Chapter 1

Making up Memory: The Spacing of Time

“Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feelings, even our action: without it, we are nothing.”

(Luis Bunuel, My Last Breath)

“And how shall I speak for myself without memory--my memory and the memories of my people, however dispersed, however distanced?”

(Meena Alexander, The Shock of Arrival)

The past is both presence and absence in any creative act in the form of memory and forgetfulness. Memory plays a vital role in the shaping of art and reclaims time and space through poetic imagination. Described as the “mind’s eye” and “the retentive power of a camera eye” in Roget’s International Thesaurus, 3rd ed., memory also implies “nostalgia”, a homesickness that could be remedied by romanticising the past and aching for what is lost. Linda Hutcheon traces the history of the word “nostalgia” from its Greek roots “nostos,” meaning “to return home” and “algos,” meaning “pain,” to the nostalgic dimension of the postmodern in favour of the ironic (12). It was coined in 1688, according to Hutcheon, by a Swiss medical student “as a sophisticated pedantic way to talk about a literally lethal kind of severe homesickness” (12). This physical and emotional “upheaval” was seen as a “disorder of imagination.” But by the nineteenth century, due to a considerable semantic shift, the word began to lose its purely medical meaning. Nostalgia became generalized, and by the twentieth century had begun to attract the
interest of psychiatrists. Nostalgia became less a physical than a psychological condition, and it became psychically internalized: it developed from a curable medical illness into an incurable condition of the spirit. This pointed to a change from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home, for it was also a return to a time of youth. Yet, time, unlike space, cannot be returned to, for time is irreversible. Nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact. It is a past that is imagined, idealised, through memory and desire, and in this sense, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It projects the ideal that is absent in the present, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, and also by forgetting, distortions and restructuring. By simultaneously distancing and bringing closer the imagined past, nostalgia exiles us from the present and the past is constructed as “simple, pure, ordered, a shining geography” (Fault Lines 197). In this sense it becomes what Hutcheon calls the “aesthetics of nostalgia” (14), whereby the past is renovated as idealized history. From a purely psychological stance, memories originate in perceptions or experiences that leave some kind of a trace in the human brain, for “… memory is such a flexible, selective, changing process that our ‘remembrances of things past’ are imperfect, distorted, or just not recorded at all. And we even think we remember events that never happened” (Morgan 183).

In the postcolonial context, the past is rewoven in new forms and hues, and is constructed into a new reality. Here, memory intervenes as a strategy to re-position and re-structure a fragmented past. Its verdant nature resists the
overwhelming erasure of identity and history. The migrant state is largely, a “nowhere place,” and in diasporic art, memory plays an indispensable part to energize and authenticate diverse experiences of the spatio-temporal. The postcoloniality of Meena Alexander is affirmed in the cultural and linguistic positioning projected in her writing. Caught in the border crossings of language, culture and identity, creating a space for herself becomes an urgent task and memory is used as a tool to situate herself in the present American context. In the case of Anna Sujatha Mathai, memory criss-crosses between voice and silence, space and spacelessness. As Rohinton Mistry has said in an interview: “No matter where you live, even if you lived in the same village all your life, you would look at the past, at lost moments, lost opportunities, lost loves” (qtd. in Harihan 203). This applies largely to the writing of Anna Sujatha Mathai who has delicately carved out a mindscape that tries to elude specificity where the space of silence reveals a homeward glance. Placed out of their native context the two poets evolve ways to construct space and reorder time.

Anna Sujatha Mathai’s poems are deeply reflective and meditative, though they deal with everyday reality. They seek to pierce the dazzling and the humdrum surface of reality in order to arrive at the core of experience. Memory becomes a subtle force in her poems, lending a personal flavour to her encounter with the past. The “hyphenated” self of a postcolonial intellectual is submerged in an acute sense of vulnerability in the lyrical flow of her writing. Her poems carry a strain of memory, of genetic memory and of the Syrian
Christian personality of south Kerala. “Somewhere within her poetic self dwells a remembered experience of pain running through most of her poems” (Ayyapa Paniker 112). Her poem “Experience” (The Attic of Night) can be cited as an example where the protagonist, unable to retrieve the past and unwind the lost years, resolves the crisis with a final sagacious statement, “desire and opportunity rarely coincide.” The pain of some remembered love seems to haunt this philosophic statement.

Meena Alexander, in The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience, calls herself “a truly postcolonial creature” torn by “multiple leave takings” who would pierce through the white skin of English language to express the “murmurings of my own heart” (11). She would also aspire to bend the colonial rigidity and refinement of English, widen and deepen it to express the violence of the day, and the truth of the female body. She would prefer to use English to let the memories surface, though Malayalam is the “other voice,” another reading, and a treasured orality. She invokes the “alphabets of flesh” to surge forth in their elemental power, as writing in America becomes an imaginative acquisition of space. It also becomes the expression of the “multiple selves” and anchorages. The issue of languages and identity and the interplay of the past and the present are knit into the text of the postcolonial Third World she inhabits. “Piecemeal Shelters” (The Shock of Arrival) is primarily about how language is refashioned to accommodate “the murmurings of my heart” (11). Her inmost desires and cherished memories were unobtrusively washed away by a colonial system of education that decided
what should be expressed and how. “Suddenly I felt that even memory would be impossible if I did not turn my attention to the violence … attendant … upon the procedures of my own writing” (4). The language of memory is the language of the heart. Do memories have a particular language? Do they lose their colours in the foreign garb? Here, one encounters the dialectic of language and reality and the problem of representation. Is memory the reality to be represented through language or does language create reality?

Treasuring Malayalam as a “dream language,” Alexander uses English to clothe her memories. With barely four years of childhood in Tiruvalla, her reservoir of Kerala memories is scanty, “bedimmed” by the passage of time. Yet they attain new forms and colour, buoyed up by the power of poetic imagination. Malayalam in this context is relegated to the lucidity of primal language unpolluted by the rapacious hold of writing. Living in America, she is confronted with the bewildering realization that she has no history, space and memories. The compelling “presentness” of the immigrant life and the fear of being “othered” are encountered by unravelling history, both personal and collective, through the play of memory. Malayalam seemed “too close” and in order to distance herself from her experience she would use English to let her forgotten part of her to surface into her poems. This cautious distancing from her mother tongue as a written script, yet claiming its rhythm and resonance in her English poems, points to the inherent fear of treading on the traditional norms of what should be included and excluded in creative writing. It also
points to the necessity of a mediator language to bridge the gap between the private and the public.

To Anna Sujatha Mathai the “word” is “breath and the source” giving shape to her deepest life perceptions. A poem for her is “a perfect coming together of words, rhythm, and meaning, creating a pattern which moves and illuminates” (Letter). The question of writing in English does not arise in her introspective journey into the mystery of creative writing.

The design began to shape itself,

It refused to be commanded.

Now I’m just a weaver

Of a pattern that is

a mystery,

The tangled threads weave themselves

as they will, strangely,

I don’t know the colours or textures,

Or what the next line will be.

(“The Pattern” Life - on My Side . . . 16-24)

Yet, words, irrespective of the language, design the meaning of the poem, as it begins “to shape itself.” Both the pattern and the meaning evolve by themselves and “day by day / inch by inch / it gathered grace / arms, limbs, eyes” (“One- Armed Goddess” 19-22). The postcolonial preoccupation with the use of English in creative writing does not afflict Mathai, as she belonged to a generation that prided itself on its command over a colonial language. Yet, the
inextricable bond between her native space and mother tongue influences her outlook on life and humanity, providing the mainstay of her poetic vision. It replenished her humanism and Christian faith in moments of utter turbulence. Her poems are vacant spaces wherein the light and shadows of the past flit into deepen her vision of the future.

Meena Alexander problematises the notion of making up memory in her memoir *Fault Lines* by an interface between the urge to expunge the past and homeland, and the yearning to fabricate “a sheltering space in the head” (193). Through an imaginary conversation, she tries to map out a provisional self and tries to remember her Khartoum years with the help of an imagined speech with a friend who had lived in Khartoum when she did. “I needed to make up that memory which did not exist, a conversation that had not occurred, for that was the only way that Khartoum could come back to me” (190). She wanted the lost years to rise up again “like mist” to enable her to live in the “here and the now” of America. Though filled with longing for Khartoum, memory fails her, for “it does not feel like real memories . . . real raw stuff. . . .” She confesses, “perhaps it is just that I am scared, having covered it over for so long” (191). Writing becomes a therapeutic act in the powerful release of memories. In the palimpsest of memory is inscribed a spatial time written and over-written, and the overwhelming need for memory to cushion the ambivalent present some times exceeds the actual situation. Two or more spaces of experience and memory interplay in the making of her poems and
prose pieces. By tracing her roots to Tiruvalla and Kozhencheri, she tries to erase partially her Khartoum years.

