Chapter 3

The Poetics of Return

Think of the long trip home.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

……………………………………………………………………………

And here, or there … No. Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be? (“Questions of Travel,” Elizabeth-Bishop)

What does it mean to be deeply attached to place … s

where is home for us here, now in the twenty first century? Can language work to make a home, a shelter? These are questions that will never leave me (Meena Alexander, “Lyric Poem in a Time of Violence”).

Notions of home and away, location and dislocation, have come to play a vital role in contemporary literary and cultural criticism, especially in postcolonial writing. Elizabeth Bishop’s pungent line from her poem “Questions of Travel”-- “No. Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that maybe?”--cuts sharply through its literalness into the boundless world of rhetoric; and “wherever that may be” reflects the postmodern sensibility most precisely and powerfully. Bishop evokes the dissolving of home as a stable location from which the traveller departs and to which the traveler, somehow still the same, returns. “Home,” is a matter of “space” one inhabits in the shifting terrain of postcolonial life, and no longer a
stable entity in the seething flow of life. It marks a definite shift from the physical
“place” to the emotive “space,” and locating one’s originary space becomes a
process of self-awareness, which is necessary for building up one’s identity. It is
also a return to a past that is pieced and patched-up to fit into the vibrant presen.
This imaginative journey into the past posits the necessary poetic “re-turn” of
words that help to map new spaces, hitherto undiscovered. The question of
“home” and of location and re-location is of vital significance to women writers.
As an “outsider” in the patriarchal space, she is compelled to “locate” herself in a
space of her own, wrought out of words and silence, the gaps between the sounds
breaking the muteness of meaning. In this persistent displacement of meaning is
gleaned an exciting encounter with new perspectives of reality out of which the
postcolonial writer draws out her creative energy to “world” the “word.” She
“needs the distance to look, to let the rhythms come, to make the poem” (“Lyric
Poem …” 5).

To Meena Alexander, the question of home is bound with “a migrant
memory and the way that poetry … permits a dwelling at the edge of the world”
(“Poem out of Place …”1). It has also to do with the kind of shelter that poets can
make with words. Anna Sujatha Mathai writes about the poem “mysteriously
taking shape within,” whereby “one becomes the home” (Letter). Both the poets
affirm in their distinctive manner, the possibility of a return to the “self” and
“home,” routed in the unpredictable detours of words and in the labour of poetic
composition. Alexander names the creative space as the “zone of radical illiteracy,
the curious place beneath the hold of a given syntax, … a zone to which words do not attach, a realm where syntax flees” (“Poem out of Place …” 6). It is a zone that will recognise neither the moorings of place nor the sensuous densities of location.

Acutely word-conscious and theory-informed, Alexander writes a kind of poetry that seems to over-ride the rigid divisions between theory and creative writing. Her prose pieces replenish her poems with their critical punch and fervour. She has evolved a “poetics of return” out of her vast repertoire of experience as an immigrant poet and an academic. Her aesthetics springs from her intuitive grasp of the unpredictable and incalculable layers of creativity. The spacelessness and “fiery muteness” of turbulent longings elude the tangible world of words. In her powerful essays--“Poem out of Place-Zone of Radical Illiteracy,” “Lyric in Time of Violence,” The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity,” and the “Poetics of Dislocation,” Alexander probes into the whole gamut of creative writing with remarkable sensitivity and perspicacity. Her migrant sensitivity lends a sharpness and fragility to her poetic vision of homeland

“Poetics of Dislocation” is a meditative pause on the complex issues of “displacement,” meandering into its etymological labyrinth to fasten on the two meanings—“to put out of place,” and “to put out of proper position in relation to contiguous parts.” In fact, all her writing evolves from this creative enquiry into the inextricable bond between the writer and her home / homeland. This search becomes inevitable to Alexander, an immigrant academic ensconced in a place cut
away from her Tiruvalla. Places visit her imagination as a palimpsest of names, and as “images all, suspended in memory, yet bound to my sensual body” (8). The persistent slippage of a terra firma accounts for a fragmentation of poetic vision—the broken mirror whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. But the poet can tap a rich seam out of the fissures of comprehension. It is precisely the partial nature of the memories and their fragmentation that make them so evocative for the writer. Rushdie calls them “the shards of memory” of “greater resonance” whereby “the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (12). A spatial-temporal dislocation implies the existence of a location from which rupture has taken place. Quoting L. P. Heartley, Rushdie calls the past, “a foreign country [where] they do things differently there” (9).

