CHAPTER V
IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

5.1 Imagery
5.1.1 Animal Imagery

The various types of animals, birds, reptiles, and insects are present in Alexander’s poetry. There are animals such as cows, buffaloes, pigs, frogs, lions, leopards, bullocks, monkeys, goats, dogs, elephants, tigers, gazelles, hyenas, and jackals. There are birds like crow, peacock, koil, cuckoo, thousand eyed owl, hawk, dove, lemming, sparrow, swallow, parrot, bat, kingfisher, gull, mynah, phoenix, hummingbird; reptiles like snakes, cobras, lizards, rats, earthworms, silkworms and scorpions. The insects are mosquitoes, fireflies, bees, ants, beetles, ticks, and butterflies. There are also water creatures like fish, and water snakes. The animal imagery can be interpreted variously as it refers to the human passions, emotions, virtues, vices, joys, and sorrows. The poet skillfully uses them for expression of her thoughts and feelings.

Bird is the central image in The Bird’s Bright Ring. The poem opens with the image of singing bird. The bird image comes recurrently as singing bird, pecking bird, burnt diamond kindled with the light bones of the bird, mother as ‘My bird’, birds singing with unstopped tongues the songs of lamentation, and frail bird throughout the poem to reveal the several connotations of the bird symbolism. The imagery of frog in the section VIII and IX presents the contrast between the omnipresent and omnipotent sun and the frog with its physical limitations.

The poem ‘Bird Head’ in I Root My Name presents the images of “sudden sparrows”, “a long slow swallow”, “feather sunk in exile” which are related to the sorrow of exile (12). While the poem ‘Sleeping
Gazelles’ presents imagery of gazelles as the symbol of love and passion. In the poem ‘Veined Words’ (IRMN 13) the lover comes in the image of a man of “leopard gaze” (IRMN 13) to set the passion of the poet on fire. The singing sparrows and scorpion are the images used for lust, sex and the existence of evil in the subconscious.

The poem ‘Songs from the Dust’ (IRMN) depicts the miserable condition of poor children through the images of “savage hornets” and “swotted flies” (21). The images of the poor children, their parched mouths and cry, the wooden hovels, and the gutter create the picture of miserable life. These children suffer from hunger and have to struggle hard to get food (IRMN 21). The another striking image of hunger, starvation and poverty comes through the image of “sobbing lemmings” (21). They are migratory birds and refer to the sorrow of migration experienced by the poet as child. The veins of the children “dry like pigeons” (21) speak about the dearth of grain and unending starvation of poor. The image of “torn worm” (22) used for lame man creates the sensation of disgust and dirtiness. The image of the “vagrant butterflies” (23) expresses the feeling of insecurity and desire of home in diasporic mind and “flagrant humming birds” (23) focus the terror in exiled life.

The poem ‘A Picture from My Street’ presents the picture of human sorrow and helplessness through the imagery of “lice in the dung heap” (IRMN 24). The agony and turmoil of exiled life is articulated through the image of “fallen sparrow” in the poem ‘Text from the Middle Earth’ (IRMN27). The image of the sparrow is dynamic and can be interpreted variously. The poet depicts the exploitation of woman on various levels by using the image of “brown sparrow” (IRMN 29) and speaks of mother daughter relationship in ‘Dream poem’ (SR13) through the image of the sparrow cupped in the palms of the mother.
The image of fled vibrant peacocks describes fatal love of Cleopatra in ‘A Mirror’s Grace’ (WP) and suggests that the happy and vibrant days of Cleopatra’s life have passed and death is approaching (WP 15). The poem ‘From Grey Room’ (SR36) uses the image of perishing peacocks to depict the sorrowful life of immigrants. The title of the poem ‘From a Grey Room’ itself has the grey shade of grief and sorrow. In the poem ‘Songs without Place’, the poet depicts the contrasting imagery of lemmings and rat to convey the loss due to migration and devastation caused by coarse rat (WP 33).

The imagery of fireflies and birds express poet’s feelings of sorrow, alienation, and uprootedness in the poem ‘The Loneliness of Plants’ (SR 22). They illumine a dark story of the poet’s grief.

In the tunnel of my ears
bird calls crawls
fireflies fester like wounds
illumining a dark story (SR 22)

The poem ‘In Divi Seema’ presents the picture of poverty and helplessness in the Indian villages through the image of “three buoyant goats / rouged in their own blood” (SR 29) and brings out the plight of poor women. The goat is the poor, tame animal used as the sacrificial scapegoat in the many religious activities. It indicates the women sacrificed in the name of customs, traditions, and superstitions. The poem ‘No Autumn in My Country’ presents the image of stray pigs, which focuses the kingdom of dirt and filth in the slum areas and poor localities. The poor people use to eat the stray pigs by roasting them alive on the fire (SR 34).

The animal imagery in ‘Black Mass’ (SR 40) articulates poet’s observation of social life and animals. The cow, which squats on her haunches, is the tame animal with godly presence. Flies buzz around the
fruit seller’s nose and give the sensation of the fly on reader’s nose (SR 40). The poem ‘Copper Cows’ (SR 47) presents the image of ‘copper cow’ as the memories of childhood. The milk is flowing in the vein of the poet and cow connects poet to her motherland and with her bloodline. The image of fish is used with different connotations. In the poem ‘The Loneliness of Plants’ (SR 22), the image of goatherd’s wife setting fish on fire has sexual and erotic implications as fish is the symbol of male genitals. Also in the poem ‘On Malabar Coast’, the image of fish, which gurgles around the rim of earth (SR 41), has sexual connotations. The pigeons in ‘Threshold City’ imply violence in spite of their correlations with peace because they are lurching in the sky, which is “shot with acid” (43). The image of “homing pigeons” (SR 47), “tiny pigeons clutching straw”, “red eyed pigeons” (SR 47) reflect poet’s desire for home as a bird longs for its nest.

The poem ‘At Konark’ presents the various images of wild animals. The images of “rampant lion”, “nuzzling elephant” suggest the sexual desires hidden in the subconscious. The image of “guzzling flies” is the symbolical of greediness existing in the human beings. The images of lizards and black flies are suggestive of some creeping desires in the blackness of heart (SR 52). The elephant in ‘Elephants in Heat’ (RaB 39) comes as the tyrant who destroys mynah’s nest.

In the poem ‘House of a Thousand Doors’ the images of various animals come as the symbol of evil and destructive forces which are restricted by the three feet high bronze sill of the ancestral house. The house is surrounded by various animals.

This house has a thousand doors
the sills are cut in bronze
three feet high
to keep out snakes,
toads, water rats
that shimmer in the bald reeds
at twilight
as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast (HoaTD 3)

In the poem ‘Her Garden’, the image of ‘bristling cicada’ (HoaTD 4) reflects how the memories of childhood pester poet’s mind. However, in the last part of the poem the cicada shunts sparks from its wings and suggests the hope of regaining the childhood (HoaTD 5). The poem ‘Looking through Well Water’ (HoaTD 6) presents the haunting image of Koil crying in well water. Its beak glazed with blood refers to the suicidal cases the poet had heard in her childhood. The poet here refers to the unwed pregnant women who commit suicide by jumping into wells to avoid the social shame.

I hear the Koil crying in well water
its beak is glazed with blood
it’s tilted on a nest of clouds
a float and burning (HoaTD 6)

The image and metaphor of young snail in the poem ‘Young Snail’ (HoaTD 41) refers to the pregnant woman expecting the experience of motherhood. The poem ‘By Bear Mountain’ (HoaTD 46) depicts the immense oddities of North American life through the images of birds, bees, a bear struck to a rock, a lynx in cage (HoaTD 41). The poem ‘Brief Chronicle by Candle Light’ (HoaTD) describes the miseries of Indian married women burnt in their own homes. The images of the night creatures like Jackal, cobra, the thousand-eyed owl (HoaTD 52) refer to the evil forces and customs, which exploit women and deprive them of their lives. The imagery of water bird is used for memories and dreams. The memories are compared with the water birds and water fowls of blue beaks and dripping feathers in the poem ‘Writing’ (HoaTD 66). The
Kingfisher knocking at the bark of jackfruit tree creates the poetic picture of Kerala homeland and campus in the poem ‘Homeward’ (HoaTD 92). The stable full of bullocks is indicative of the richness of home.

The image of buffaloes crawling in waterholes in the poem ‘After the First House’ (TS 2) reminds of A. K. Ramanujan’s ‘River’. The image of mating ants is terrifically erotic, “I saw wild ants / mating in heaps” (TS 3). The gulls crying in indecipherable language indicate the inner turmoil of the exiled poet in ‘The Travellers’ (TS 7). The images of ‘hyenas wailed in guttural tongues’ and ‘monkeys clawed at banyan bark’ in ‘Sita’s Story’ (TS 13) create the atmosphere of fear. The images of ‘thousand eyed monster’ and ‘Kaliya puffed with poison’ (TS 13) represent the evil forces in society.

The imagery of birds is used very effectively in Night Scene, the Garden. The images of night birds like owl, hungry myena, loudmouthed crow, blue-black koil, crimson hummingbird, a cluster of bats, remind the poet of the past and garden of childhood (HoaTD 5). The past comes to live in present through the images of birds. The poem ‘Black Water’ (HoaTD 17) presents bizarre animal imagery only to express confusion in poet’s mind. The images of beetles, mice, earthworms, bats, ticks, create nauseating feeling and express filthiness. The image of phoenix in ‘Man in a Red Shirt’ (IH 44) explains poet’s struggle to come out of the chaos of exile to prove her. The poem ‘Red parapet’ (IH 73) presents the images of rat racing in the rain, the harmless bats in the jamun trees, monsoon rivers and cobra over threshold stones. They give the feel of Kerala house and the surrounding experienced by the poet in childhood.

The image of insect in ‘Aftermath’ (RS 9) is related to the bloodshed during 9/11. The disaster of 9/11 has made the wings of insect bloody.
I want to write of the linden tree
That stoops at the edge of the river

But its leaves are filled with insects
With wings the color of dry blood (RS 9)

In ‘Pit fire’ (RS 11) the cry of bird comes as the symbol of strut of death in the aftermath of 9/11. The images of a woman in army castoffs, a dove that flutters each shoulder bone and the naked birds refer to the violence and war like situation after 9/11. After 9/11 birds have stopped their singing as poet describes in the poem ‘September Sunlight’, “The birds are naked as birds well might be / they sing to no one in particular” (RS 17). In the poem ‘Color of Home’ the image of bullfight reminds the dangerous competition between different countries which is the root cause of the incidents like 9/11 (RS 18).The image of “Bird with no beak” in ‘Child, Stone, Sea’ suggests the psychological harm caused due to racial discrimination while living immigrant’s life in USA (RS 29).