Anna Sujatha Mathai speaks of the layering effects of memories with traces of earlier inscriptions / memories as the text of life, giving them their particular density and character in her poem “Palimpsest” (The Attic of Night):

Memories flare
like dying forest fires
in scorched terrain
A few words sear
through the smouldering pages
Vivid as in illuminated manuscript. (10-15)

The past scripted in faded letters becomes an indecipherable text. What makes it so is forgetfulness or selective amnesia, with a few remnant words of searing memories, personal and collective. The past and the present move towards each other to create a new space of vivid experience that contests boundaries in space and time. In her poem “Secret Enemy” (Life - on My Side of the Street and Other Poems: Dialogue and Other Poems) a name triggers off a memory and forgotten pain, moves through metaphors of winter clothing, mouldering in trunks to ash and embers, and then to spring flowers bursting through the cold crust of winter, ambushing the poet like a secret enemy.

that pain begins to ache again,
the dull ash, dying embers
burn fiercely once more.
who could conceive in winter

that flowers wait beneath

to spring out upon one, and startle? (8-13).

Yi-Fu Tuan, connects space with human emotion in his *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. According to him “place” spells security, and space connotes freedom, for “in experience the meaning of space often merges with that of place {and} what begins as undifferentiated “space” becomes “place” as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (3). Hence, there is no place like home. To the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the “house” becomes the “site of our intimate lives,” the space of memory where they are localized and where time is fossilized (*The Poetics of Space* 8). The ancient Greeks used the mnemonic device of “loci” (Latin word for place) to remember speeches. The method mentioned in *Psychology: Understanding Behaviour* is linked directly to the architectural features of a building and their linkage with memory (Baron 233). Each room contained the image of some point the speaker wanted to make and he imagined himself moving from room to room. This not only helped the speaker remember the debating points but also ensured they came out in the right sequence. This highlights the curious connection of memory with geography. The spatial tool to memorize a speech helps to create an architectural patterning of thought and to focus on the need to construct an edifice / house. Memory becomes the vital device to re-integrate the fragmented complexity of postcolonial existence. Through this building process, the restructuring of events and experiences necessitates a
kaleidoscopic designing of the fabric of life. Making up memory becomes inevitable for an immigrant caught between the fear of erasure and the overwhelming presentness of life, and this provokes a powerful urge to create and fabricate a homeland, “a sheltering space in the head.”

In The Shock of Arrival, Meena Alexander writes of the impossibility of translating the swirling snow of New York “into the white space of the page” as she is haunted by the fact that she never “knew” snow as a child (‘Brief Chronicle by Candlelight” 141). The knowing of a thing implies experiencing that thing, and she relates memory not only with experience but also with reality as grasped by the ‘self.’ It also validates the inextricable bond of memory with poetry knit together by the power of imagination. The immediacy of experience gains intensity from the multi-layered resonance of the past. Her query, “I cannot remember snow / so how can I continue to write here?” points to the indispensable role of memory in bridging the “there” with the “here.” The emotional space of the past enters the white space of the page to help thresh out the ambivalence of postcoloniality.

She realizes how the magic of space works on remembrance, “letting loose these breakable rhythms of breath . . . in the dense living spaces of the metropolis” (142). The self-consciousness of modern life does not merely mirror the changing kaleidoscope of city life impressions, but is itself fragmented by it. It becomes the “kaleidoscopic self of modernity” (Lloyd 9), which responds to the time consciousness of the metropolis in a complex manner. The temporal and spatial sense evoked by urban life is entirely
different from the rhythm of the rural life that rests on deeply felt emotional
relationships.

To the protagonist in Anna Sujatha Mathai’s poem “My World” (The
Attic of Night) the emotional value of space overrides the binary opposition of
the rural and urban. The soothing calm of the rural sunset of childhood bursts
into the frame of consciousness set against the surging and seething
metropolitan life of shifting relationships. The gradual defamiliarisation of the
childhood space that had hitherto represented peace and security marks the
advent of a new space-time. This phenomenon is explicitly summed up by
Helene Cixous as “being abroad at home” or the “entredeux”—an in-between
space (11). Uprooted and dislocated in a city of steel girders and neon lights,
the protagonist relocates herself in a new space of intimacy born of a new
relationship. ‘The shock of arrival’ is cushioned by the warm companionship of
the beloved in a claustrophobic space of an air-conditioned car. The “blind”
and “steel” city of soaring skyscrapers is miraculously transformed into “my
world,” thereby establishing her own space not in the childhood past of
romantic hues, but in a bursting metropolis of the present. The “young sunset”
and the “gentle spreading trees” of her rural past, tinged by a “strange raw
pain,” anticipate a new space in a new relationship. “Home” is where the
beloved is. It is more a state of mind and less, a geographical locus: “Travelling
once through this strange city / Watching everything with an outward look”
(“My World” 7-8).
The outward gaze panning the wide space moves into the narrow space of a car and spatializes the memory of an experience in a new context of significance. The “outward” look evolves into a dispassionate withdrawal from “a childhood evening / in my own country,” implying that the obvious difference between the heat and burst of the metropolis and the cool expanse of the rural sunset is immaterial in the context of personal joy. Here, the “shock of arrival” is transformed into the “shock of recognition” of a new intimacy. “And deep in the heart of stone / A flower bloomed” (28-29). The metropolis ceases to be the “other” and in the apparent “strangeness,” she discovers the lineaments of her own hopes and joy. The “strange raw pain” of a childhood evening seeps seamlessly into the exhilarating discovery of a new space and relationship.

Meena Alexander upholds the transforming power of the word and of memory in it. “Memory in this postcolonial world transforms what lies around it ... to be elaborated, spelled out, precariously reconstructed” (The Shock of Arrival 6). In her quest for an imaginative source to withstand the pressures of the present, she made up a grandmother figure, through which the rich vein of being could be tapped. The ancestral figure, “part ghost, part flesh,” would permit her to “speak.” The mediating power of the “grandmother figure” gives the poet an easy entry, though a subversive one, into public space by crossing the domestic. Memory, the hidden river, emerges in its fullness and power in her early poems – House of a Thousand Doors (1988), Storm: A Poem in Five Parts (1992). She calls the “House of a Thousand Doors” “a dream poem,”
though the image of the house is based on the ancestral home in Niranum where her maternal grandfather grew up. “It is mere music … she does not exist--this grandmother figure,” who pervades her poems as a distinct memory. “Yet the pain of her kneeling outside the house of a “thousand doors’ remains” (The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity 81). To the question, “why do I turn to her?” she finds the answer thus: “there seems to be no one else … from whom I can draw both the lines of ancestry and poetry. And she both is real and is not real” (81). In The Garden: Night Scene, The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts and the ‘grandmother poems’ of House of a Thousand Doors, the poet rekindles her faith in her female ancestors. The poems are centered round the space of the house, the Tiruvalla house, blending with other houses of her migrant life. As Gaston says, “Through poems, … more than through reflections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house” (6).

The “haunting inexistence” of the grandmother and “the house of a thousand doors” carry the dream memory not only of a house, but also of a mindscape that is physical and concrete. “In order to sense across the years our attachment for the house we were born in, dream is more powerful than thought … for the house we were born is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams” (Gaston 15-16). The dream-like house and grandmother lost in the shadows of a past are retrieved dynamically in poetry. The ‘house of a thousand doors’ is a dream house where the “key” predominates over the “door knob,” for “in the domain of values, … a key closes more than it opens whereas the door-knob opens more than it closes and
the gesture of closing is always sharper, firmer and briefer than that of opening” (Gaston 73). Yet, the poet’s house has a “thousand doors,” offering innumerable options for the grandmother. The “house” is both a medley of images and values experienced by the mutual working of imagination and memory. It houses memories merging with the persistent images of the “incense tree” of the Tiruvalla courtyard. The grandmother figure fuses the radically disparate facets of the grandmother known and unknown haunting her. Cast into the colonial past of the feudal Kerala, she traces the path of her nationalist grandmother Kunju (whom she never saw) and of her homebound grandmother Mariamma. “Both were born into an era of great social change for women in India, yet how differently their lives had marked them” (The Shock of Arrival 36).