To Alexander the “bits and pieces of temporality echoing in [her] inwardness,” are to be “redisposed in a poem” as a shining symbolic space (“Poetics of Dislocation” 8). The provisional nature of all truths and certainties, and the fault lines in comprehending the self and the world become an indispensable part of the human understanding. The broken mirror of poetic vision enables the poet to perceive things partially, yet definitely. She envisions a harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation where multiple places are joined together, lit by the desire to “re recuperate the past, [figure] forth the future” (9). Rushdie would call it “some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” and “create imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10).
According to Alexander, there arises an urgent need for the poet to think space in the new century marked by massive migrations of people, and ceaseless circulation of goods and knowledge ("Poetics of Dislocation" 9). To the woman poet, the task of reclaiming the past is more than the creation of "imaginary homelands" because she has to "think space through her blood and bones," and to "figure out how space allows [her] to be, permits language, encodes the poem" (9). Space also means an inner frame and an internal index of sense, "a blossoming of words, out of flesh" (9). Her inner world becomes a palimpsest of imagined landscapes and the dwelling of memory, without which she could not make her poems. Realizing the intimate bond between the "self" and "place," she allows her poetic imagination to flit over names of places, as "they are all unknown to us, all names ..." (Lyric Poem 12). The past, comprising her childhood, her grandparents, the garden and the trees, is re-formed into her intimate space/mindscape. To an immigrant writer who is physically alienated from her homeland, the past becomes her home, "albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 9) and her present, foreign.

Born of this pain and violence of dislocation is the "poetics of loss," as well as the emergence of a sensibility enriched by the simultaneity of geography. It involves the possibilities of living "here" in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination. Journeying back and forth in time, Alexander’s memoir Fault Lines epitomises a quest wherein the writer plants her self in her early days in Kerala, recounting events from her distant childhood. History, myth and memory interact
as she recreates strongly felt images of a childhood in Kerala. Out of this provisional negation of place, where words elude the grasp of poetic imagination, evolves the creative sap. The physical, cultural, and linguistic alienation from her homeland calls for an inordinate sensitivity to the use of English, a colonial language. Allied to this burden of colonial past is the social repercussion on woman writing. The linguistic struggle is a reflection of other struggles between the cultures within the writer and the social influences at work. It entails the translation of emotions, thoughts and the “self,” at the risk of creating ambiguity and of loss. Rushdie’s concept of translation as “bearing across” affirms the notion of gain more than the loss of meaning--“I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (6). The gain could be the new trajectory of meanings set forth in the gaps made in the creative process. Alexander perceives writing as translating “… or ferrying across, wordless, tangled thoughts and sensations into language …” (“The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity” 85).

Alexander distinguishes her linguistic activities in America into the daily social transactions made smooth by habit, and the extremely private act of writing a poem, made rough by the “hesitant nature of poetic speech” (“The Poem’s Second Life … 85). The “hesitant nature” of poetic language points to the impossibility to ‘word’ the ‘emotion’. The verbal inadequacy stems from the “gap, the cleft existing between wordless intimacy and functioning script” (84). The fault lines in her life, and the disjunctions between thought and script, are co-equal
in their creative power to reveal new possibilities of meaning in life and in her poetry. The corrosiveness of the gaps coerces a self-reflexivity in the process of writing and challenges the reader to enter the labyrinth of inter-textuality. She affirms the mnemonic powers of words: “Sometimes when I am writing, it is not just events in my life but other poems that enter into my memory … that evoke and trigger associations” (“Lyric Poem … 12). Memory interrupts the linear and conventional narratives in order to accommodate multiple voices and perspectives.