Through the image of Phoenix in ‘Green Parasol’ (RS 32) the poet encourages her daughter to soar high and set to fire all the old customs, traditions and restrictions imposed on women.The images of silk, silkworms and mulberry trees are very significant in the poem ‘Raw Silk’ (RS). Silk production is one of the major businesses in India. For that silkworms are cultured and mulberry leaves provide food to the silkworms. Consequently, the recurring images of silk, silkworms and mulberry leaves are related to poet’s home state Kerala, culture of silk production and wearing silk very fondly (RS 36).The image of “crown of mulberry leaves” (RS 36) which is set on poet’s head gives comfort to poet’s mind. The search of silk is actually search of self and homeland.

When I open the drawer
to search for silk
I touch smoke
raw silk turned to smoke in the night’s throat (RS 36)

As dove is considered as symbol of peace, the image of dove presents contrast to the bloodshed, violence, and Afghan war in the aftermath of 9/11 in the poem ‘Central Park” (RS 38). In addition to these animals, birds and insects, there are cicadas, pigeons, butterflies, eagles, crows, fireflies and so on. All of them are the part of Alexander’s poetic world.

5.1.2 Imagery of Blindness, Darkness, Blackness, and Death

The poetry of Meena Alexander is overwhelming with the images of blindness, darkness, and blackness. These images seem to obsess the poet. Therefore, she makes an excessive use of words blind, dark, black. We come across number of dark images in her poetry - dark gate, dark space, dark and wretched spaces, dark bruise, dark hollows, dark body, the dark, countless voices rising in the dark, speaking darkness, dark hollows (BBR), dark veins, dark flesh, dark tiles, dark pit of pavement, dark room, dark flowing floods (IRMN), dark blood, darkest corner with a mess, darkest spouse, dark prickly thorn (WP), dark again, a fit of darkness, darkness, dark wedge of my body, cyclone played the gold flute of darkness, clothing clotted dark as blood, dark story, dark corner of a library (SR), flute played in darkness, fern fronds dark as hair, the darkest water crashing through pebbles, dark coil, Bible filled with darkness, freckles of black stuff, dark room, darkness in the last hours before springs, Love’s currencies : minted in darkness, darkness, dark water, dark coil (HoaTD), dark mouth (TS), lips so dry and dark, darkness of threshold (HoaTD), mouth is so dark, soil is dark, dear dark body, jets of darkness (RaB), dark skin, sun soars into that darkness, plump dark flesh, dark body alive, darkness by the basin, dark fishing lines, a river dark
with ash, dark leaves, dark spoke under succulent thorns (IH), dark water, sun dark skin, darken lips, dark skin, dark tribute or punishment, ink dark stars, dark flower, dark eyes, a dark rose (RS). The association of darkness with terror or mystery is obvious. It seems that darkness has engulfed Alexander’s poetry and intensifies the atmosphere of gloominess and despair and loss of home and lamentation.

The darkness is assisted by the images of blackness and blindness. Blind musician, black air, black gun, tiny black eyes, voice glints black, Krishna’s perfumes bathing in blindness, black roll, a form which blinds, tunnels of black, blindness blooms, a black hole of music (BBR), blind heart, bare black rock, black tar, blind man retching gutter water, blind tongue, blind land (IRMN), black milk of time, a black grape, black river, black bracelet, black vein of thorn (WP), black icons, black mass, blind boy, black vessel, stars blacken, black braids (SR), a blindness cleaned, black and bare, rock that is black, black sister, face black with dirt, freckles of black stuff (HoaTD), grandmother blinded by shrapnel, black horizon, black water, black roots, blackened stuff (HoaTD), black god’s altar, heron blinded by an eagle’s claw, black flowering cherry, black kindness, a blackness monstrous, a blindness magnified (RaB) ghost in black cutways, blind beggar, black water (RS), black river, black water, black rose, black stone, black mass, black berry, black milk of childhood, childhood, black portfolio (IH). Along with depicting the despair and loss of hope, devastation, and lamentation, the images of darkness and blackness such as dark body, black skin stand for the racial colour discrimination. The recurring image of black water is symbolical of migration and exile that is equaled with the punishment of ‘Kalapani’. This world of darkness, blackness, and blindness is accompanied by the death. The images of death run like this – innumerable death (BBR), dying dancers, I were dead, dying of loneliness, dead husband’s breath,
she is dead, dead cacti, three days dead (SR), death, dead sister’s dowry, dead field of grass, her death, a bloody death (HoaTD) gardens of our dead, cousins dead of brain fever, bodies of the dead, we murmur dead, land swarming with death, our living and dead, ancestral houses of our dead, graves of my dead (The Storm), coils of death, dead mother’s saris (HoaTD). I had died, all had died, death a hundred armed, germs of death, scent of death, fields of death, a death ceremony, hundreds hacked to death in Ayodhya, terrible kindness of dead (RaB), hour of father’s death, black sun of death, death’s head, William Blake’s death mask, holy the cord of death (IH), strut of death, two million dead in carnage, the untimely dead (RS). The death intensifies the gloominess and atmosphere of violence and bloodshed.

5.1.3 Imagery of Light

Though Alexander’s poetry is engulfed by the darkness, blackness, and blindness, the ray of hope is suggested by using many images of light and brightness. The Bird’s Bright Ring includes the variety of images related to light; bones of light, the crystal of mundo, sparks from diamond, burnt diamond kindled with light, a river of crystal, the bright of the black air, the light in mother’s vein, the frog in the sun, cloak shot with rainbow, a song of light, long grass wet with light, the winter sun, bright plums, bones of light, bright ring, light in the mouths, radiant canopy are the images of light and hope which indicate that in spite of endless devastation there is surety of new beginning through poetry.

Sunlight falling in spears, brilliant sun (IRMN) brightening sea, bright skulls, light of the great moon, endless light (WP), lightening, scratched by light, torn by light, plump heart of light, roses tarred with light (SR), candle light, chronicle by candle light, future light, winter light, the plump heart of light, solace of sunlight, patch of sunlight,
sunlight in threads (HoaTD), luminous stretch of sky, moonlit sea, sunlight darts into storm (The Storm), moonlight, milky light, canopy of light, full moon (HoaTD), bumpy lights, paper filled with light, traffic lights, first burn of light, twilight, lightening storm, fractures of light, in comprehensible light, clear light of stone, phosphorous, morning light, ghostly light (RaB), wave of light, tunnel of light, terrible light (IH), uncommon light in the sky, altered light, September sunlight, flowering sunlight (RS). The imagery of light symbolizes hope, happiness, satisfaction, but in some poems like ‘Paper Filled with Light’, light stands for creative inspiration. In Raw Silk, the light symbolizes the explosion of twin towers and its aftermath.

5.1.4 Stone Imagery

Stone is the recurring image in the poetry of Meena Alexander. In her childhood she was absolutely “fascinated by the shapes and the texture of stones” (Duncan23) and had spent many hours studying them. It is the source from where her imagery of stone roots springs. The stones poet speaks of are the rocks of New Jersey, an outcrop of granite, black obsidian, and gray green genesis, red stones of Delhi and so on. The rock and stones are the part of distinct portions of geography that allow poet to anchor her inner world to make sense of place. Along with the real and lived places, the imaginative landscapes are inevitable for her poetry.

Along with being the part of geographical landscape, the stones in Alexander’s poetry show their static quality, stillness, hardness, deadness, coldness, solidity, and agelessness. They are as ancient as time. Consequently, in Alexander’s poetry we come across many images of stones. The diamond (BBR 12), paper stone (BBR 15), red stones of Kashmere Gate, red mouths of the outer walls, marble, alabaster, rubies richer than veins of porphyry (BBR 21), the stones of that still city (BBR
22) and rocks (24) are the various images of stone which unravel the hardness, coldness and inhumanity of the colonizers and neo-colonizers in India. The stones coming with their red colour tell a lot about the bloodbath and brutality.

The image of polished stone in ‘Text from the Middle Earth’ (IRMN 26) stands for the feminist awareness of the poet as the woman is compared with a polished stone. She has only the place of showpiece in family and society and hard strong-bricked walls of restrictions are set around her.

The imagery of sandstone, ripple stone, slates in the poem ‘Glyphs’ (IH 38) and inscriptions and glyphs on stones reveal the “zone of grace of history” (IH 38). The stones thus acquire historical significance. The stones in Raw Silk have tongues and they are ‘bald rocks’ with the qualities of human beings and suggest the liveliness in ‘Blue Lotus’ (RS 44).

The images of ‘stones beneath’ and ‘the stones around’ in ‘Roman Ground’ (RS) stand for the earth beneath the feet, which supports the life of human being. The images of stones from the childhood in ‘Porta Santa’ (RS 52) refer to stone eating girl. The poet compares stones from childhood with rolls of bread. The stone is not only a roll of bread but stores light which inspires poet in her creative activity and search of roots (RS 53). The poem ‘Field in Summer’ (RS 63) presents the image of singing stones as stones sang canticles in poet’s mouth. The singing stones remind her of father, mother, stars of childhood which have lost now.

The significant image related to the stones is that of ‘stone roots’ which is the central imagery in Stone Roots. A stone root is a sort of image which works as a spring board so that she could feel secure. While using this image she was “struck by the way in which trees become
fossils, changing into stone” (Govindasamy 99). The image of being lost in the poem ‘Stone Roots’ comes from the urge of finding roots. The stone becomes the base of trees and suggests the ancestral roots of the poet, “Trees understand the under / water base of stone / the gravity of exile” (SR 25). Apart from this, we come across a number of images of stones in Alexander’s poetry as she has been obsessed by stone like her poetic mentor Jayanta Mahapatra. We have broken rock, crumbling sandstone, shattered rock, sullen stone, polished stone (IRMN) which focus the frustration, despair, and anger of the poet.

In the poem ‘Childhood’ (SR7), poet thinks that “flesh was not stone”, stones are lifeless but after the experience of migration, she compares herself with stones, which are “perfectly cold”. Stone has permanence, but the flesh is mortal. Boundaries of mortality must be crossed to achieve permanence. The poet presents the contrast by calling herself “perfectly cold like stone” while stone is “warm’ like well rinsed flesh (SR 7). Then there are other images like limestone, cold rocks, blue stone, lime blue stone, pebble, moonstones (SR), stones, pebbles, mottled stone, sore stones, a small stone, the ancient stones, hot stones, marbles shining as stars, hips of finest stone, bruised stones, stone inscription which can make centuries alive, stone slab (HoaTD), sharp rocks, black rock (TS), the fretted stone, sharp pebbles, rock face (HoaTD), stone wall, stone bench, a stone that weeps water, sheer stone, plumstones, lime stone, honey craped from stones, porous stone, sand stone, lip of stone, black rock, lip of rock, stone chariots (RaB), Shadow of stone, a small house of stones, glinting stones, a black stone, stony syntax, rough stones of the alley, a stone at the side of the road, stone steps, foundation stones (IH), stone gates, a stone cracked down the spine, stones around, singing stones (RS). Through these images, Alexander presents various aspects
and features of stone. As it appears recurrently in many poems acquires the status of symbol allowing multiple interpretations.