It is curious how Alexander uses the figure to translate her inner conflict into pieces of poems and prose. The two grandmothers blend into her poetry and prose as a poetic device to negotiate with a past entrenched in Kerala, and a present fraught with postcolonial complexity. Their distinctive personalities not only colour the memories of Tiruvalla childhood but also replenish a creative dialogue with the world. Grandmother Kunju is both fact and fiction, for the poet confesses in her memoir, “I never knew her and that is the most brutal fact I have about her as she enters me and my life” (10). Yet, the family history by word of mouth and photographs compensated this “lack” of “knowing” Kunju. She had dared to cross the border of social taboos to pursue her studies, travelling to Peking and London and other foreign places “that melted in my
head, in a long melodious string of place names ... She chose a man, who was a Nationalist already and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi” (Fault Lines 11).

Grandmother Mariamma, on the other hand, who hardly left her Kozhencheri house, was the silent strength of the house. “She was the power in the Kozhencheri house. Appa would never raise his voice in her presence” (26). In her domestic sphere, she reigned supreme by quietly bringing in order and precision to the day–to-day activities of a large household. Yet, she becomes the protagonist in “Looking through well water” (House of a Thousand Doors) sitting by the garden well, gazing for hours into its mysterious depths, as if trying to fathom the female anguish. The domestic image of the garden suggests the confined world of the woman tethered to the grind of routine work. The space occupied by the Gandhian follower Kunju is vast and masculine, for her active involvement in the Nationalist Movement took her out of the limits of domesticity. Yet, “she kneels at each / of the thousand doors in turn / paying her dues” (“House of a Thousand Doors” 17-19). The subordinate position (kneeling) of the female subject overrides her robust nationalist activities. “I was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak … I imaged her: a sensitive, cultured woman … who had a tradition, and a history--precisely what I lacked; a woman who had lived to witness the birth pangs of a nation” (Fault Lines 15). In a sense, the poet tries to uncover an identity closely linked to Kerala. The resistance to colonial powers is substituted by the postcolonial response to the neocolonial forces of racism and gender bias.
In the poem “Her Garden” (House of a Thousand Doors), memory thrives in the sequestered realm of a garden creating a new space-time. Totally cut-off from reality, the garden scene becomes a pretty artefact to be stored away in the attic of memory knitted in the somber shades of gray and blue. Death settles down soundlessly on “that solitary hour” in the garden that becomes the setting for an effortless and seamless entry into the enigmatic sphere of death. The reiterative force of the metaphor “sleep” in the poem helps to erase the finality of the “losing body” by the power of poetic imagination. The grandmother figure is resurrected in her memory in the poem, “Her Garden” most evocatively:

I remember her
She died so long
before my birth
that we are one, entirely
as a sky
disowned by sun and star. (40-45)

“A rare fragrance” enhances the memory “as a dry mulberry / pierced by the monsoon wind” (48-49). The poem validates the deathlessness of memory and searches for an answer to the intense longing for a strong and vibrant ancestral figure. The poet elucidates her stand in The Shock of Arrival thus--“To reach the grandmother figure, I had to lose body, touch death and in “Her Garden”… I have written about this” (43).
Collective memory of colonial repression crystallizes into “Grandmother’s Letters” introduced by Alexander as “a fictive piece struck off, … from the actual” (House of a Thousand Doors 19). The letters are written by grandmother Kunju, to her husband Kuruvilla in jail. It is an epistolary tapestry of a relationship born in the throes of the freedom struggle and of a value system upheld in times of despair and loneliness. The letters also critique the “non players” as evidenced in Kunju’s indignant comment on the westernised section of society: “can you imagine the ignominy of wearing that dress in times like ours! I couldn’t bear to look at his polished shoes” (22). In “Burnt Hair,” the grandmother appears in a dream “as in shadow play,” sitting in a stool, gagged and tied to the foot of the mast of a ship, tortured by a fat “Britisher.” “She did not cringe, she did not twitch a lip, my grandmother” (18). Her heroism is indented in the poet’s memory as “the stench of burnt hair.” The rare fragrance of nostalgia wafting in the void of spacelessness changes into the “stench of burnt hair” of native resistance to the colonial might of a particular space-time. Strung together, the following lines from the House of a Thousand Doors express the inextricable bonding of two generations, of two historical moments and contexts:

Her house I inherit ("Salt Spray” 43)

She didn’t give birth to me

But when I look into the well

It’s her face I see

("Looking Through the Well Water” 9-11)
A poor forked thing

I watch her kneel in all my lifetime

Imploring the household gods

Who will not let her

(“House of a Thousand Doors” 24-27)

Will I fall

to the sounding

of your blood?  (“Grandmother’s Mirror” 136-138)

It was the stench of the burnt hair that stayed with me.

(“Burnt Hair” 18)

Or is she like myself inventing a great deal?

(“Grandmother’s Letters” 19)

I could hear Grandmother’s voice so clearly […] with the

slight distortion my own voice has as I listen to it.

(“Grandmother’s Letters” 24)

A curious blend of distancing and intimacy pervades the making of the ancestral figure. It is interesting to note the distinctive ways of approach in the poetic re-creation of the grandmother figure in the poems of Meena Alexander and Anna Sujatha Mathai. The ancestral moorings, especially the Kerala childhood, are indispensable to an immigrant writer like Meena Alexander caught in the searing immediacy and mobility of her postcolonial existence. In this context, the grandmother becomes the staying power and strength to the poetic mind, entangled in the net of doubts and tentativeness. The ancestral
figure, besides its emotional value, represents a value system that necessitates a review of its validity in the postcolonial context. The stance adopted by the female ancestors is largely the product of a social structure that was both colonial and patriarchal. Despite the bold stance taken by the maternal grandmother in spelling out her vision of life, both personal and national, she remains a painful memory to her only child (the poet’s mother) whose impressionable years were spent outside the warm maternal space. The wide space of nationality contests the narrow space of domesticity. It is this complexity that lends the figure an intensity and relevance to the poet of the late twentieth century.

In the poems of Anna Sujatha Mathai, the grandmother figure is an important part of her “familial poems” as “In Tiruvella” which has all the atmosphere of a South Indian Syrian Christian family with its cohesion and continuity, its internal feuds and its external composure and seeming unity. The poem “In Tiruvella” (The Attic of Night) is a photographic narrative of a past, with all the familial tropes woven in the conventional manner. The coconut trees, the jackfruit trees and the temple flowers surrounding the house in all their glory become a story of a past. The trees yield less fruit, and the flowers have withered. The ideal family ambience is punctured consistently. The graves of the grandparents that lie close by—“though they never were close in life,”—stir memories of vacations spent in the cool darkness of the “tharavad” (ancestral house) of Tiruvalla. The tumult and exuberance of youth complement a new awareness of female sexuality couched in the
grandmotherly advice: “young girls [should never] sit and argue with grandfather / In the presence of other men” (18-9). Marriage as a dire necessity, a cosmetic device to retain the “light” in the face, is critiqued in another poem, “Light”: “The light on a woman’s face / should not be so brief” (8-9). It contains the burden of experience and questions the veracity of the grandmother’s recipe to retain the glow in a girl’s face.

The old well that mirrored the young faces of the grandchildren, the oil baths with “inja,” and the “kashavukauni” worn by elder women typify the Syrian Christian ambience. Yet, beneath them rages the subterranean force of anguish and dislocation experienced in the wake of a new relationship. Nostalgia gives way to a new understanding of the past and of ancestral experience in the light of the present. The institution of marriage is severe and confined, for it seldom accommodates the rosy dreams of the young:

She had been beautiful once
But had been married at eleven
To a man she did not find handsome
She never loved his face as we did.

(“In Tiruvella” 43-46)

Yet, the intricate web of relationship is strong and secure: “It was he who helped her to learn enough English / To wade through the works of Dickens and Thackeray” (48-49).

The depth of relationship is measured in grandmother’s desperate cry after his death - “Grandpa always knew where the stamps were kept” (“In
Surrounded by the “wonderful smelling old” books in his study, grandfather knew “nothing of life” and needed his wife to protect him from the practicalities of life. “If it weren’t for me he would be completely cheated” (33). Grandmother, after her death, appears in dream with another confession – “You know I was never happy, but now I know this great joy” (61-62). The Tiruvalla house becomes the site of complex human relationships and the beginning of female awareness. The passage of time and generations cannot demystify the complexity of life and human relationship.