The creative act is complex, its depth unfathomed. In the shifting, multiple worlds of the postcolonial writer, the question of home is bound up with a migrant memory, for the “hold of a loved place cannot be taken for granted” (“Poem Out of Place” 1). She posits the possibility of making shelter with words and a dwelling in a poem. Alexander never fails to be intrigued and entranced by the tenuous gaps between thought and word, in the silence that fills with meaning. Her childhood fascination for the musty fragrance of her Tiruvalla garden, the sensuous hold of its red soil takes shape into a literary and a poetic concept. Digging deep into the marrow of the soil, and inhaling its rich fragrance becomes a highly sensuous act that is also concrete, tangible and vital. In her memoir, she writes about how she used to burrow her face deep into the wet soil of her Tiruvella garden, as a gesture of parting with her home, her beloved “Illya” and childhood. “Never allowed to be of one place,” this farewell act carries the deep flavour of nostalgia, desire and anguish. Fissures and fault lines in life and writing are thus effortlessly intertwined.
“Making of a house” becomes an integral part of her experience as a creative writer, and she recalls how she had to move from Khartoum to Kerala every year, “the time of each year … measured by the passage from one to the other” (Tharu 11). She realises that geography has only minimal relevance in the building of habitation. A poem is also a tale, a peculiar kind of narrative that grows into a space. In every storytelling is embedded the image of home, and the desire for personal space. The narrative of home, implicit in the poem, blends the “actual” with the “desire,” the present with the past. Walter Benjamin writes of the death of storytelling in the present day, as a part of the inability in us to communicate our deep thoughts and feelings. Walter Benjamin’s storyteller evolves from the “resident tiller of the soil,” bursting with local tales and tradition, and the “trading sea man,” full of the lore of far away places he has been to (81).

“IT is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (83). The migrant sensibility has become an indispensable part of the postcolonial generation, irrespective of whether the writer is “placed” in or outside the country. The poet builds her space out of the lumber of her thoughts and emotions, and in the process, creates a web of stories that grow out of the urge to relate to the self and the world outside.

Anna Sujatha Mathai speaks of the inextricable bond between pain and poetry in an interview thus: “I knew I was a creative person but I had no friends. There was no one I could talk to. So I started--because of the unbearable pain--I
started to write a few lines (Kuortti 199). The poem validated her existence as a human being and helped her to re-invent a new world for herself. Writing enabled her to ease out her intense loneliness and disjunctions caused by her marital breakdown. “We moved from house to house and I had no place. So it [poem] was the only thing that was accessible to me” (202). The intense pressure of suppressed pain makes a poet like Mathai reach out for some light and to “give a little space to a vision of justice, beauty, truth” (209). The internal landscapes, and the overwhelming power of hidden knowledge, can be made visible, and voiced in a subversive way in the little space of a lyric. To Alexander, the lyric is a form that is intensely alive, yet fragile. It is a place of extreme silence that permits a crystallization of the realities, and offers a therapeutic release from the stultifying force of raw emotions to both the poet and the reader.

Both the poets delve into the intricate and sometimes evasive patterns of speech in order to “sort out a form that makes sense to others” (Tharu 14). The resonance of an inner life breaks through the gaps of silence in their poem, enhancing the vividness of life. Alexander’s poems are a taut string on which she attempts to play the “migrant music.” Mathai’s poetry is a mellifluous flow of highly personalised moments, indented with graceful ease and felicity. Life-moments are scrutinised and neatly sketched with the keen observation and detached concentration of an artist. The carefully arranged imagery oscillates towards the “true, sincere, unitary self lodged within the center of the lyric derived from the Romantic tradition” (Kinnahan 6). The private or the interior realm is
preserved while exploring its reconfiguration within the contemporary socio-political changes. Subjectivity and linguistic structure interact so that the “i” is placed within a structure that is variable and contextual. In an interview, Alexander speaks about the image of stone-roots predominating in her fourth collection of poems *Stone Roots* (1980). She was struck by the way in which trees became fossils, changing into stones, “and the manner in which these different elements work into each other through time” (Govinda samy 100). The “garden” becomes the interstice between the past and the present, and the imaginative site for creative writing.