5.1.5 Landscape Imagery

Due to the broad range of experiences and variety of environments in which Meena Alexander has lived, her poetry is besieged with powerful images and memories from India and evocative pictures of the Hudson River, the roaring subways and the raucous bus traffic of New York City. She employs landscape imagery very skillfully to express her feelings of estrangement and alienation from her homeland. Stone Roots depicts the nature and landscape imagery with dramatic details. The poem ‘June 1977’ (SR 21) describes the month of June in India when there is monsoon and the rain pours cats and dogs exhibiting the beauty of raining season in all its fierce and calm aspects. The images of streets full of water, rooftops as sails, and earth as the gurgling jug create the picture of Indian monsoon (SR 21). The poem ‘On the Malabar Coast’ presents the beautiful imagery of Malabar Coast by the juxtaposition of various images like tall trees, star headed acned palms.

Tall trees drown in water
rough headed fishes gurgle
round the rim of earth, 
surf sucks its burden . . .

Once these acned palms
where star headed, serpent
necked, swaying as great Solomon
before his beloved (SR 41)

House of a Thousand Doors includes a richly imaged landscape of Kerala. The poetry is generated by using imagery of garden, wells, stony
landscapes, thorny and fruited trees, silted marshes, paddy fields, and vibrant rivers. In ‘Waiting for Rain’ (HoaTD 45) the great beauty of landscape flowed in the poem which is written for poet’s son Adam Kuruvilla of three. He is waiting for rain with the hope of discovering the various aspects of landscape.

Now cherry, plum
the impossibly white blossoms
of a bough I’m too new in this place
to name, unpin themselves, let go. . .  (HoaTD 44)

The poet is living ten thousand miles away from grandmother’s house by Pamba River and close to river Hudson. So the images of motherland and landscape are suspended in her memory. They have become the part of her mnemonic world as Alexander writes in ‘Poetics of Dislocation’, “bits of places pour into me, the edge of muddy stream, green leaves of tree, I can smell the bitter bark, stones at the edge of a dry road, a wall white with sunshine wings of dove, somewhere over a slate grey roof” (Alexander8). The poem ‘My Valley’ (HoaTD 67) depicts the image of Kerala house and landscape which is the part of poet’s memory world.

Once there was a valley
a house with a red tiled roof
a courtyard with a mulberry tree
and sand strewn all around

Sand where a girl child
printed her mouth, her feet,
her reddening lips
sand where an old man
old as the tree. . . .
What happened to him (HoaTD 67)
The imagery of Kerala home and land is always associated with the memories of grandfather, an old man.

The poem ‘Homeward’ (HoaTD) presents the various images of Kerala landscape including the bamboo trees and its shadow announcing the homecoming of the poet to close “wound of America” (HoaTD 89), the river Pamba flowing in the veins of poet, and the variety of flora and fauna of the Kerala land. The description of Kerala landscape with its all details creates the picture of this land of God in front of mind’s eye.

There are footsteps in his brain,
cumbersome, toes splayed with mud
from paddy beds, fields of sugarcane.
The stench of arak nut and rubber
white sap out of a remembered bark
dissolving precious silks
grandmother hung on the glass cabinets
by the bed to shield her bottles -
those potions that numb,
skidding through blood and sinew
erasing all pain (HoaTD 89)

The streets in Tiruvella in Kerala, her grandmother’s house with the red-tiled roof, water buffaloes, the church, the small road with few buses and cars are the part of landscape of Kerala. Now that is fractured and she has a city courtyard, Broadway, the dark underground subway. In the poem ‘Black Broadway’ (HoaTD 69) the past and present is merged in the image of windowscape of moving train.

The vanished fields
eroding
iron
The poet also goes on depicting the imagery of American landscape. The poem ‘By Bear Mountain’ (HoaTD 46) draws the fascinating images of North American landscape and through them poet skillfully weaves together contradictory geography, thoughts and feelings. The poem depicts the landscape of America with all its oddities.

Then all the immense oddity of a North American landscape: Catbriar, wild parsnip, the rough rude raspberry, birds, bees, a bear struck to a rock, a lynx in a cage its eyelids knotted with hot wires tail stinking (HoaTD 46)

The imagery of landscape is often the product of both memory and imagination hanging between New York and South Indian village surrounded by green paddy fields. The poem ‘Passion’ (RaB) depicts the contrasting images of a Manhattan Street and a country road and a small house in Kerala. The another poem ‘Everything Strikes Loose’ (RaB 59) depicts Kerala landscape with its pepper vines, mango trees, flickering leaves, golden Pamba river trickling through low hills, tastes of childhood, the boats and spices of Kerala like cinnamon, cloves and pepper (RaB 59).

The glare
was in my eyes,
the flickering leaves,
the golden pamba river.

Now the river trickles
through low hills,
it tastes of childhood

The boats fly no flags
the races are all done
and flat barges driven by men
bear cinnamon, cloves, dried pepper (RaB 59)

The poem ‘San Andreas Fault’ (RaB) depicts the two contrasting images, San Andreas Fault in San Francisco on one hand, and the cliffs of Himalayas on the other to juxtapose both the landscapes of past and present. The images of San Andreas and Himalaya together in the poem exhibit poet’s multicultural sensibility(RaB11). Thus poet fabricates the places in her poems in such way that the images of landscape come in existence as symbolic space.

The poem ‘Gold Horizon’ (IH) presents the landscape of Kerala. The images of running river, summer floods, sinking stones, fireflies, paddy fields, herons, stumps of tree, mess of water create the picture of Kerala landscape in floods (IH 47).

She waited where the river ran
that summer as the floods began -
stones sinking,
fireflies murmuring in paddy fields.

heron on stumps of tree
the axe planted
where little else would work
and everywhere mess of water (IH 47)

The poem also gives the images of places from New York, Delhi, Hyderabad, Tiruvella, Sudan, Manhattan and they are not just places but
are geographical images with complex histories and deal with the present and past of the poet.

Place names splinter
on my tongue and flee

Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri
Khartoum, Nottingham, New Delhi,
Hyderabad, New York,
the piece work of sanity
stitching them into a single
coruscating geography
(a long drawn breath
In an infant’s dream might work)
ruined by black water in a paddy field (IH 49)

In the poem ‘Low Hills of Bavaria’ (IH), the poet mixes the images of landscapes from past and present to overcome the sense of exile and homelessness (IH 76). The images of thyme and wild blackberry come together to connect the past in Kerala and present in America.

In the poem ‘Black River, Walled Garden’ (IH), the various images and symbols come together to allude the time of poet’s childhood. The images are scattered in the poem. The cradle in the tree where she hangs gently rocking back and forth, blades of grass, warm bunches of mangoes on the mango tree, the monsoon clouds in the sky, the world of rock and stone, gooseberry bush, river in spate, sugarcane stalks, garden gate, coiled rosebuds symbolize the childhood places which are safe, secret and away from the world of “Crossed paths, circling aerial routes, rough sea voyages, all the morass of intercontinental crossings her parent’s enforce” as poet writes in ‘Poetics of Dislocation’ (Alexander
10). Staying in trees and depicting the landscape of Kerala heal her fractured world.

5.1.6 Body Imagery

Images of eyes, heads, bones, mouth, flesh, tongue, wrist, womb, palm, tooth, nail, sinew, veins, hands, feet, back, belly of the mother, cheek, throat and hair are abound in Alexander’s poetry. They are very realistic, sensuous, sometimes disgusting and very expressive of the emotions and feelings that the poet experiences in her life.

The poem *The Bird’s Bright Ring* articulates the experience of despair and devastation and lamentation through the images of gouged out eyes of the cactus man. Cactus man is also the blind musician whose eyes are juxtaposed with the image of the “eyes of the pecking bird” (BBR 10). He could not see and his existence bathes in blindness spreading the kingdom of darkness. The image of womb symbolizes the brilliant mother who feeds poet with the river of crystal.

Brilliant mother

he knows

I crawled

in the pitch

of your womb

feed me

with the rivers

of crystal

flowing

in the flesh of your

open palm (BBR 13)
Poet uses body imagery to express her social concern in *I Root My Name*. The lack of grain due to excess of rain causes misery to the hungry people and tongue becomes “bitten tongue” (IRMN19)

The images of eyes, burst bones, torn cartilage, mucus tell the story of cruelty of Chinese government against the protesting students in the poem ‘The Young of Tiananmen’ (RaB13) and uses the imagery of human organ to depict the inhuman massacre of students at Tiananmen Square. The body imagery in ‘Skin Song’ (RaB 74) is used to represent the pains and violence involved in childbirth. The birth of child is always welcome and happy thing. However, sometimes to deliver a too-big, wide shouldered bull headed child can be fatal for the mother (RaB 74).

The poem ‘Green Parasol’ in *Raw Silk* uses body imagery skillfully to describe the birth of poet’s daughter before fourteen years.

> Sweet blossom of heir and flesh
> fourteen years ago you tore me up so swift
> They set you blue, bawling to my left breast
> Later I fit you hungry still
> between elbow and wrist
> dream as rib to rib (RS 31)

The images of “blossom of hair and flesh” and “child bawling” to left breast held between elbow and wrist create the picture of newly born infant and its mother feeding to him (RS 31).

The body imagery plays crucial role in Alexander’s poetry as it is directly attached to the being of the poet as expressed in the poem, ‘She Hears a Gold Flute’ (IH 7). The body imagery stands for the poet’s consciousness of being black woman in the exiled space where heart of the poet becomes hot after experiencing discrimination due to dark skin.
She needs help to survive which she gets through her verses. In another poem ‘Heat Wave’ (IH) the images of “marks on body”, “bruises on my thighs” (IH 8) refer to the scars of racial discrimination. The poem ‘Rumours for an Immigrant’ (RS) depicts the uncertainty of immigrant's life in the aftermath of 9/11. The images of hair, lips, two black eyes, dark skin, and two nostrils (RS 37) reflect the difficulties of psychic survival for the black woman due to her physical blackness. The contrasting images of ‘bodies’ and ‘souls’ (RS 40) represent the contradictory forces of physical survival and psychic survival working on immigrant. While in the poem ‘Porta Santa’ (RS 54) the image of soul is depicted as naked, unashamed while body is old sari according to Indian philosophy (RS 54).

The poem ‘Gold Horizon’ (IH) presents various images including landscape imagery, animal imagery and body imagery. The image of pregnant woman who waits for the birth of child has been presented in different perspective.

Beneath my cheek I feel
her belly’s bowl
thick with blood,
the woman who waits for me (IH 51)

The images of lips and tongues melting in migrancy, raw bones, skull’s precise asymmetry, tongues of mist, parting ribs, express the dissatisfaction and reticence imposed on women by patriarchal society.

The body imagery in its fierce aspect has been depicted in the poems written in the aftermath of 9/11 fall of twin towers. Twin towers which poet used to see every day from Fifth Avenue were exploded and then there were flames and smoke everywhere. The Fifth Avenue was covered with smoke and the twin towers have just turned into twisted metal sticking up. There was the scent of burning flesh and twisted metal
and wood and body parts, a hand, a thigh, a torn lip twisted in. The body imagery is used to express the fierceness of 9/11 in the poem ‘Aftermath’ “An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms / Sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky” (RS 9). In another poem ‘For a Friend Whose Father Was Killed on the Lahore Boarder in the 1965 War between India and Pakistan’ (RS 26), the image of ‘the bone of a father’ stands for the cruelty of war, which deprives man of life.