In the section, “Boating” (Night Scene: The Garden) Alexander re-creates a family boating excursion that ends in a mild disaster, when the boat almost capsizes with the women, children and men on board. The poet invokes the accident with epiphanic overtones by hauling the racy narrative on to the adult realization by the power of memory. The grandmother holding the frightened child firmly in the turbulent waters of the lake cannot simply be dismissed as a rescue venture. Instead it becomes an imaginative excursion into the cool solace of ancestry, of roots and anchorage, making her realize that “when they pulled / us out / we would not / come unstuck” (49-52). The dizzy descent into the “blackest depths” of dislocation is gently averted by the strong secure grasp of ancestral knowledge and memory. Memory is also of the postcolonial, ripping apart the sedative flow of the grand narratives. It entails the disclosure of ordinary lives and the density of the knowledge acquired thereof. Raging madness ruptures the linear structuring of a “durable past.” Through the character of a mad aunt, the poet tries to discover the violence of
female emotions, repressed for ages, in the violent antics of the female ancestor Chinna in the poem “Aunt Chinna.” The grandfather regaled the child with sizzling tales of a certain girl named Susikali who could fly over vast distances and mountains, appear and disappear by her supernatural power. The grandchild identified herself easily with this “super girl” and dreamt of accomplishing her idol’s feats. The fantasy woven round Susikali could be read as the subconscious urge in every girl child to overcome societal strictures; it resides as the collective memory of every woman.

Aunt Chinna is the crazy old ancestor driven to the mad fascination for mud, a shame to the family as “she raced, clothes streaming from her sides, mud in her hair / …all in public … / so much so that uncle Paulos almost hung her in his rage” (“Aunt Chinna” 52-53, 56-57). Chinna is inscribed in the collective memory of the family as “mad,” “shameless.” Through her, the poet tries to break through the cold stillness of language that is inadequate to express the violence of female emotions, suppressed for ages: “Kneel / kneel she sang to me / clutch the polished doorknob / lick the doorstep clean / she sang adding a note of caution … before they bind / your mouth with cords” (“Aunt Chinna” 96-102). The reiterative image of the “doorstep” and “threshold” of the ancestral house underlines the question of the included and the excluded. The postcolonial subjectivity of the poet draws out these subversive elements that go against societal values and acceptance. Madness is rejected and ostracized, and aunt Chinna is subdued into a foetal posture. The corrosiveness of “female madness” indents the memory of injustice meted out.
to the marginalized both in the microcosm of a household and in the macrocosm of society.

Juxtaposed with the Gandhian principles of Illya, her maternal grandfather, is the feudal mindset of her paternal grandmother of Kozhencheri, delineated as a typical landlord in the poem “Homeward” (House of a Thousand Doors). The poem is a journey back home, “a homecoming really by which I take my turn, closing the wounds of America” (6). The wound may allude to the countless ways in which the poet experienced dislocation that would be cured, to an extent, by an evocative journey to the Tiruvalla-Kozhencheri terrain of childhood experience: “Kozhencheri is only ten miles away from Tiruvalla, but in my mind’s eye, it is a lifetime away, more archaic, more backward and bent to the darkness of blood feuds and feudal moments. The white house, fitted with electricity was built after “valiappachan tore down the house of teak and mahogany that had stood for hundred years …”(Fault Lines 23). The Kozhencheri grandfather wielded feudal power over his brood of middlemen, overseers and peasants who ploughed the paddy fields and worked tirelessly in the rubber and coconut groves. If the ivory cane, the stiff gold turban and the wooden chair with the six-feet arms represent the grandfather’s regal sway over his land, the obsequious overseer and the labourers squatting in the yard for their wages complete the picture of a decadent feudal system of pre-independence Kerala.

To the willing and sympathetic listeners, Jayanta Mahapatra and Runu, the poet-narrator, like Coleridge’s ancient mariner, opens out her tale: “My
tongue unstops the shame / my speech halting, homeward turned in a torment / I will tell you my tale” (“Homeward” 62-65). It is also a tale of great social upheavals that had followed the advent of communism in Kerala. In Fault Lines, she recollects the night-prayers sung by the bedside of “Valiappachan,” where she, a mere child, watched with wonder the transformed feudal lord weeping out aloud, reciting prayers for the salvation of the soul: “[He] called upon the Father in Heaven to rescue us from Communists whose powers were growing” (44). He was mortally afraid of the Communists who were set out an avenging mission by killing tax collectors, landowners and all those belonging to the bourgeoisie. Feudal power was almost vested in patriarchy. Grandmother Mariamma rarely spoke to her husband and maintained staunch silence in his presence, and the granddaughter firmly believed that the Communists would spare her. The narrative of her childhood in Kerala becomes part of the larger process of social changes.

In another long poem, Night Scene: The Garden, the private and the public merge into the lines of extreme power and sensitivity. The voices that constitute the long poem provide a richness of tone and a range of subject matter interwoven into the poem. Moving anecdote-wise, the poem recalls the moments of love, pain and dispossession, the most poignant being the intensity and suffering of aunt Chinna. Unable to resolve various contraries, the poet wonders:

Is it a fault in the land

Or in ourselves?
The stars cannot foretell
The ruin and the mist
That covers a people eclipsed
And suffering.

(“Keeping House” 6-11)

The atmosphere is cleverly wrought out of an extremely private space of a
garden in the night when “mother turns at last / and whispers as the broken
shadows play” (19-20). The poem-play was performed at Hunter College.
Watching the rehearsal of its performance, the poet could not believe that her
words had anything to do with “the sounds that came from their mouths” (The
Shock of Arrival 51). The sandy courtyard of Tiruvalla and the garden well
seemed far off as she watched the performance. She felt that the loneliness in
[her] writing life was being touched upon and eased tenderly.

The poem is about a house, kinship, and a childhood immured in the
dense memories of Tiruvalla, of desecration and loss. The garden becomes the
personal space to find out the turbulent thoughts and feelings of “dislocation”
and “unhousedness” and emptiness of postcolonial India. The mother reaches
out to the first-born daughter in the shadows of the garden:

Child my oldest child
your sisters still unmarried
and you are so far away,
come over here.   (“Night Birds” 21-24)
The mood is sombre with signs of decay and destruction: no fragrance but the heavy scent of the “pala,” no nightingale song but the ominous hoot of the owl. The tangled roots of the ancient trees bear silent testimony to the tangled kinship of mother and daughter bound in the magic of memory. Alexander ponders over the bond in an evocative manner in her memoir:

Ever since I can remember, amma and I raveled together in net after net of time. … Without her I could not be, not even in someone else’s memory. …. Lacking her, I cannot picture what I might be. (Fault Lines 7)

The voices of the mother and daughter commingle into a complex narrative voice lending a lyrical intensity into the quick fluid shift between the past and the present. Mother’s voice knits sounds and experiences; the “sigh” of the cotton bed sheet crashing into the dirt and the “rustles” of the wedding sari merge into the twin experience of the bride and the mother in “a house / riding its own grave” (42-43). The glory of the past of the house once pulsating with childbirth, marriage and the Gandhian values is juxtaposed with its desecration brought about its illegal ownership: “When the house was stolen from us / we did not know where to turn” (“Keeping House” 51-52). Truth turns beggar and falsehood reigns. It marks not only the systematic desecration of a house but of a whole system of values moored to Gandhism.

The voice of the mother gains momentum and power as the water of a stream pulsing through silt and rocks. The daughter takes up the narrative flow to rewind the childhood of her mother, who had traversed the rugged path of
life. The childhood faith in a new India and in oneself, fifty years before, wilts before the rampant violence and meaningless hatred pervading the post-Independence era. Some vestige of that childhood clarity of vision is regained in the “parched, resinous soil of the garden, fifty years after.” It marks a return to one’s space both physical and emotional. The house with its carved beams and reddened tiles dominates the movement of the poem as a powerful symbol. Embedded in the history of the house is the interplay of ownership power dominance and oppression. The female voices critique the patriarchal power that drives woman to insanity. In the emptying of the house that once boasted of prosperity is built the story of the second daughter of the tenant priest, forced to marry a widower with a green card. It is a prelude to bouts of insanity that ravaged the young girl, reduced to a pathetic figure crawling back and forth, saris spiked with chicken droppings. The young girl reappears as aunt Chinna who embarrassed the male members of the family with her bouts of insanity. Madness is the only way of contesting the strict norms of patriarchy for a woman.

