multiply-cultured, multiply-divided person struggles for equilibrium or at least equanimity--for some space to build a creative life” (“Meena Alexander’s…” 69). Avoiding a post-colonial or feminist agenda on the grounds of a “political program that says I’m marginal”, Alexander says: “I may have a secret one [agenda] I do not talk about” (qtd. in Perry “Meena Alexander’s…”). Quite unlike Kamala Das, the sexual desires or the driving sexual energy is delicately protected, or has its privacy as taboo feelings. That way, Alexander manages her own diasporic strategies of distantiation and indeterminacy. She tries to expand a constricting social fabric, exploiting some of the still-living memories of her childhood in Kerala. In this expedition down the memory line, there is a multitude of relational selves--a series of modular identities that work as milestones.

Unlike many Indo-Anglian poets, including her poetic mentor or guru, Jayanta Mahapatra, she had the privilege of acquainting herself with
international post-modern writing. It is no wonder that her poems require several readings before we can decipher their content. Yet, she is acutely aware of the burden of representing the complex realities of her own “inherited culture” even while writing in English. This leads to the double perspective of an insider-outsider or the double consciousness that Rushdie points out: “This stereoscopic vision is…what we can offer in place of whole sight” (118).

Alexander subverts “the invisible ideology of Indian English” (“Exiled…” 3) by rupturing its syntax. Similarly, she tears apart the icon very often, the language used to express the rupture is itself ruptured—to contest the decadent hierarchy. Regarding her powerful poem “Passion”, she writes: “I wrote it [poem] in Manhattan… yet, I was translating into the landscape of the small town in Kerala where I came from, and out again, into the space of the page, using the concrete and palpable present as an invisible frame” (The Shock of Arrival 8). The poem sews together the body-bursting agony of childbirth, “the tenth month’s passion” (“Passion” 1) and a maimed bird’s agony of its bleeding head hanging on “by a sinew or two” (3). For the woman-figure, the route/root of language is invisible and she suffers the agony. Linearity is broken, with a voluntary attempt from the part of the poet to give way for the reader to take a pause and listen to the soundless recreation of her own associations, imagination and reflection. Most evocatively, the throes of the freedom struggle, wafting, perspicacity, native resistance to the colonial might are strung together in her poetry, with eons of
physical and intellectual subjugation, hitherto considered the sole prerogatives of patriarchy. Undoubtedly, her ancestral moorings work as the chlorophyll of her poetic imagination.