In ‘Letters to Gandhi’, the body imagery stands for the death, massacre and pain experienced by people during riots of Gujarat. The images of torn bodies and flung heart are horrifying.

There is too much riveted into death-
What they bruised and broke
-thighs arms
Lips, throat
precious inner organs – is brushed
with brilliant ink,
cavalcades of pain
It rains in your city, the heart’s
flung back
Torn bodies clattering
in an ox-drawn cart (RS 77)
5.1.7 Scatological Imagery

Scatological imagery deals with dirt, excretion, and obscenity. Alexander has used scatological imagery, mainly to express her social concerns, despair, and feelings of personal loss after migration. In ‘Stained Words’ poet speaks about disemboweling earth and raw entrails which stands for the feeling of emptiness and loss of people and places (IRMN 18).

The poem ‘Keeping House’ (HoaTD) narrates the story of a stolen house by the crook from poet’s parents. This ancestral house was given on a rent to a person who comes out to be drunkard, crook and full with all types of forgeries. He had black money from Gulf and had goondas in his hire. By threatening poet’s parents, the crook usurped their ancestral house. Although after long court matters poet got that house back which was in desecrated situation. It was made dirty, shabby in all the ways. The poem presents the image of that desecrated house. The images of excrement in buckets, a human dung heap, carcasses of chickens, black heaps of filth, and cow dung are suggestive of the purposeful desecration of the house by crook and his selfish crooked mind. These images comment on the mental derangement of people to spoil other’s possessions.

When we entered the house
we saw nails stuck into white washed walls
barbed wire strung
through the chiselled windows,
excrement in buckets set up on sills
a human dung heap. They led goats
into the dining room, pigs, a bullock too
fouling the floors.
The drunkard and his wife
the crook put there, tore pictures
down from their hooks
hung carcasses of chickens
from the polished rafters.

My mother’s delicate porcelain
Brought all the way from China
those bowls you loved with the patterns
of rice, visible when held to the light.

Ground into dirt
into black heaps of filth
and cowdung and fish scales (HoaTD 11)

The poem ‘Estrangement Becomes the Mark of the Eagle’ (RaB) speaks about the mental derangement of human beings to devour everything greedily and their unending thirst of power through the scatological image. Everybody is after more progress, more development and more comfort. However, this tendency produces the heaps of dirt on earth and neglects sustainable development.

While men well trained to the purchase of power
knot water bottles, burst cans of shaving cream
spent condoms, to the rear ends of jeeps and race
at the crack of down, at the bitten end of our century
through Broadway, through narrow desert tracks (RaB 28)

The images of knot water bottles, burst cans of shaving cream, spent condoms are not only suggestive of dirt as the byproduct of modern lifestyle but comment on the ‘use and throw’ tendency of modern people which will lead them to desert only. The images of ‘girl licking dirt’,
‘Cerberus licking clots of burnt milk’ in *River and Bridge* are some of the scatological images, which bring out feelings of nausea and disgust.

5.1.8 Imagery of Destruction

*Raw Silk* presents the picturesque description of destruction of twin towers on 9/11. The imagery of ruin is linked to the ruin of the pride and power of USA and hence it has political implications. Besides, it tries to comment on the cultural and moral degradation by using image of horrifying weapons. The images of destruction in Alexander’s poetry are also linked with religious consciousness. We come across the image of exploded twin towers in many number of poems in *Raw Silk* such as ‘Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Tower’, ‘School Yard’, ‘Blue Lotus’, ‘Triptych in a Time of War’, ‘Aftermath’, ‘Pitfire’, ‘Invisible City’.

The 9/11 attack on American ego and pride turned the twin towers into just a mountain of twisted metal parts and rubble of human bodies. There is only mountain of metal, and the debris of the tower. The towers exploded into flames and the innocent people were hurled into that flame. The destruction was so terrible that it made even the clouds weep and it started to rain. The towers which were once called as ‘Sky Scrappers’, ‘Tall Towers’, ‘Twin Towers’ have just turned into scrap, wreckage, just a knot of rubble, the pit tor of metal where death struts. We can find the reflection of this destruction in Alexander’s poetry. The images of “ash tree on the river bank”, juxtaposed with “tower blazed” in ‘Blue Lotus’ (RS 44), “towers cherish bits of flaming bone”, “jags of twisted metal”, “urns of priceless ash” in ‘Petroglyph’(Rs 48), “spotted beak of the dove”, “olive tree axed into bits” in ‘Triptych in a Time of War’ (RS 66) stand for the ruin, destruction, and devastation of 9/11.

Another image of destruction and ruin comes in the poem ‘Searching for a Tomb over which they Paved a Road’ (RS76). The poem
describes the destruction of tomb of Muslim poet Wali Gujarati by Hindu extremists during Gujarat riots. The destruction and fanaticism is the worst example of cultural terrorism. Therefore, poet calls herself as the “poet of a city in ruins”.

Where is my skin
my bones?
I am the poet of a city
in ruins
burnt by the sun
bound to the moon (RS 76)

The images of ruin in *Raw Silk* are related to religious violence with reference to the nineties in India. The image of destruction of Babari Masjid, situated at controversial birthplace of Rama in Ayodhya is given in the poem ‘Bengali Market’ (RS), “It was cold the day the Masjid / was torn down stone by stone, / colder still at the heart of Delhi” (RS 80). The image of the colder heart of Delhi suggests the unresponsiveness of politicians to such activities of fanaticism. The images of Godhra carnage and then consequent riots in Gujarat resulting in the death of countless people are the worst outcomes of such destruction. The recurring image of Mohenjo Daro in all poetic volumes stands for the ruin and destruction of ancient civilization and comes as the alarming bell to modern people.

### 5.1.9 Nature Imagery

Under the influence of the study of Romantic poets and particularly Wordsworth Meena Alexander has a great fascination for nature. However, the nature imagery is not used only for its beauty but has purpose that is more important. Nature provides proper setting for the memories and past related to Kerala landscape and connects her with the present in USA. The nature imagery in her poetry has wide range from
the paddy fields, hills, and valleys of Kerala landscape to San Andreas Fault and Niagara Falls. The various elements of nature come spontaneously in her poems to give the sense of her geographical dislocation. The extravagant vista of the inanimate and natural world has been portrayed and nature imagery appears to be very easy and concrete. It enhances the beauty of the poem and sometimes the natural elements acquire mystic, philosophic, and supernatural significance.

We come across purple plums, pink hibiscus, mutters of flowers, long grass, pomegranate, palash and gulmohor (BBR), stars and moons, bouganvillea, fern fronds, tamarind twigs, thorn tree, varieties of stones, sky, fig tree, a brown horizon (IRMN), first monsoon, cherry trees, scents of jasmine, green flowering of the wet season, lilies, roses, chrysanthemums, palm trees (SR), mango bark, bluish sky, gooseberries, grass, sugarcane (The Storm), champak trees, rosewood, mulberry tree, tiger lily, flowering cherry trees, orchids, guava bush, thyme, coriander, mint (HoaTD). There are Mountains, mulberry, monsoon, wind, Arabian Sea, Malabar coast, Pamba river, spring, winter, rain, bear mountain, Hudson river, jasmine, thyme, wild grass badam tree, forest of bamboo, night sky, deodar, mist, sky, hillside garden, dew, bells of laburnum, strawberries, heliotrope, coconut trees (HoaTD), tomatoes, plums, cabbages (RaB).

The nature has been presented in its all variety of cycle of season, cycle of sun, flow of rivers, the beautiful naturescape, riverscape, and mountains. Trees of bamboo, deodar, jasmine, lime, mango, and mulberry are the part of vegetation of Kerala. The Arabian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Red sea appear repeatedly only to refer the poet’s migration and crossing of seven seas. Guava, gooseberry, and jackfruit trees are also typical plants of coastal area. The image of kingfisher knocking at the bark of jackfruit tree creates the poetic picture in front of mind’s eye. The
image of guava tree in the moonlight and its unripe fruits suggest the unborn things of poet’s mind in the poem ‘Homeward’

In the moonlight
that tree with its unripe fruit,
hard green knots
with seed swollen inside
trapped in a silver net.
When the west wind blew
the guava tree
rocked like an unborn
thing (HoaTD 90)

The rivers like Ganga, Pamba, Yamuna are flowing through poet’s veins. River Mahanadi is depicted as a river wasting grief of poet.

I dream the Mahanadi, that impenitent river
flowing swift and noiseless
strips us of clothes
wasting our grief (HoaTD 93)

The bluish sky and glittering sun in bare spots add the elements of nature in Alexander’s poetry. The image of sky and sun remind the poet of the voices of family ancestors in the poem ‘After the First House’

I glimpsed the bluish sky
flashing in places

as if the masts
of a great ship wrecked
had pierced it through,
the sun glittering in bare spots
the voices of family
all near and dear
The nature imagery is not always pleasant in Alexander’s poetry. Nevertheless, it touches the bitter realities of loss and lamentation as it is reflected through the image of grass thrashed by heat.

Acres of sweet grass
thrashed by the heat
scored back,
refused to grow
in the burnt and blackned space
where the first house stood ‘After the First House’ (TS 3)

In ‘Revelation’ the nature has become gaudy with blood and suggests the bloodshed and violence. The images of ash and ash tree add to the fierceness of picture, “There is ash on the ash tree / the flimsy cover of nature / is gaudy with blood” (RaB 82). The nature also comes in the form of natural disasters like floods and cyclones causing lot of destruction and loss of lives and property. The poems ‘Natural Difficulties’ (SR35) and ‘Eye of the Cyclone’ (SR31) present the image of nature in its destructive force which parcels out the grief.

5.1.10 Surrealistic Imagery

Some of the poems of Meena Alexander are extremely complex and obscure due to the use of surrealistic imagery. The imagery, which is used to reveal the subconscious mind, leads to the bewilderment and confusion of the readers. It lacks logical reasoning and brings together very strange and bizarre collocations. The surrealistic imagery intends to focus on the working of deep mind and goes on presenting the material of dreams, states of mind, and natural or drug-induced hallucinations. As Abrams and Harpham write, “Surrealist innovation can be found in many modern writers of prose and verse who have broken with conventional
modes of artistic organization to experiment with free association, a broken syntax, non logical and non chronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking and unrelated images” (304). Such images are abounding in Alexander’s poetry.

The poem *The Bird’s Bright Ring* is overwhelmed with the bizarre images and strange collocations. The unrelated images like blind musician, cactus man Durga and Lila, pecking bird and Krishna’s voice are just juxtaposed together without any logic. The cactus man is the guardian of dark gate, whose perfumes bathe in blindness. The free association of images and inversion of all grammatical rules has been used to depict the surrealist images and to focus the inner working of poet’s mind full of despair and gloom. The section-V of the poem is an excellent example of surrealist imagery where bizarre images are just juxtaposed together without any connecting link.