Mother’s voice recreates the idyllic world of Gandhian values when “father and mother and a group of friends / all from the ashram by the Sabermati / … set spinning wheels in the sandy yard / and worked without cease” (“Keeping House” 4/17-20). The silence of the garden throbs with the strains of memory seeping into the crevices of forgetfulness. Proximity and distance predominate the spatial pattern of the poem.

In darkness still
I touch my mother’s face

Overhead stars race

Flash their rare markings. (‘Night Scene’ 1-4)

The visual of the cool, pearly moonlight caressing the mother and the child on the marble ledge of the ancestral house fades into another moonlit garden, where two women search for a “lost parallel / drawn by the dim / confusions of our blood” (“Black Water” 4-6). Touching mother’s face in the darkness of the night compress both time and space. She races home to her roots, driven by the burning desire for the soil of her homeland: “Moist lots of dirt / sharp pebbles / and weeping, weeping / in my tumult / I swallowed hard” (52-56). It is this desire for her place and home that ignites her creative urge, the chlorophyll of poetic imagination to paint her memories green.

Peering into the depth of the garden well, the child narrator evolves into the adult poet, recognising the “self” mirrored in its secret waters. The garden, its gate and the well dissolve into “no man’s land / no woman’s either,” the in-between space of self-realisation when “the lost child / lifts her eyes / to mine.” The “self” is part of the collective memory of ancestors, the vast social changes they underwent and the immediacy of female experience. Death, desecration, and destruction mingle with the celebration of fecundity and parturition in the building of the “house” and the “poem” in the last two lines of the poem: “And in the empty hold of air / whispers of children born into this garden.”

To Gaston, memories are motionless and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. Memory then, must rest on space and be
“housed.” and the ancestral house in Tiruvalla acquires a human face
“embracing and embraced.” In the poems of Alexander, space becomes
everything and time ceases to quicken memory. In the cellar, the garret, the
very nook and the corridors of the house, memories abide and take refuge. The
Storm: A Poem in Five Parts opens by invoking the paternal grandfather who
tore down his ancestral house of teak and bronze, centuries old. He tore it down
to build a house complete with running water and electricity. The brutality of
the act is indented in the images of death and decay: “Father’s father tore it
down / heaped rose wood in pits / as if it were a burial” (1-3), and “rice grains
hung / to each other / soldered in sorrow” (7-9), as if unwilling to part from the
cool foetal space of the “ancient granary.” Fragmentations and flotation
dominate the poetic narration as if contesting the romantic notion of wholeness.
The poem folds and unfolds its formal folds. Memory is embodied in the
fragments of “the first house” as dreams: “I dreamt of bits and pieces / of the
ruined house” (96-97).

A cascade of images overflows the banks of forgetfulness: “blackened
vessels,” “disused well,” a child’s toy of two tin wheels swirling on a stick. The
“blackened space” and “rubble” cry out the presence of the “first house.” “I
peer from the rubble / where a first home stood / the centuries swarm through
me” (136-138). Perspectives change spatially and temporally. The closeness
and intimacy of objects--brocades in silver boxes, the bleached ends of the
palmyra fan, the rice grains stuck to the granary: zoom ahead into the “long
gardens of our dead” and the breathing mounds of the ancestors, to plunge into
the pungent depths of waterholes and “the very base” of the garden well. The fluent power of the verbs accelerates the poetic narration, lending an immediacy to the constant change in space and time. The warm space of ancestral house, akin to the cool space of the ancient granary, is a fragmented relic of the past. Cast out into the undulating ancestral hillside across the swollen paddy fields, down the chalky slopes and ravines, the protagonist remembers the “first house” in the “burned and blackened space.” It becomes a “great ship wrecked” with “the voices of family / all near and dear / crying from the holds” (40-42) to the adult narrator transformed into a child. It “turned me then all muddy / and green and fearful / into a child …” (51-53). The word “then” counterpoints the past in the present, whereby the adult re-experiences her childhood. The “blackened space” and the “rubble” become the burial ground of not only the ancestral house but also of a lifestyle constrained by the straitjacket of patriarchy.

A kinetic energy propels the movement of the past, the heaving graves of the ancestors lurch into a close-up. The fragments of the first house and its images of desolateness and nostalgia evolve into a new house on the hill, “its pillars washed in white” and “walls wired with electricity.” But the newness of the white house cannot obliterate the image of the “first house,” it resonates powerfully within the poet, caught in the flux of migrant life. The images of the whirling toy, blackened vessels and rosewood silt enter the blank space of silence and stillness. They are broken and ruined, never to be restored to wholeness and completeness. A sense of loss permeates them and centuries
swarm. Reality destroys the fantasising of a past, of rebuilding the “first house” on its ruins. The poetic mind instead, re-forms the broken images into the purely tangible. Time cannot be arrested, it is imprinted on the graying hair, heavy palm-lines, “natural occurrences” that cannot be controlled. Yet, poetic imagination resurrects and re-designs a past. The fragmented images of the “first house” move into the shifting terrain of the postcolonial travellers in the section “The travellers.” “Is there no almanac / for those who travel ceaselessly?” (7-8).

Ceaselessly travelling, the travellers cross the border of past experience into the emerging world of violence and destruction. If motion is the rule of life, so violence is the only language of the present generation. The violence embedded in the demolition of the ancestral house is reviewed in the market places, alleys, highways and poorly lit cafes of Baghdad, Tehran, New Delhi and Meerut. The story is the same everywhere and all time. The grim wasteland, bloody battlefields and corpse-filled seas move into the poetic vision. The battles of yore--“Lanka laid waste” and of the present--are interlinked by the image of “pale Sita” kneeling in the dirt, fondly touching a tree, rock and shrub whose “incandescent scent” revives in her the lost memory of a furrow where Janaka had found her. The fecundity of the poetic imagination blends into the musty fragrance of the soil wherein the tender roots of grass sprout. The legend of Rama and Sita reverberates in the songs sung and lived through generations. In a train or a plane, the postmodern individual
is forever on the move, crossing borders. The poetic mind also crosses the borders of space and time.

Familial bonds strain and tauten as every Sita is drawn in a vortex of loneliness and despair. “She clings / to her grassy slope / utterly still” (80-82). The great Janaka’s daughter and Lord Rama’s bride is reduced to a hapless soul in the rocky wilderness of an alien land “widowed by memory.” The space of loneliness is vast and foreboding. Memories quiver and hang suspended. “The house resurrects itself,” in the text of memory and the poetic imagination of the poet. A ritual celebration of memory is called for whereby all “exile” ends and all hurt is healed. Memory becomes a regenerative force through poetic imagination. The tremendous roar of the storm fades into a peaceful silence and pristine clarity of vision. It marks the return to one’s own roots: “I stoop / I touch the soil / of my homeland” (11-13). The passage of rites and rituals create an aesthetic detachment and healing, with “… all exile ended / the faces in lamplight, rejoicing” (138-139). The poem is a quest into the silence of forgetfulness that resonate with words; a silence that throbs alive through memory.

The continuing source of strength in Mathai’s poetry is her strength to locate within the “self” the drama perceived in the external world and to locate within the external, the drama of the “self.” Memory becomes her invaluable aid in perceiving the meaning of her own personal experience. The poet herself is constantly conscious of the power exercised by memory on her creative outpourings. Often, it is the memory of some experience of pain, suffering,
loss, failure and a sense of inadequacy, which surfaces insistently in the mind of the poet, demanding expression in verse. The book *Crucifixions* contains poems of infinite delicacy and tenderness with an intuitive grasp of the paradox of life, diving into the “submarine spaces” of the poet mind. From the object to the subject, the “other” to the “self,” the words dance their way into the heart of the reader. A sense of foreboding, of loneliness haunts every poetic intervention in life situations. The past seeps into the present as spots of silence and reflection. But a new awareness shatters the silence of forgetfulness, by the connectiveness of memory. The poems revolve around ruminations, observations and statements that vacillate between the trite and the poignant. The urgency to create memory or to evoke a past is minimal in her poems. Space-time stands immobile and the reader is led into the labyrinth of the poet mind:

> I have known the terrible beauty  
> Of the swift passing hour  
> The infinite sadness of a summer’s day  
> … my spirit has its own clear streams it walks beside  
> I have known creation of another kind.  
> (*Creativity* 14-18)

Yet, the poet carries the burden of temporality and realizes the imperceptible changes weaving their web on human relationship.