He shows me
a river
of crystal
flowing
out of the throne
of the Lamb
Cactus man
eyes out gouged
charcoal
spat
from the cat’s tongue
My Mother
Brilliant Mother
he knows
I crawled
in the pitch
of your womb
feed me
with the rivers
of crystal
flowing
in the flesh of your
open palm (BBR 13)

The other example of surreal imagery reminds of meaningless activities in modern life as in T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* and expresses the sense of meaningless life.

I heard the terrible babble
and looked to see the earth
but the spirit had vanished

Only the soil hand remains
it opens out its dark bruise
and countless tongues make speech (BBR 24)

The poem ‘I Root My Name’ (IRMN) presents the surreal image to suggest the pains, “Let us invite our eyes, / polished with fluent pain / to the body’s brimming festival” (IRMN 9). The fusion of dreams, sleep and light and history has been done to express grief. The bizarre collocations like waxen bones, vibrant peacocks, green spice of shame, raw sun are the surreal images commenting on the mentality of immigrant poet.

Alexander’s poetry is the creative and honest expression of the intense and very intimate feelings both pleasant and coarse. The image of “a dream of ruin” in ‘Her Imageless Face’ (WP) represents the gloom, sorrow, and disturbed mind of the poet.
A dream of ruin
sprite souled saint
all the rats of kalighat
are clawing you
to flame
to her bright tongue –
you wait
frail root of crystal
in a sightless cave

your mirroring eyes
drenched in gloom –
you cannot image her
you shall not name
sister
dear sister
and darkest spouse
unsalt me
from my doom (WP 29)

In the poem, ‘Natural Difficulties’ (SR), the bizarre and unrelated images are juxtaposed to express the commotion of poet’s mind.

On the other side
skies are burnt.
Soil gulps smoke.
A torn bush
corrosive with roses.

Scratched by natural difficulties
black stars alight  
raw heads  
corkscrew  
through metal jambs.
Roses

tarred with light

rupture my solitude (SR 35)

The image of nightmare in ‘Elephants in Heat’ stands for the poet craving for mother. The dreams and nightmares are the part of surreal world, which is not easily conceivable. The world of dreams is the world of fulfilled desired emancipated from all anxieties and frustration. On the contrary, universe of the nightmares entirely revolves around the fears, anxiety, terror, and other negative elements of the subconscious.

   I used to make up nightmares as a child
   so mother would come in
   and lift me up, lips wet
   in all that moonlight (RaB 39)

The surrealistic imagery in ‘Ashtamudi Lake’ refers to the house that is not a physical territory but a part of mind’s space.

   Rubbing raw the nervous
   interstices of sense

   Desire’s nuptials lit in us
   no elsewhere her

   Only a house
   held by its own weight
in the mind’s space (RaB 55)
The ferocious incidents and violent events destroy the dreams of people. The surreal image of ‘Freight of dreams’ suggests the people who surrender their dreams in front of the bitter challenges of life in the poem ‘Revelation’, “And butterflies / surrender their stoniness / to the freight of dreams” (RaB 82).

Thus, Alexander’s poetry is overwhelmed with oblique syntax, and surrealistic dream imagery due to which the poems remain elusive and unparaphrasable.

5.1.11 Silk Imagery

The image of silk comes recurring in Alexander’s poems and it has been major image in the collection Raw Silk. Silk is one of the delicate, precious, and favorite textures of Indian People. The poet speaks of the silk from Varanasi, which connects her to her grandmother as well as her birthplace Allahabad near Varanasi. Being the central image of the poem ‘Raw Silk’, the various factors related to silk and its production come in the poem spontaneously. The images of mulberries and silkworm are abound in Alexander’s other poems also.

grandmother coaxed mulberries
from monsoon soil, clouds ran riot

silkworms coiled under the skin of leaves
berries dripped free, ‘Raw Silk’ (RS 34-35)

The images of grandmother’s “Wedding Sari with its brocade” and “Muslin” reflect poet’s fondness of silk. By using silk image, the poet connects herself to the homeland where silk is cultured. The image of “colostrums” emphasizes the importance of silk for the poet as of colostrums for the newly born child, “When silk comes out of the
silkworms’ hole // it is the color of colostrums” (RS 36). The image of “Silkworm dancing in the firmament” “mother of worms”, “crown of mulberry leaves” set on poet’s head (RS 36) refer to poet’s “Search for Silk” (RS 36) which is in fact search of self for the poet.

The image of silk is woven with poet’s memories of the house, the seacoast of Kerala and Tiruvella in ‘Fragile Places’.

Rain blazed over Tiruvella – the red gorge
Sankara speak to me

Carry me through the house of slit,
the low - slung bone,

wind me in raw silk,
cry to the gulls on the seacoast (RS 84)

5.1.12 General Imagery

Apart from above mentioned images there are many number of general images in Alexander’s poetry. The images of infants “strapped to the flesh of their working mothers” (BBR 15) eloquently speak about the downtrodden poor and deprived people working hard to earn livelihood. While the image of grass with several tongues withered in winter (BBR 19), creates the atmosphere of gloom, despair, and sorrow. The grass field has just turned into field of serpents and everywhere there are sorrows of the winter sun. The images of “two fierce kingdoms” and their “endless devastation” (BBR 23) directly refer to the partition and aftermath which left people without space between two fierce kingdoms.

The images like “a broken rock”, “splintered thread”, “the kingdom of memory” (IRMN 15-16) mark the note of sadness, exile and migration by referring to Rama’s exile in the poem ‘Lost Ayodhya’. The image of
ravaged mother in ‘Stained Words’ (IRMN 18) expresses the misery of people caused due to excess of rain and lack of grain. The images of poor children, their parched mouths and cry, the wooden hovels, the gutter, butcher’s daughter, in ‘Songs from this Dust’ (IRMN 21) depict the suffering and miserable condition of poor and wretched people. The children suffer from hunger and struggle hard to get food. The imagery of the wretched people come in the form of a lame man crouched like a torn worm, a deaf man crazed by the traffic, a blind man retching gutter water, a mute woman. All of them are victims of misery and poverty (IRMN 22). Images of lame man, deaf man, blind man, and mute woman remind of Gandhi’s three monkeys and indicate the worn out conditions of social life. In the poem, ‘Text from the Middle Earth’, poet expresses the feeling of restlessness, the dangling middle state which does not have beginning and end. The images of cur indulged in worldly pleasure and weeping of the poet like Lazarus are the striking images expressing the feelings of pain and agony of Diaspora life (IRMN 30).

The poem ‘Pictures for the Bhagavatha Purana’ (SR 31-32) juxtaposes various images to form the picture of modern life. The image of oil fishing boat, a wooden stool, a police station with broken windows, a mongrel, a boy with an extra thumb erect, four women pouring water on the tomb present the wide view of life in India. According to poet, these pictures of modern life are for the Bhagavata Purana, which is one of the religious scriptures of Hindu religion.

The image of well comes recurrently in many poems. The well in the grandmother’s garden is set deep in the soil of motherland and connects poet to the home. Nevertheless, in the poem, ‘Poem by the Well Side’ well is related to the suicidal deaths of unwed pregnant girls due to the fear of social shame (HoaTD 84). Images of ten thousand sickles and crossed knives and the flags coloured with blood refer to the leftist
thought in Kerala. These images of ‘sickles’ and ‘hammer’ are recurring ly used by the poet in other poems like ‘Homeward’ (HoaTD 93). The images of ‘Sickle stacked’ and ‘hammer draw blood’ in ‘The Travellers’ (TS 7) is significantly showing the hard work done by workers breaking stones by the roadside.

There are several images of departures and arrivals in Alexander’s poetry. The phrases like “crack of dawn”, “ferocious loves”, “sucking up sense”, “evicting memory” in ‘The Storm’ (TS 17) reveal the inner turmoil of the poet. The image of the storm stands for the storm of upsurge of ancestral house by other, but after lot of struggle and court cases, poet’s parents got it back. That is why she speaks of resurrection of house at the end of exile (TS 23). Image of the mist lifted from the paddy fields is suggestive of resurrection.

The poem ‘Keeping House’ (HoaTD) juxtaposes various images to create the picture of social reality. The image of priest’s wife died of womb sucked dry by a fifteenth child stands for the women’s oppression in country. The girl married to sight unseen widower who had green card presents the shameful reality of Indian life. The images of Sabarmati Ashram, ablutions, and sung prayers, spinning wheels represent the simple and peaceful way of life, which is contrasted by juxtaposing the contrasting picture of current situation.

Now disorder dogs us
the Muslim butcher’s carcasses
spin in the night wind

All that weight of bloodied flesh
still visible
in nightmares(HoaTD 9)
The images of the English children Tom and Bess in the book of alphabets in ‘Illiterate Heart’, and poet’s desire to be like them reflect poet’s desire to achieve command over the English language as well as burden of learning English (IH 64). The image of palm tree appears in poem after poem. The images in Alexander’s poetry, according to Mohanty are “Kaleidoscopic images emerge from the past and jostle for the possession of the self, always fragile, unstable and precarious” (40). Imagery in Alexander’s poetry is very useful in understanding the poet’s feelings, thoughts and even the working of her mind. Imagery illustrates, clarifies, and concretizes the poet’s sense experiences into words. Through these images, the reader is able to have a real feel of the poet’s experience. The imagery is not used as device of decoration or embellishment but on the contrary has the unpleasant connotations in some surreal and scatological images.

5.2 Symbolism

5.2.1 Symbol of House

The house, for Alexander, symbolizes the desirable place, which implies home as a subtle refugee, shelter, and place where one can feel sense of belonging, a sense of being wanted and loved. Along with symbolizing fixity and shelter house is symbol of sweetness, comfort, love, safety, and stability which poet has lost due to exile. The ancestral homes in Tiruvella and Kozhencheri, paternal and maternal homes come together to form poet’s house.

The images of house have symbolic significance in *House of a Thousand Doors*. There are also images of mirror and descriptive images of nature, which express “a self-contained private emotional world” (King 379) and the poems represent, “symbolism of fixity, shelter, and rootedness (the house) contrasted to multiplicity of possibilities and
identities” (King 379). Freudian implication of house symbolism is that, the rooms symbolize women while the courtyard represents the male. According to Freud, “The human body is often represented in dreams by the symbol of house” (193) and the windows, door and gates represent the openings in the body. However, the title *House of a Thousand Doors* symbolizes, “many doors her life continues to sway in and out” (Naidu37). The thousand doors symbolize multiple migrations. According to Rustomji, “the house which is inherited and lost, the house of memories, and the house which is a woman’s body are all consumed with yearning for true possession; for impossible returns and reunions at the conclusion of poems and journeys” (Rustomji377).

While implying house as the place of origin, the symbol of house in *I Root My Name* represents poet’s wish to root her name in ancestral land. In *Without Place*, house is the symbol of migrant’s concern of being without place, and poet finally concludes “poetry is place” (WP 36). House is not just a real and lived place but also a portion of a symbolic imagined space where poet wants to recover her lost past and present to form the golden future. While living in the unfixed place, poet’s mind tries to repossess the security through dreams of house as reflected in *Stone Roots*.

### 5.2.2 Bird Symbolism

The birds like koil, cuckoo, night birds, dove, eagle, seagull, or the hawk in its attribute of soaring flight symbolize ambitions of the poet. The most frequently, the bird image like white lemmings with red spot on its beak remind of migration and pain (WP 35). The birds like dove and mynah symbolize the realization of the transcendent fulfillment of primitive, natural, and shy sexuality of the poet. While “heron blinded by eagle’s claw” comes in the poem ‘Passion’ (RaB 63) as the victim of
powerful and evil forces. The bird symbolism has been used most effectively by the poet and is remarkable for its vividness and complexity. It is variously used to symbolize exiled present, the victimization of bloodshed and harmed poetic self. After her migration at the early stage of life, the poet became like migratory birds lemmings those she refers emphatically to express the pain of dislocation (WP 35). The symbolic use of migratory birds amplifies poet’s profound sense of loss and displacement.

The Bird’s Bright Ring is an excellent poem and the skilful use of symbols renders the poem evocative and suggestive. Because of the intricate and private symbols, the poem turns out to be the puzzling riddle. In the opening verses in French, the symbol of bird singing with “its fingers” and then with “My Fingers” (BBR 9) make the poem very complex from the beginning. The title of the poem is highly symbolic and has several connotations. On the one hand, it reminds of an attribute of ‘golden bird’ used for India in the past, on the other hand, poet is the bird, and poetry is her bright ring. The bird is a symbol of Muse and of imagination. Bird represents speed, lightness, freedom, flight, quickness of intellect, the song of despair, victimization of violence, terrorism. The bird also symbolizes oppression as, “Ploughshares / are thrust into the singing mouth” (BBR 24).

In the poem, ‘Bird Head’ in I Root My Name the swallow becomes the symbol of exile as its feathers are “sunk with exile” (12). In “Lost Ayodhya” (IRMN 16), comparison of mind with a hawk, “dislodged from the pendant sky” (16) symbolizes unbelonging and dangling position of Diasporas. The singing sparrow in the poem ‘Veined Words’ (IRMN 13) symbolizes poet’s tender and warm feelings and intensity of passion towards her lover. The poem ‘Songs without Place’ (WP) uses the symbol of the lemmings, the delicate creatures that dream about great White Sea
and symbolize poet’s dreaming about her homeland. Poet is like those migratory birds for which this season can be “fatal season” (WP 35).

In ‘Dream Poem’ (SR 13), the sparrow cupped in the palm symbolizes the Indian women cupped in traditions and customs and crying to rise to the sun. The “sparrow burning” (SR 13) refers to the bride burning incidents about which poet had heard in her childhood in India. The crawling birds symbolize sorrow, alienation, uprootedness and loneliness in ‘The Loneliness of Plants’ (SR 22). The “fireflies fester like wounds” (SR 22) and tell the dark story of poet’s grief. The poem ‘From a Grey Room’ (SR 36) depicts the terror and violence through the symbol of “peacocks perish” (SR 36).

The poems in *House of a Thousand Doors* use symbol excellently. In the poem ‘Grandmother’s Mirror’(HoaTD 16), the koil crying all night symbolizes the disturbed mind of the poet and its black colour is indicative of the discrimination imposed due to the colour of skin. The image of “Koil without skin” (16) represents the loss of self and identity and the sense of unbelonging in the foreign country. While depicting the miseries of Indian women, the poem ‘Brief Chronicle by Candle Light’ depicts the night birds and other creatures to create the horrifying atmosphere. The thousand eyed owl is symbol of the male dominated society which is eager to make women prey of their oppression (HoaTD 53-54). The birds also symbolize namelessness as written by the poet in the poem ‘Kabir was a Weaver’, “Throats of a thousand birds / forever nameless” (HoaTD 79). In ‘Winter on Broadway’ (HoaTD 81), crows become discoloured birds to represent poet’s colourless memory and past. The symbol of geese in “To Li Ch’ing – Chao” (HoaTD 85 – 86), reminds of the slaughter done by Tartars. Geese also symbolize the struggle of the great Chinese poet of the late Sung Dynasty, Li Ch’ing –
Chao against Tartars who attacked Manchuria in 1127 and she was forced to flee for her life.

Symbols can be interpreted severally and therefore the “Night birds” acquire different symbolic significance in the collection *Night Scene, The Garden*. The poem ‘Night Birds’ describes various night birds such as, owl, hungry myena in the jackfruit tree, a loudmouthed crow, blue black koil, crimson humming bird, cinnamon tongued bats whose poky wings are sizzling in moonlight. These birds from the courtyard of her Kerala home symbolize the fled away days of childhood and memories of the past, people and places.

The bird symbolism has been used for violence, bloodshed, and destruction in *Raw Silk, which* is written in the aftermath of 9/11. In ‘Pit fire’, bird stands for the devastation, ruin, and inhuman waste on which poet is lamenting. Poet hears a bird cry by the scrap of towers amidst of “strut of death” (RS 11). The sparrows who “swallowed their song” (RS 75) by the temple gate symbolize the horror during Gujarat riots in the poem ‘In Naroda Patiya’ (RS 75). The symbol of “Red Bird” in the poem of same title refers to the woman, a victim of rape (RS 71).

**5.2.3 Water Symbolism**

According to Freudian concept of symbolism, the exposure to water and rescue from water had been perceived as representations of birth. Alexander’s poem ‘Boating’ has central symbolism of boating and water representing the relation between mother and child. The poem depicts the incident of poet’s falling in the water and being rescued by the grandmother. The incident reveals poet’s intimacy with grandmother and symbolically grandmother becomes mother as she rescues her.

Water symbolism comes significantly in the form of river and other sources of water such as sea, lakes, and ponds that recur in poem after
poem. The sea is the symbol of seven seas, Kalapani (black water) for the poet as she has transgressed them against Indian customs and is experiencing punishment of exile. In *River and Bridge*, river is the symbol of culture and civilization for the poet because the civilization emerges at the edge of river and hence in spite of leaving behind Ganga and Pamba and other Indian rivers, the poet is sure to begin her life at Hudson’s edge. For the poet, migration is death and to begin life after migration is kind of rebirth. Thus, water is the symbol of birth and fertility and river symbolizes life.

In *Stone Roots*, Alexander describes our land as the land full of rivers and those rivers have great significance in Indian life, culture, and agriculture. In the poem ‘By the Mahanadi’ (HoaTD 64) Alexander describes Mahanadi as the edge of life and fatal rim. River is the giver of life who sets right the lives of people but when over flooded runs to paddy fields causing destruction of life and wealth. The poem ‘Keeping House’ describes “Pamba river in spate” (HoaTD12) which symbolizes the river as the destructive force. Rivers are also symbol of culture and poet wants to weave them in Keralite silk. The three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Pamba are flowing through the pink silk in the yard and symbolize poet’s attachment with Kerala home in the poem ‘Kabir was a Weaver’ (HoaTD 79).

Poet not only celebrates the sacred Indian rivers but also writes about pollution of the river in the poem ‘Great Brown River’ (HoaTD80-81). The devastation of brown River is symbolized through the description of river full of dirt, debris, tin cans, chipped glass, worn car tires and the body of dead hawk. However, poet knows that “The Waves are swords” which symbolize destructive power of the river and river will hit back one day (HoaTD 81). In the poem ‘Homeward’, poet dreams of Mahanadi which is described as “that impenitent river” (HoaTD 93) and
symbolizes swift and noiseless flow of life through the sorrows of life. The poem ‘Black River, Walled Garden’ (IH 91-99) presents black river as the symbol of colonial tyranny and harms done by colonial oppression. While in ‘Green Parasol’ (RS 32) the river is the symbol of barriers made by customs and traditions for women which poet asks her daughter to transgress. Rivers also have religious significance and they are considered as holy in the poem, ‘Indian April’.

Holy, the waters of the Ganga, Hudson, Nile, 
Pamba, Mississipi, Mahanadi

Holy the lake in central park, bruised eye of earth, 
mirror of heaven, (IH 57)

In Alexander’s poetry, sea is depicted as Kalapani, seven seas, and hardest thing. It symbolizes the acute sense of loss and nostalgia, the desperate feeling of being at sea in the search of anchorage, mooring to belong somewhere. Note of pain and agony is associated with the sea as expressed in ‘Text from the Middle Earth’ (IRMN28). The green sea in the poem symbolizes the rotten state of life (IRMN 28). The red sea in the poem ‘Port Sudan’ (IH 11) is associated with the memories of first migration to Sudan. Along with symbolizing migration, sea has been the symbol of eternity in which all river and brooks run and become eternity. Rivers, streams, lakes are time passing but they become eternity by running into the sea.

5.2.4 Garden and Vegetation Symbolism

In Alexander’s poetry the garden and vegetation symbolism have various implications. Night Scene, the Garden includes the symbols of trees and vegetable world to symbolize the lost garden of poet’s childhood. The garden is an earthly paradise from which poet is exiled
like Adam and Eve. After migration poet feels to be banished from that heavenly abode of her motherland. In the context of Freudian symbolism, the tree becomes the symbol of physical and spiritual love. The sex symbolism is manifested by the masculine tree and the feminine garden and the night symbolizes the union of lovers in its various connotations. The title *Night Scene, The Garden* is highly suggestive and evocative in this reference. The garden is also symbol of poet’s heritage and her roots. Garden is depicted as earth’s treasure in the poem ‘Glimpsed in Indigo’ (HoaTD 31). The poem is born into this garden and its free air symbolizes safety, security, and freedom. However, this garden of childhood is lost as described in the poem ‘Black River, Walled Garden’ (IH). Poet feels that, “The garden of my childhood flees from me” (IH 91) but still there is the hope of restoring the loss because she feels “the garden of my childhood returns to the sea” (IH 98).

Generally, the symbol of tree denotes life of the cosmos, its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes, inexhaustible life, and immortality. On the contrary, Yeats uses tree as symbol of age, sterility, and reality in some poems. On the other hand, Alexander uses the symbol of “thorn tree” in *I Root My Name* and *Without Place*. In the poem ‘Lost Ayodhya’ (IRMN15) poet describes Ram in his exile resting under blistered thorn tree which symbolizes the bitterness of exiled life. In the poem, ‘Epilogue’ (WP 32) thorn tree comes as the symbol of Cleopatra’s sorrowful life.

The garden symbol is used differently in the poem ‘I’m in a Garden’ (SR 8). The garden of Kerala home and alphabets recited by the garden tree symbolize the happy childhood that has passed away. Poet is in search of that garden and is sure that she will find the way back to that “featureless garden” (WP 8) through her poetry. The poem ‘Her Garden’
in *House of a Thousand Doors* presents garden as the symbol of grandmother’s ultimate power in her domestic life.