> O loved one  
> The new lines under your eyes
Aroused such tenderness in me
And love, because you, like me,
Were time-bound,       (“Loved One” 1-5)

Spatial distance keeps the loved one apart, accentuating the irrevocability of time. “But distances swept between / Everything kept us apart / And I wept, as women sometimes weep” (“Loved One” 11-13).

In “Waiting,” the figure of a woman waiting for her lover, engenders a disastrous slide into straits of apathy and meaningless suffering. The woman waits endlessly, wearied with weeping for her beloved:

We are the women who wait

................................

And yet we wait; for the

Sweetness of this pain of longing

    We know.

................................

I felt no hate. Only aware of a bond…    (1, 4-6, 7)

The two-worded line “We Know” not only knits together the five-line stanzas of the poem, but also lifts the poem from the depth of passivity to a positive moment of “common womanhood,” revealing, if only for an instance, the moral value inherent in this waiting. “And the secret knowledge of suffering / Something shared not spoken of” (10-11). It reveals a past of pain and loss that had been immured in forgetfulness, awaiting excavation by the healing power of memory. Personal memory merge into the collective female memory of pain
and loss. Vacillating between the past and the present, the poet mind encounters a timeless-spaceless experience, the “nowhere zone” of absolute stillness of silence.

“The I blotted out / No earth of mine / and what should I return to / to become again?” (1-4), is an existential query posed in the poem “June 1969,” for the space from which ‘self’ is erased is immaterial. Yet, “the lonely self caught within,” hankers after a time-space where “two and two makes four” and “love is love is love.” A barbed wire of erasure and forgetfulness fences the nostalgic space. The speaker in the poem aspires to cross the “barbed wire” of forgetfulness to that spatial time where “a child is warm.” Memory as painless and soothing recurs in her poems. Memory is pinned on a particular person and experience in another poem called “Poem,” in which “{o} nly your memory comes back again, again” (3). The particularity of the personal experience colours its memory in happy hues. The irrevocability of that particular experience casts anguish on the poet mind, crushed by the “anguish filled” present. Memory offers solace:

Memory has no pain
It is the prison of our present,
The knowledge of our helplessness
That crushes us. (6-9)

Yet, in another poem “Our Todays,” (Crucifixions) she dwells on the vibrant reality of the present, casting aside the vagueness on the past, and of the
future. The “todays” bridge the yesterdays and tomorrows, each day chiseled to perfection and fulfillment.

This day vibrates with joy
All things are alive
And my heart knows the radiance
Cast out by a perfect day,
Or by its perfection recognised. (12-16)

Alexander transfers her childhood memory of being entranced by the sight of a butterfly, breaking out of the pupa, to her adult experience of “multiple anchorages.” She has lived many lives in many places—Kerala, Khartoum, England, America—and each carries the indelible stamp of memories. Each lived space becomes a “dark incipient thing” to let the other space take wings to memory. She ruminates in her memoir Fault Lines: “Where did my Khartoum life go when I was in Kozhencheri or Tiruvalla? And what of this life of rock and stone, under the thick green leaves of Kerala, when I was living [in a desert so far away]?” (77) The incipient phases of the earlier lives coalesce into the complex sensibility of a postcolonial writer. She writes of being torn apart by two sorts of memories, two opposing ways of memories towards the past. Another memory invades her, of the burning present “cut by existential choices,” of a patchwork of place names—Allahabd, Tiruvalla, Kozhencheri, Pune, Khartoum, New York, and Delhi. Like an indigent dressmaker, she would garner the scraps of places and stitch her “days into a patchwork garment fit to wear” (Fault Lines 30). A new being is born with a
new consciousness of “a nowhere creature” babbling in a multitude of tongues—Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, English and French. Set against these shifting, varied, multiple words is the “house” of her childhood in Kerala, for “when I think of homesickness, the Tiruvalla house where Illya lived rise up for me” (30). Rushdie referring to the postcolonial dilemma of calling up the past and memories writes: “I knew that I had tapped a rich seam, [though] not gifted with total recall, … it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory [acquire] … greater resonance … ” (“Imaginary Homelands” 12).

In the second collection of poems—We the Unreconciled, the poet dwelling on the transitoriness of life, celebrates the first toll of the bell and the first drop of rain, crystallized into eternity. Every moment is set against the rock of eternity, containing within, “intangible memories.” The binary opposition of life and death, moment and eternity, sunshine and night chase each other in “The Black Crow” to erase every vestige of memory.

You will be swept
From my memory
Like loose grain
From the floor. (19-22)

“Strange Meeting” voices the silence of memories:

There was silence
No sound but the stirring
of deep memories
of love
ancient longings
resurrected. (5-10)

The deep memories of love evolve from “ancient longings” that are resurrected in the “narrow corridor of time.” They will transcend the narrow confines of space and time, to “echo in these corridors / And haunt us / In another life” (“Strange Meeting” 22-24). Memory is persistently despatialised in the poems of Mathai. More than tangible places, the inner landscape of the mind becomes the site of memory appropriated by silence and loneliness. Hovering in this mindscape are tender memories of love and the beloved find peaceful sanctuary in the inmost being of the lover. In another poem “Hopelessness,” the poet bewails:

In the end is there only this:
Is there only the memory
of a flute
Played on a long-ago night? (1, 6-8)

Love moments get translated into dulcet liquid notes of the flute and the brightness of a life of a “life caught within me.” The poet sings of the radiance thus:

Today I stand alone
But still sustained
By that past brightness
And a frail flame
Which will not die. (“Brightness” 20-24)

The brightness of the memory of a “home” of familial ties will not die.

The Attic of Night is a collection of mature poems that explores the possibilities of blending the abstract with the concrete and delving into the intricacies of human relationship to arrive at self-realisation. Her reflection and objective sketching carry the burden of memory. “It seemed to me that families held each other’s dreams down” begins the poem “Families,” hinting at the possibility of arriving at a point of realisation and to a space-time covering vast experience. “But now, alone, without family / I see that families are held by / Secret bonds” (15-17) catapults the protagonist into a realisation couched in a homily--“families are boats where / strangers cling together” (23-24).

The poem “Palimpsest” speaks of the layered effect of memories with traces of earlier inscriptions / memories remaining as a continual feature of the “text” of life. The past, which is scripted in faded letters, becomes an undecipherable text. Life is viewed as a manuscript, its letters faded by the passage of time. What remain vivid are the searing memories etched in the “scorched terrain” of the original text / life. Life is salvaged through memories. But memories can also reveal the ugly cracks and scars of harsh reality. The poem “Music” underlines the bliss of forgetfulness and the cruelty of memory. Listening to music and drowning in wine can intoxicate the mind to regenerate “forgotten wounds” in the form of memory of “love that was lost” and “of summer days gone.” The bliss of forgetfulness is short lived, for the sharp glare of memory will peel asunder the amnesiac veil. All barricades built carefully to
obstruct the flow of memory break down to the tantalising strain of music.
Hence, surrendering to music and memory becomes a fatal act, for it is related
to loss, wounds and hurt.

In “The Little Madammas,” the poet explicitly contextualises memory,
drenched in the Kerala flavour. The poem opens with a flourish: “Sister, the
memories are stirring,” Memories stir like “insects in the air, lady birds in the
grass,” and they languish in the sultry heat of a Tiruvalla Christian ambience.
Visuals pour into the vacuum of forgetfulness--the Mar Thoma church with its
“stained glass” and “cemetery,” “the missionary dresses” and “church fetes.”
The “little Madammas” are the two sisters from the city, in missionary dresses,
sunhats and shoes, hooted at as “Madammas” by the urchins of the village. The
girls are the “memsahibs,” who represent the British culture; for their hats and
shoes cry out their alien sophistication in the heart of rural Tiruvalla.

The British power was fast waning, leaving some vestige of its
influence in the Mar Thoma community of south Kerala. The English educated
class (mostly belonging to the Mar Thoma denomination in south Kerala) could
enter the colonial system with ease. The “Madammas” and the “urchins”
coexist as the social reality of the pre-Independence India. The colonial
influence is subtly countered in the ironic reference to the elaborate monuments
erected over the dead Englishmen and women in the Church cemetery-- “where
the angels wept / over dead English women / and babies scorched by heat.” The
heat and bustle of the past can only hasten the death of the colonists. The
history of Christianity in south Kerala is touched upon in the “madammas”
playing games with “Brahmin ancestors.” It is claimed that much conversion to Christianity took place among the Namboodiri and Kshatriya families.