Grass symbolism is used excellently by Alexander. In the poem ‘Blood Line’ in *River and Bridge*, the daughter is the symbol of new and modern generation who has to struggle against the useless and rigid forces of previous generation symbolized by “burnt grass” (RaB 66). While the torn grass in the poem ‘Torn Grass’ (IRMN 19) symbolizes the pain and sorrow of the poet caught between two cultures in the search of roots and calls herself “torn grass” (19). The leaf symbolism has been used to suggest something insignificant in the poem ‘Consider this Leaf’ (HoaTD72). Lily and rose are symbols of summer’s height where the withered grass suggests death and decay by being the symbol of decline to wintry death. Though rose stands as emblem of beauty, love, and inner reality of divinity, it comes as the symbol of despair and loss of hope in the poem ‘Desert Rose’ (RaB 25). The “falling seeds” in ‘Searching of Heaven’ (HoaTD74) symbolize the scattering of seeds, which is real meaning of Diaspora. The incense tree in ‘Under the Incense Tree’ symbolizes sacrifice and devoted life because “until it’s burnt / it has no scent // It has no scent of Death” (RaB 48). In elegies in *Raw Silk*, the pale petals and leaves of linden tree filled with insects with the wings of the color of the dry blood symbolize the massacre of thousands in 9/11 attacks. Tree bruised of violence and terrorism symbolizes bruised life in America.

5.2.5 Abstract Symbols

The symbols of the earth, sun, moon, sky, and stars appear in number of poems of Alexander. These celestial bodies revolving in their orbits from creation of universe symbolize eternal cycle of universe. In addition, they symbolize order and balance in midst of chaos and disorder.
and confirm man’s faith in God and his governance. The stars symbolize fixedness and clouds suggest transience. The vivid celestial images signify the death and rebirth, which follows death. I. A. Richards states in his *Practical Criticism* that, “The clouds are symbolic of some brooding spirit: they arouse dreams, desires, prognostications in their holder” (156). They can also symbolize shadow of sorrow and transitory pleasure as a golden line at the edge.

In the poem ‘Looking through Well Water’ (HoaTD 6) “a ridge of cloud” comes as the dividing line from the homeland. “The patterns of stars and moon” portrayed in hennaed hands in the poem ‘After Wedding’ (IRMN 9) symbolize captivity in the prison of marriage. In the poem ‘Black Broadway’ (HoaTD 69), the past and present is merged in the image of windowscape of moving train creating the effect of fleeing nearness and distance by using the symbol of wavering clouds.

The sun is recurring symbol in the poems of Alexander. The “great red sun” (15) in *The Bird’s Bright Ring* symbolizes dying feudalism and capitalist powers and rising communist thoughts in Kerala about which poet speaks. Sun is also the symbol of male domination and oppression of workers who work head bent “close against the great red sun” (BBR 15). The sun that burns down to the Kerala coast is the symbol of feudalism in poems like ‘House of a Thousand Doors’ and ‘Homeward’ (HoaTD). In some poems, it has been representative of fertility, or a fruitful and fulfilled life. The silent ways of nature and violent ways of the human life are contrastingly presented through the symbol of sun. The sun is symbol of war itself causing bloodshed. Sometimes sun becomes the symbol of poet’s creative sensibilities.

Along with these traditional associations of sun symbol, the sun and the moon come as the eye witness of Hiroshima as well as 9/11 in the poem ‘September Sunlight’ in *Raw silk*. September sunlight symbolizes
atom bomb explosion of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and terrorist attack of 9/11. In the poem ‘Searching for a Tomb Over which They Paved a Road’ (RS 76), the sun, and the moon are the symbols of ruin, devastation, and violence in the name of religion. Poems in *Raw Silk* concentrate on 9/11, bloodshed, violence, and Afghan war during which mothers lost their sons and other dear ones. But in the poem, ‘Petroglyph’ the poet mentions a change in Afghani women by using sunlight as the symbol of women’s liberty and their revolutionary stance of casting away customs and traditions, “I see women shrug of their veils, let sunlight / strike their cheeks” (RS 49). The symbols of root, stone and sky come together in the poem ‘The Unexceptional Drift of Things’(RaB) to represent poet’s search of roots. In the poem, ‘Songs without Place’ poet uses the symbol of sunlight to express the hope of better tomorrow. The dark prickly thorns of past memories are tormenting poet’s mind, still poet hopes for sunlight, “Will sunlight flow as water?” (WP36). The moon also symbolizes the beauty and mother principle and changing phases of human life.

The other abstract symbol is the blowing wind, which represents the forward progress and backward step of life. The mountain standing steadfast in storms, rain and sunlight represent the undefeatable spirit of life while the deep valleys from the Kerala landscape represent the unchanging, deep, unfathomable darkness of human mind. Thus, symbolism in Alexander’s poetry comes out of the inner experience and still has some familiar patterns, which help to interpret them.

**5.2.6 Symbol of Muse**

Symbol of muse is related to experience of creation and stands for intimate fear, longing and joy in creation which is expressed imaginatively. The muse symbolizes a power beyond the limited
laborious consciousness, which moulds the uncontrolled thoughts in the revealing order and harmony in order to make a poem. The muse is the access of inspiration as reflected in ‘Muse Poems’ in *Illiterate Heart, Raw Silk*, and *River and Bridge*. It is a feminine figure resembling with mother, the giver of life. The tormenting questions asked by muse force poet to write a poem. Composing poetry provides kind of energy and a very special pleasure because poem brings into existence the feelings and whole realm of perception of the poet and illuminates the dark horizons of poet’s experience for a moment. Poet has written two poems entitled ‘Muse’ in *River and Bridge* where muse comes as the female figure that is unhoused and quite marginal to the world she comes from. The muse is furious, as she has nowhere to be. Her sari spills of her flesh. Her flesh is burnt with words. She is hurt and her language is in ruins.

Poetry is the music of survival for the poet. A cycle of poems in *Illiterate Heart* meditates on the act of composition and muse is the symbol of, “Something of the internal architecture of sense, the objects of our metamorphic life . . . a trajectory from the pitch of memory to the possibility of a shared existence” (Alexander ‘Composing Poetry’ 141). The poems ‘Muse’, ‘Choric Meditation’, ‘Fragments’, ‘Map’, ‘Civil Strife’, ‘Indigo’, ‘Mirror of Earth’, ‘Glyphs’ and ‘Valley’ in *Illiterate Heart* (23-39) form the cycle of poems which are about creation of poetry and presents Muse in various implications. Muse is a goddess of poetry and seen as “Muse of memory and maker of sense” (IH 30) in the poem “House”. In the poem, “Indigo” muse becomes the “Muse of Migrancy” (IH 34) and speaks about loss of people and places due to migration.

### 5.2.7 Mandala Symbol

Mandala is a geometric figure based upon the squaring of a circle around a unifying centre and symbolizes the circle, the eternal circle of life, the theme of endless death and regeneration. In the section
‘Mandala’ of *River and Bridge*, the Mandala symbol has acquired much significance. It is related to the aspect of time and symbolizes the mysterious rhythm of nature’s eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of seasons, cycle of the day, and cycle of life and death. Poet speaks of Tibetan Mandala, which is composed of different shades of sands. It is the ‘Kalachakra Mandala’ (Wheel of Time Mandala). Sand is suggestive of the passing of time marked by hourglass and evokes the imprints on the sands of time. Thus, Mandala is not only the symbol of vast and expansive time but also seamless and flowing time. “‘Mandala’ evokes time, rippling back to the short line in an earlier poem where she makes the measure of time as the bitten end our century” (Kanan Rev. of *River and Bridge* 89).

**5.2.8 Plough Symbolism**

Mother earth has played vital role in the concepts and cults of the people of antiquity and their views of agriculture were determined by this symbolism. The tool like plough employed in agricultural operations is the symbolic representation of masculinity. In the poem ‘In Divi Seema’ (SR), plough comes as the symbol of male aggression on female capacity of plantation, agriculture, and reproduction. In ancient times, the agriculture was considered as the domain of women, but as the man discovered his capacity as farmer and procreator, he started to exploit and dominate women. Plough is the symbol of male domination and is seen in the poem *The Bird’s Bright Ring*.

**5.2.9 Snake Symbol**

In Alexander’s poetry, snake appears as the symbol of lust, hate, threatening values felt by human beings. It is the symbol of energy and libido, evil, corruption, sensuality, destruction, mystery, wisdom and the
unconscious. In the poem *The Bird’s Bright Ring*, poet speaks of “a field of serpents” (19) while commenting on the chaos in the independent India. Because of the corruption, evil, and devaluation of values, the nation is in the state of decline and the serpents in the golden grass (BBR19) symbolize the evil causing sorrow to the common people. The twin tongued asp in ‘A Mirror’s Grace’ (WP 17) is symbolical of Cleopatra’s misfortune and fatal love. The twin-tongued asp that bites Cleopatra brings to an end her fatal love, which is just “shroud of shame for Cleopatra” (17). The snake symbol here represents the twisting paths of desire, the unfulfilled love, and tragedy of Cleopatra who was “forsaken at the summit of desire” (17) by Antony. In the poem ‘Night Birds’ in *Night Scene, the Garden* cobra comes as the symbol of memories of house possessed back after long court matters. It is the house where, “Once cobra crested” (HoaTD 6). In the poem ‘No Man’s Land’ (HoaTD 26), killing of Cobra to death by cowherd Bhaskaran symbolizes the destruction of vicious elements on the one hand and inhuman treatment given to animals on the other hand.

5.2.10 Mother Symbolism

The Archetypal symbol of mother has two significant aspects, the good mother, and the terrible mother. The Good Mother symbolizes the positive aspects of the Earth Mother and is associated with the life principle, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, and abundance. Demeter, Sita, Ceres, Savitri are the examples of Good Mother. While the terrible Mother is a witch, siren, whore and is associated with sensuality, fear, danger, death and terrifying aspects.

In Alexander’s poetry, mother is the source and origin of the voice to be heard. Poet is always close to the mother as a source of good. Mother figure is the good mother: the omnipotent and generous dispenser
of love, nourishment, and plentitude. The mother in Alexander’s poetry symbolizes her own mother as traditionalist, quiet woman whose world is centered on the domestic responsibilities and religious rituals and suffering from the several types of injustices. She is the Mother who taught the poet importance of reticence for woman and believed that woman’s place is in home by her children and not in career. Still in spite of this, the female images in Alexander’s works tend to center around strong and independent woman who defy culturally imposed conventions.

The mother figure in the form of Kali and Durga in *The Bird’s Bright Ring* symbolizes mother principle with its fierceness, strength, as well as wisdom. The poem represents mother as giver of life who feeds poet with rivers of crystal flowing in the flesh of poet. Though poem expresses despair and melancholy on cotemporary degeneration, the mother is the symbol of “bright” amidst “black air” (13). She is the “brilliant mother” (17) who fed the poet with the light in her veins. Finally, poet compares mother with the harvest and mother comes as the symbol of creativity and reproduction (BBR 24-25).

The mother figure in *Without Place* is mixed with sister. It reminds of T. S. Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’ in which Mother is the symbol of savior who can relieve from the grief and sin of being. This mother and sister mixed with Goddess Durga become the symbol of eternal reliever from grief in the poem ‘Her Imageless Face’ (WP 30). Mother in the form of Goddess Durga is the symbol of the feminine power of creation, recreation and procreation as well as protection from all evils of life. In *Raw Silk*, which speaks of violence, destructive way of bloodshed and terrorism, mother comes as the symbol of pain experienced by the poet as she writes in ‘Firefly’, “Mud in her mouth / my mother cries in me” (RS 28).
*House of a Thousand Doors* explodes with the images, memories, and voices of grandmother. The image of woman, who kneels at each of the three-foot high bronze sills that guard each of the thousand doors, reflects the symbols of good mother. The two grandmothers are highly symbolic. The paternal grandmother was housebound throughout her life and symbolized the traditional and domestic part of woman’s existence while her maternal grandmother who had been politically active represented the new awareness and feminist consciousness of the contemporary women. In order to represent their lives imaginatively, poet metamorphoses the two grandmothers into the image of one ancestral mother figure. Finally, they “merge into one nameless woman who has no past” (Rustomji-Kerns Rev.of HoaTD90). The symbol of grandmother is significant symbol around which Alexander has composed a number of poems. She felt sense of recovered identity closely related to life in Kerala as she explains in *Fault Lines*, “coming to America I felt that I didn’t have a history and wanted a female ancestral figure and so made one up, as in so many poems in *House of a Thousand Doors*” (27). The mother and grandmother figures affirm the matrilineal rights distinctive of Kerala culture to which poet belongs.

### 5.2.11 Grandfather Symbol

The image of grandfather coming repeatedly in Alexander’s poetry symbolizes the wise old man, the savior, the redeemer, and the guru. The grandfather represents the wise old man who is the personification of the spiritual principle representing knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness and intuition, goodwill and readiness to help. The grandmother, for Alexander, is the shaping influence who molded poet’s personality by acquainting her with Indian National Freedom Movement and Western Literary Tradition. He is the person who encouraged the
feminist awareness of the poet. In hopeless and desperate situation, the poet needs help or knowledge essential to overcome and it becomes available to her in the form of this sagacious and helpful old man, Ilya.

The grandfather is the symbol of those ancestors who lived here from centuries as Alexander claims in ‘No Common Earth’ (SR). He is associated with memories of childhood, the house of the red-tiled roof and courtyard with mulberry trees and sand. The old man compared with the old tree in ‘My Valley’ (HoaTD) is the symbol of ancestral roots while paternal grandfather in some poems in *House of a Thousand Doors* is the feudal landlord having number of workers working on his field. He symbolizes the feudalism in Kerala. In the poem ‘After the First House’ (TS), poet speaks of the death of grandparents and other ancestors with the hope of the resurrection and revival after death. Grandfather symbolizes that resurrection. In the poem ‘Diary of Dreams’ in *Illiterate Heart*, poet imagines herself as a small child during Gandhian movement and Gandhi calls her to join the salt Satyagraha and “make salt with me!” (IH87). This is her fanciful association where her grandmother symbolizes the lifelong influence for her presented in the form of Gandhi. Her maternal grandfather was a theologian and social reformer who was the source of inspiration for her in her early childhood.

**5.2.12 Tower Symbolism**

Generally, tower symbolizes soul’s attempt to rise higher and higher and curling stairs are indicative of the obstacles in the way of spiritual upliftment. In Alexander’s *Raw Silk*, the Twin Towers of World Trade Centre which are the symbols of tradition, national pride and heritage of USA but are destroyed by terrorist to transform them into the symbols of terror, violence, bloodthirstiness, tyranny and insecurity. Poet used to see twin towers everyday from Fifth Avenue where she works.
The tower with a fireball exploding through it and the flames and smoke and slow, black implosion of the building frightens the poet and she worries about thousands of ordinary people working there. The devastation of twin towers is the symbol of devastation of honor and pride of US government. The towers, once the symbol of pride have just turned into twisted metal sticking up and there was scent of burning flesh and twisted metal. The poet describes towers as, “Now there is a mountain in my dreams. Not Mount Blanc. This is a mountain of twisted metal parts and rubble and human bodies.” (‘I Witness’ 57). The poems such as ‘Dialogue by a City Wall’ (5), ‘Aftermath’ (9), ‘Invisible city’ (10), ‘Pit fire’ (11), ‘Hard Rowing’ (12), ‘Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Towers’ (14), ‘Ghalib’s Ghost’ (15), ‘School Yard’ (16), ‘September Sunlight’ (17) in Raw Silk involve the symbol of burning tower turned into just tor of metal.

5.2.13 Symbol of Barbed Wire

The symbol of barbed wire is an evocation of chaos, the disorder caused by multiple dislocations. Barbed wire is a recurrent motif and metaphor for the pain of negotiating barriers and dislocation. It occurs in the poem ‘June 1977’ in Stone Roots. The barbed wire is the marker of border crossing and is present in the poet’s mind. It pinches her sensibility repeatedly. This violent pain leads poet to the process of creation. In Night Scene, the Garden, the poet’s back is against barbed wire and she invokes muse to claim her heritage in ferocious alphabets of flesh. The poet comments on the recurring image of the ‘barbed wire’ in the poem, “The spaces of radical dislocation are bounded by barbed wire. …, though the barbed wire is at the edge of the Tiruvella garden, quite close to the heart” (FL129). In the poem ‘The Travellers’ (TS 7), barbed
wire is associated with violence and bloodshed and comes as the symbol of partition and massacre of thousands piled in lorries.

5.2.14 Symbols of Sita, Draupadi, and Mirabai

The symbol of Mirabai gives new meaning to the theme of displacement in the poem ‘Indian April’ in Illiterate Heart. Mirabai is the medieval bhakti poet who broke the confines of domesticity. Her image in torn saris and dry and chapped feet represents the women revolting against tradition. She is the symbol of many other Asian immigrant women working in USA.

Sita and Draupadi are the significant symbols of the women’s oppression in patriarchal society and come almost in all collections of Alexander. The poem ‘Sita’s Story’ (TS) narrates the story of Sita, the heroine of the epic Ramayana who is the role model of womanhood for the Indian people. It is expected that women should follow her. Sita was found in furrow by her father king Janaka and was married to Rama. As a princess, she had lived life in all comforts and pleasures but still accompanied Rama in his fourteen years of exile. There she was abducted by Ravana and again became the prey of male domination. Poet describes her wretched condition as “suspended between heaven and earth” (TS 16) though having many homes. Sita becomes the symbol of all those Diasporas hanging between two worlds.

Inspite of going through hardships of exile, what she gets in return is the insult, suspicion, and hatred of husband who compels her to go through the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. Sita, the woman caught in the clutches of male dominated society, symbolizes the exploitation of woman in the poem ‘Cutting Trees’, as poet writes, “lovely Sita would have burnt/had mother earth not opened” (HoaTD 14).
The poem ‘Sweet Alyssum’ in *River and Bridge* expresses sorrows of Draupadi, Demeter, and Sita all of whom are subjugated by male dominated society.

Draupadi born of fire  
Surely you are she  
Or Demeter even, poised at the bramble pit  
where love drove her  
Or Sita clinging to stone (RaB 89)

Draupadi is the heroic character from the Mahabharata. She was princess in palace but became the woman bartered in the dice-throw between men. She lived in wilderness with her five husbands and crawled through tunnels to save her life. She was brought to rage and shame by vulgar behaviour of Kauravas. Her anger is symbolical of anger of women as she takes revenge of her insult in battlefield through her husbands. While Sita is the silent sufferer, and accepts whatever comes to her and finally disappears in the mother earth from where she had come. Poet identifies Indian women with Draupadi and Sita in the poem ‘San Andreas Fault’ (RaB). Nevertheless, in poem ‘Dialogue by a City Wall’, Alexander identifies herself with these mythological figures to declare her modern feminist attitude, “I am Sita and Iphigenia, Demeter and Draupadi / I am not fit for burning” (RS 6).

### 5.2.15 General Symbolism

The symbolism in Alexander’s poetry is multilayered and provides several connotations. The recurring symbols provide kind of cohesion to thought of the poet, which keeps flowing in the poem. In *The Bird’s Bright Ring*, we come across many number of symbols. They are plum, bird, and blackness. The cactus man, black blind musician are symbolical of evil and dehumanizing forces that force men to invoke the goddess
who has many heads. The symbol of diamond represents soul at metaphysical level and the country at the physical level. The “Cactus Man” is set in contrast with “Brilliant Mother” to reinforce the intensity of the clash and conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. The poet wants to be fed with “plums pudding” and “river of crystal”. In an attempt to rupture language, poet employs private symbols to make language more obscure and oblique.

There are also symbols of departure and journey, which are used recurrently to symbolize death because poet’s life is “Narrative of loss” (IH 44). As migration is identified with death, the symbolism of rebirth is used effectively to express the hope of recovering the loss. The depiction of deserts of South Africa, one of the lived places of the poet symbolizes aridity, death, nihilism, and hopelessness experienced by the poet during her migrated life. To overcome this loss poet employs the rebirth symbol, which may be identified with the primary impulse of return to the mother and motherland to be born again. By presenting the symbolism of birth, death, and rebirth, poet symbolizes the eternal cycle of life.

Alexander’s symbolism has potential of multiple interpretations. The overlapping of symbols makes the interpretation and elucidation of poems complex and gives rise to many contradictions. The field of symbolism is immensely wide as stated by Freud. Some symbols are common but some symbols are highly distinct and unintelligible. In fact, symbolism is an ancient but extinct mode of expression and according to Freud symbolism is “basic language of human beings” (Freud 203), and finds its residues in today’s symbolic relations through the collective unconscious of human being. Symbolism is an important technique through which poet communicates her ideas and vision. The ‘unseen’ is made to be seen by the use of vivid, concrete images, which due to their constant repetition acquire symbolic significance. The images like grass,
sea, rivers, birds, trees, gardens, houses, earth, stars, sun and moon are all used as symbols to convey poet’s perception of life. Personal emotions are woven into patterns of images and symbols to express poet’s love, pain, sufferings, and ecstasy. Like Yeats, she has used the symbols in abundance that is sun, moon, wheel, family members, and mythological figures. The symbols are important tools, which help her to depict the primary passions of the heart, passions of life, death, feminist consciousness and diasporas’ agony, birth and rebirth, violent destruction and terrorism, and even the noble joy of creation.

The poet also employs archetypal symbols that are passed from one generation to another through the collective unconscious and they form group of universal symbols. Such universal symbols include symbols of colours, of the quest or journey, sky, earth, light, darkness, wheel, the archetypal woman, the wise old man, the Garden, the tree, the desert. While commenting on Alexander’s symbolism Bruce King writes, “She early took up a body of basic symbols which recur throughout her verse, symbols which act as images for parts of the self and its desires as well as for the external world” (444).