Collective memory blends into the personal, in the nuances of sexual awareness experienced by the protagonist: “At 12, I thought I smelt blood. / that at last I’d become a woman” (21-22). “We played at being little woman” collide with “be good girls now / pick up sticks.” They point to the double colonisation of women. The concluding lines raise uneasy questions of the freedom sanctioned to women and the freedom gained for the Indians after the freedom struggle: “The games nearly over / The power and glory, ours / Forever and ever” (35-37). The “games” may refer to both the game of the girls (hopscotch and seven tiles) and of the British power in India.

In her latest collection of poems titled, Life - on My Side of the Street and Other Poems: Dialogue and Other Poems, memories haunt the protagonist as waves. Memories of pain and of love, lie submerged in the green depth of consciousness:

Seaweed wraps my green memories
which sink into shifting sand

.................................

Songs of sea creatures call me

Weighted with memories of pain and love. (6-7, 10-11)

The protagonist identifies herself with “an old woman, alone and blind, / insane with memories of / her own lost element” (29-31). The personal memories, buried deep, of pain and love, widen into the collective memory of
womanhood. Memory, being dream-like, is delocalised, and shorn of all landmarks. But in “A Line Drawn in Water,” memory is spatialised with the specific reference to a personal tragedy in Kerala: “you who drowned in Mavelikkara / I hear your voice again” (18-19). The necessity of a link between the past and the present is reiterated. Life that is as transient as a line drawn in water, and as shadowy as a dream, begins to attain a form and a voice, once the link between the present and the past is established. It becomes an anchor in the following tide of contemporariness. “Ancestral faces merge into mine” and “the lines begin to form.” Ancestral images and stories continue to haunt the past.

The “Tight Rope Walkers” is a nostalgic journey to the grandparents that opens the magic casement of the past, replenishing life with stories of a “lost generation.” The grandparents with their rich reservoir of “stories and legends” walk the tight rope between the past and the present, at the risk of being discarded, misunderstood and forgotten. The golden world of stories of the “lost generations” will soon slide into indifference and oblivion. “Mother stories” recreate the richness of that “lost generation.” The stories die their natural death of oblivion. Story telling carries the line of life to eternity, and mother “losing her memory … quick with life” reflect the slow decay of life. Memories “a cauldron, a storehouse, rich with stories” carry the message of continuity of life. They are the lifeline drawn between past and present, forgetfulness and memories. Story telling or story weaving becomes the strategy of expression for women. Stories are also memories, of the real and the
imagines, the warp and the weft of the fabric of life. They occupy the space of the mind and imagination, and of the mindscape. In the “Lost Children,” the search for “my own lost spaces” continues:

I keep searching for that child-
I’d surely recognise her-
If I could look into her face-

But I can’t recognise her,

it’s so long ago I saw her (4-6, 18-19)

In a self-reflexive mood, the protagonist visits her “self” in the absence of space-time. But this “absence” becomes “a presence / most insistent” (“Absence”). The forgotten pain of lost love buried deep in the soul’s interior (like winter cloths tucked away in summer) begins to ache startlingly, and suddenly as flowers long buried in soil, break into bloom, or as robbers pouncing on the unsuspecting passerby. The sudden assault of painful memory is as unpredictable as that of a secret enemy and somewhere deep within burns “the dull ash” of a long lost relationship (“Secret Enemy”).

The poem “To Marina Tsvetayeva” honours the Russian poetess who killed herself, being friendless and alone. But, the icy figure of death cannot touch her poetry that dwells in the hearts and minds of the readers. The poet lives forever in her poems and in the reader’s heart. “She lives again, who had but slept” (16). The immensity of poetic experience overflows the rim of a world measured by social norms and prejudices. A chord of sympathy is struck
and “life spark burns again in another woman’s heart” (43-44). The reader and
the poet meet at the juncture of life experience. In “Lost Memory,” the
protagonist identifies a poor “lost memory” that “stand so quiet, stand helpless
/ in the corner”, (12-13) amidst a crowd of other memories, discrete and clear,
jostling it out. But the “lost” memory, unidentifiable and unfixed, disturbs the
tranquil flow of other memories. This enigma is resolved, to an extent in
“Forest Paths,” where the poet, lost in the dense forest of years, realises that the
“ … only way  / out of the dark forest might be / to delve deeper, yet deeper /
into the forest’s very heart” (11-14). It becomes a painful journey into “my own
heart’s lost secrets.” It marks an inward journey.

The poems of Alexander never seem to drift far from her space-time of
bliss in the green spaces of the garden trees where she used to hide as a child in
Tiruvalla. Her later years of postcolonial existence are a search for that lost
“bliss” and “green” of her childhood. She identifies in her essay “Poetics of
Dislocation,” the source of her poetic inspiration thus: “There is a zone of
radical illiteracy, a space that studs under both our hold of place and of syntax,
a zone where I need to touch in order to make poems and now I see the child in
the green tree renders back what the woman in her searches … ” (6). It is often
the absence of a particular space-time that creates a new space. The cadence of
Tiruvalla, the heady fragrance of the soil, the shining leaves of the incense tree,
the green depth of garden wells, and the haunting presence of her grandparents,
are insistently experienced. She writes about this resonance in her memoir thus:
“I felt I needed the peace of a place where there was no more marrying, no
more taking in marriage and in the bright moon light, on the soil of my grandmother’s garden, for a few moments, I felt I had found it” (Fault Lines, 226). The tree branches into a tangled network of relationships and associations. The knobbled roots of the incense tree, planted by her maternal grandfather “Illya,” whose first blossom arrived on Adam’s birthday, appropriates the nostalgic space exuding a peace and harmony that arches over the restless postcolonial transit.

The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience deciphers the curious “exfoliation of sense” under the sign of America. New knowledge rams into the carefully built rampart of hierarchy and tradition. The book contains poems and prose pieces that “braid together difficult truths of body and languages.” Violence, racism and marginalised identity are issues that provoke not only the question of location-dis-location but also necessitate the making of memory and of a past. In “A Durable Past,” the question: “how can I make a durable past in art … that is not merely nostalgic, but stands in vibrant relation to the present?” haunts the poet (127).

Memory flows through the borders of space and time “rivers of Asia … of Africa, memory flowing through harsh rock, muddy borders … ” (“Making up Memory” 138). The question put by the king to the caged parrot in Banabhatta’s Kadambari is thrown at the poet in an epigraph thus: “tell me everything about yourself, starting with your birth. Where were you born? Who gave you your name? … How were you caught in this cage?” (“Making up memory” 138) The cage to an immigrant writer could be the physical sense of
dislocation, and “otherness” that shape and colour the past. The poet takes a simple and final decision: “The city fronts me … It is here I must remember.” Memory transcends nostalgia to enter the violence embedded in it. Nostalgia could be interpreted as the space created in the consciousness in relation to the space vacated earlier. In the postcolonial context, nostalgia besides this relational characteristic enters the domain of a new space of identity. Hence, an element of aggressiveness colours nostalgia. The Manhattan persuades her to enter the memory of another city, Hyderabad, where women are nothing without money and property. The scores of memories that can never be lashed back into place, image the white sails on the Nile, the water lights on the Hudson and the fishermen’s nets on the Pamba, glistening in moonlight. To the postcolonial mind, memory necessitates invention—“a slashed moon perpetually moving towards the invented contour of its other part”(144).

Alexander refers to an Art exhibition organised by Asia Society entitled “Identities in Contemporary Asian-American Art.” What she experienced in the Art exhibition was a rich aesthetic resistance to the great unifying forces of America. It is an art forged in the crucible of communal memory (“Body, Memory, Desire in Asian American Art” 152). She is amazed by the powerful configuration of Asian-American art expressed in the paintings, and installation pieces of immigrant artists. A re-envisioning of history becomes part of the passage into the present. The contortions of colonialism and the tension of historical memory work for women artists through textures of a gendered awareness. In the search for identity in the new context, she dwells into the
collective memory of Kerala, the colonial conquest of Portuguese and the English. The memory travels to Vasco Da Gama, whose landing in Calicut, set into motion the relentless flow of colonial power.

The collection of poems, Illiterate Heart, dedicated to her father, follows a sequence of four sections, fenced by two poems--“Provenance” and “Black River, Walled Garden.” The poet invites the reader into the “cool passage ways” of the “Mohenjodaro of the mind” to discover new dimensions of meaning in life experiences that cluster as discrete entities (“Provenance”). The poems revolve round a particular time-space to rediscover the palpable truth of kinship and the possibility of a shared existence. They also mark a journey into the roots of existence and the inner recess of “self,” eluding the grasp of words. The rhythm of silence pervades the text. All voyages end and the tumult and heat of endless transit lounges surrender to the cold certainty of a singular space, hitherto unvisited and unimagined: “I am going over stones / stumbling to a place / I never thought I would know” (“She Hears a Gold Flute” 10-12). The innumerable houses lived and loved dissolve into “a small house of stones” perched on “this great hill of bones.”

Under her coat

The woman wears a sari,

under her boots

her skin is dark (5-8)

Casting aside all token of strangeness, and alienation--coats and boots--and keenly conscious of the “sari” and her “black skin” that points to her
hyphenated identity, she returns to what could be called the “primary” space (C.P Ravichandra 83). In the essay “Search of Civil Space: A study of South Asian Writing in Canada,” Ravichandra identifies two spaces in the context of immigration. They are the primary and secondary spaces qualified as the “space of emergence,” and the “space of arrival,” respectively. The secondary space is also the “civil space,” that imposes certain regulations and demands loyalties on the immigrant. Very often, the immigrant adopts the secondary space as the primary, dependent on the urge for better prospects. In the poetry of Alexander, one detects a fluent interweaving of the two spaces, highlighting the postcolonial angst.

*Illiterate Heart* is also a subtle critique of the binariness of the “mind” and the “heart,” the rational and the emotional. A certain amount of faith is needed in stoking up memory. In the poem “Elegy for My Father,” memory is linked with faith in the lines “memory believes” and “can knowing remember?” The “illiterate heart” can remember and gauge intuitively the depth of kinship built on faith and trust. “Knowing” a thing is a matter of the intellect, for it is knowledge confined and patterned in a definite way. In the elegy, the protagonist recreates certain poignant moments in the relationship with her father. The “loud mouthed teenager” asks her father unabashedly, “Do you love me?” and he replies, “some things need not be said … / of course, you added softly” (18, 20, 23). The knowledge of paternal love mellows into a deep understanding of the relationship that defies borders and limits, contesting the rational and the specific. The light of memory redefines the territory of heart.
In another poem “Black river, Walled garden” the movement is from the realm of reality to that of dreams, the childhood space dissolving into a “longing” memory. The opening line pulsates with the anguish of loss, for “[t]he garden of my childhood flees from me.” The garden of her childhood registers the time-space of “anamnesis, living memory” (57). The verdant space perfumed by the “sharp stars of jasmine and saughandi” is recreated in its vivid sensuousness. “Anamnesis” which in Greek is “remembrance,” is also the recollection of a supposed previous existence. In the Christian context, it is recalling the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, the holy moments etched in the memory of every Christian. Yet, the events are also stained with the blood of Christ, the Saviour, and marked by the memory of the sacrifice of the Son of God for the human race. The memory is “living” and it inspires both silence in its fullness and speech in its anarchic power. Similarly, the childhood space inspires both silence in its completeness and words in their vigour. It behoves a poetic revisitation and resurrection of that space-time almost bedimmed by the onslaught of years. This revisit, invested with ritual solemnity inscribes the Kerala space as a metaphor: “You understand these things / The need for human ritual” (64-65).

The garden is walled, circumscribed and closed to the world outside. The black earth breathes out the heavy scent of cloves mingled with the delicate fragrance of the “milk white seasons of longing,” the rhythmic tapping of the woodpecker reverberating in the air. The verdant garden is also the space of self-inflicted pain, death-thoughts and death simulation:
In the walled garden on hot mornings
I ditched ants from the low apple tree
on to my belly and thighs
lay still as they pinched and struck.
Afternoons I gazed into the well water
watching a balloon child
Nowhere-Girl her flesh striking
stone rings as she fell
face tucked into a metal bucket (101-109)

Torrid sense impressions leave their imprints on her body and mind. The
pangs of growth and femaleness torment her. Death visits her poetically in the
passion and death of Anna Karenina, and in reality, in the slow, painful death
of her grandfather. ‘Cradle’ and ‘grave’ merge into a unified experience: “I lay
in a grave I dug in the earth / I swayed in a cradle hung in a tree” (54-55). The
river of memory flows through her. Childhood is petrified into the twin images
of the “Walled Garden” and “Black River.” The “black river” of forgetfulness
could also signify ostracism suffered by the “no-where girl” in the protagonist.
The child in the speaker steps out of the garden gate that remains shut to the
woman in her:

Must I stoop
drink from those waters again
reach a walled garden, memory’s unquiet garden? (59-61)
The space of memory is unquiet, imbued with the dark hues of a forbidden act in grandfather’s enclosed library:

Who could I tell about the library?

………………………………………..

O books with seeing eyes!

I blacked it all the way (96, 99-100)

Her mother’s words of caution float into her consciousness--“The first thing a girl should learn is when to keep her silence … it made a black space in my ear, a savagery I could not yet decipher” (Fault Lines 191). Implied in the “Black River, Walled Garden” is the contradictory pull of searing memory and selective amnesia. What is most painful has to be stored in the attic of memory and immured in a purposeful act of forgetfulness. Burdened with the awareness of sexuality at an early age, the protagonist is initiated into the complex site of female sexuality. “I recall my childhood fears about what it might mean to be born into a female body” (Fault Lines 42).

Though poetic imagination culls images of childhood as “restive bits and pieces edged into place,” the poet wonders:

Who can cry back into a first world

a barefoot child on a mud forking path

fields gold with monsoon water,

haunt of the snail and dragon fly (“Gold Horizon” 92-95)

To the query, “what makes the narrative whole?” the answer is the acute consciousness of the present, of the woman in the child:
Beneath my cheek I feel
Her belly’s bowl
Thick with blood

The woman who waits for me (“Gold Horizon” 97-100)

Alexander uses the “durable” past as a useful space-time to reveal the complexity of the migrant experience. The present and the past coexist as a single space in memory as a strategy to cope with the multiple cultural translations and influences. The dissonances in human relationship lurk in an apparently idyllic physical space. Her poems reveal the chink in the grandmother-figure, the powerful female ancestor unveiling the hidden layers of anguish, despair and impotent rage. She considers the grandmother figure a tribute paid to her female ancestors and to their memory. The resonance of silence, and mute rage--“walls – a husband … given to her and a God so distant that His rage was the rage of her own father,” is released in her poems (Tharu 12). It is this intuitive knowledge of the ruptures in the lives of her grandmothers that draw Alexander so close to her poetry. The placid domesticity of her paternal grandmother is fractured by the mysterious depths of the garden well in which her face is reflected. The domestic image of the well, situated in the interiors of the garden becomes the redundant trope in her poetry in order to highlight the impending doom awaiting every woman who dares to scale the walls of societal values.

Hutcheon, clearly, connects nostalgia with irony in their twin evocations of the ‘affect’ and ‘agony.’ Irony is the merging of the said and the unsaid
while nostalgia is the coming together of the two different temporal moments, past and present. Alexander’s recalling her past, her family, community and nation is imbued with an ironic double vision “that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia’s affective power” (22). As Alexander herself states in another interview-- “… one should resist the museum mentality [of] putting the bits into ethnographic setting. When we tell our own postcolonial stories, we need to retrieve it all differently. I took the memory of those letters (“Grandmother’s Letters”) and turned it into a piece of writing” (Interview, Aysha Abraham 26).

Memory becomes the lifeline along which the dissociated individual could be pulled back to her real self, coming into being. The “ironising of nostalgia” (Hutcheon 24) may be one way the postmodern has of taking responsibility for such responses by creating a small part of the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past. Hutcheon points out the similarity between irony and nostalgia in their affective power, clarifying that “irony ‘happens’ for you … when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, … with a certain critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is … what you feel when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you, and … carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response … that makes for the power”(17). The snapshots of memory are treasured not for what they are but for what is hidden in them. They point to the complex site of identity. Where Alexander identifies the hidden and forgotten spaces in the multiple geographies of
Kerala, Khartoum and New York. Mathai traverses the silent and lonely path of imagined spaces, sometimes made tangible in a Tiruvalla space. Yet, the two poets unveil a humanistic geography in the way they relate to space through memory.