The space of a poem is the place of negotiating the personal with the social, and the self with the “other.” Alexander calls it “a particular perceptual whole given to us in the poem. It may be present, part of the here and now … phantasised, recollected and projected” (“The Poetic Self” 37). The loss of geographical landmarks, of intimate relationships, engenders a change in the individual sensibility of the poet. The poem becomes a montage of the shifting terrain of emotions translated into certain fixed markers. Some of Alexander’s early poems are anchored in the garden space where she comes to terms with her past that often overwhelms and oversteps the boundaries of thoughts and words. It is a private space wherein is enacted the complex and intricate workings of relationships. It offers solitude, peace and the necessary distance to weave out a tapestry of tales that reveal their seams. The overarching meditative calmness and stillness is therapeutic, and the garden becomes the poetic site not only to reclaim
lost loves, kinship, but also to re-enact the pain and hurt of life with a keener insight and understanding. The lived reality merges into the poetic realm of deep understanding. The space sets forth a trajectory of contexts that can be re-figured into four poems that were written between 1980 and 2002.

In the poem “Sometimes I’m in a Garden” (Stone Roots 1980), the garden is present in its absence to become the personal space for the speaker to negotiate with the sharp reality of the present. The opening line, “Sometimes I’m in a garden by a tree” implies the presence of another perceptual space that breaks into the vision with amazing alacrity--“a single room in which I am alone” (7). The embodied space flits from the verdant garden to the Spartan simplicity of a single room which offers “the crudest discipline of space” (6). This spatial movement is concomitant with a temporal shift from the past to the present, the imagined and the real. The spatio-temporal configuration is enhanced by a series of contrasts implied in “but then I struggle to a waking place / where I must die a little / tell no tales”. Words are spaced and paced on the bark of the garden tree and the concrete walls of the city room as “burning alphabets” “articulate with flame.” The evocative power of the “alphabets” to word and design her personal space is yet to be realised in the “featureless” garden of inner space. The sheer physicality of the experience is summed up in her willingness to appropriate the mindscape rather paradoxically, in the confines of her room. “There I pace gesticulate / and wait” traces the motion, gesture and stillness that follow the flash of the contrastive visuals of the precise angularities of the single room and the misty featurelessness
of the garden. The room space seems to be permeated with an emotive atmosphere that has its source elsewhere [garden]. The inwardness of poetic imagination is perceptually dependent on the primary space of the “featureless” garden:

It’s slowly that I’ll find the gate
Back to that featureless garden,
Slowly taste the blade
Scraping my heart’s blood
Into poetry. (13-17)

The permeation here would have been much weaker had it not been for the contrastive settings that eventually affirm the “zone of radical illiteracy” that eludes the hold of syntax and pulsate with the subterranean force of the “heart’s blood” pumping into the dry veins of rhetoric. The binariness persists in “but I struggle to a waking place / where I must die a little / tell no tales” (3-5). Tales that infiltrate into the linear structure of narration have to be veiled and transformed as memory. The indistinctness of the garden signifies not only the spatial-temporal distance but also the unformed, unsaid thoughts and emotions of memory and nostalgia that will gradually attain features in her later poems. The iambic metre and the regular rhythm help to simulate the beat of the heart pumping the lifeblood of poetic imagination.

The garden becomes a determinate landscape upheld by the human presence of the grandmother figure in another poem “Her Garden” (House of a
Thousand Doors) An objective panning of the space imbues it with a harsh and somber tone:

The mountains crackle
they are full of flint,
the cicada bristles
it does not sing
in grandmother’s garden
as mulberry trees
gnarled like her hands
start their long slide
seaward (1-9)

The grandmother, seated under the mulberry tree, awaits the magic hour sheathed in solitude, when “trees clamber / out of bark”. Her presence is of vital importance to the meditative atmosphere etched out of the pages of memory and imagination, for “I remember her / She died so long / before my birth” (40-42). The garden space both enacts and envelops the imagined reality: “I like to think / she died in the day / her face set heavenward / exacting little attention” (23-26). The first nine lines sketch the ambience of the garden space in a predominantly aural imagery, purged of all vestige of tenderness. The tautened landscape “crackle” and “bristle;” it is devoid of the lush green of mountain trees, and the mellifluous birdsong bathing the garden. The mulberry trees are gnarled; their spondaic “long slide seawards” capture the heaviness of decrepitude. Yet the actual moment of death is
lightened by the quick movement of the short lines and the softness of the sibilant:

“so losing body / she crept into her own soul / and she slept” (33-35). The reiterative force of the frictionless continuants, the smoothness of the sibilants, and the resonance of the vowel sounds lend a brisk movement to the poem:

In that solitary hour

when trees clamber

out of bark

and swim

to a rock that is black

and bare

and like nothing

else in this homeland.(15-22)

Grandmother’s death is poignantly evoked in the subtle imagery of the sunset; the soft and seamless transition from life to death is as effortless and resplendent as the sunrays merging into the blue depths of the waters.

from the sun

once risen it sets

in finicky chaos

in a sky so flat and blue

that light mirrors itself

as if on water, soundlessly:

so losing body
she crept into her own soul

and she slept. (27-35)

The three lines--“I imagine her sitting” (10), “I like to think” (24), and “I remember her” (41)--control the movement of the words and carry the burden of the poem. Brief and effective, they bind the garden and the grandmother figure with the “I,” implying the subjective sway over the making the poem. They also highlight the blend of poetic imagination with the searing yearning for an ancestral mooring in a grandmother figure who had “died so long / before my birth.” The embodied garden space ignites the memory of a kinship she cherishes as a precious relic, as the “zone of radical illiteracy,” the reservoir of her creativity. Alexander affirms the inextricable bond between memory and creativity in an interview: “When you write down something, it is a way of saying, I am remembering” (Tharu 71). The maternal grandmother, whom she admired with a great yearning, lives in her consciousness as “a rare fragrance,” a heroic character in the family annals, and an anchor in the turbulent seas of postcolonial times. Her death (“before my birth”) reinforces the relationship in a manner that “we are one, entirely / as a sky / disowned by sun and star” (43-45). It is a re-enactment of the moment of death, drawing to a close the circle of life and death. The poem draws out a space, which becomes the inner index of sense, of self-awareness. The single line “I remember her” goes to establish not only a relationship with the past and self, but validates the “fiery muteness” of words.
In Alexander’s long poem play Night Scene, The Garden: (In her mother’s voice) the speaker is positioned close to her mother in a space that is directly perceptual in nature. It sets forth a trajectory of the history of the ancestral house and its inmates. The speaker interrogates her position and identity in this space in the night to her companion, her mother, whose words flow into her depth of understanding: “Child, my oldest child / … / Come over here” (21, 24). The opening section “Night Birds” sets into motion the steady rhythm of the narrative of the ancestral house, the mother’s voice merging gently with that of the narrator’s. The “featureless” garden of “Sometimes I’m in a Garden” is transformed into a vibrant presence, the poeteye tracing its contours with the precise observation of a camera eye. The scene is set in the cool dark of the garden; the mood is sombre, and signs of decay abound—no fragrance of flowers but the heavy scent of the pala, no nightingale song but the ominous hoot of the owl, the raucous cries of the mynah, the crows and the bats with poky wings. They are the “night birds” that give voice to the dark space of the garden. Appropriate epithets help underline the mood of mother’s monologue, the ancient trees and the nocturnal birds silhouetting the poetic space.

Night birds:

Owl, hungry myna in the jackfruit tree
a loudmouthed crow or two,
blue black koil and crimson humming bird
a cluster of cinnamon-tongued bats
in the jamun bush
their poky wings sizzling in moonlight. (1-7)

The adroit weaving of the aural and the visual sets the tone to the tale of an ancient house. Even the trees seem to move, their animated forms overpowering the garden space. The stump of the ancient pala, “chopped for matchwood,” is still raw and alive, oozing out its sap. It offers the mother, a place to rest her tired feet. “I know she needs to rest, / Bony feet propped against a trunk” (36-37).

The poet-narrator positions herself in the complex web of human relationships, to the mother (the main narrator), the ancestral house, and to the ancestors by an evocative use of time and space. The past is voiced in the mother’s tremulous narration of the history of the house that undulates its glory, desecration and the gradual decline:

as with the weight of waters
when a rock is loosed
and the stream entire
pulses through shale and silt,
shivering the roots of tiger lily
and orchid, the swollen tubers
of the musk flower. (“Keeping House” 239-245)

The garden spatialises Time in the sudden swerves and twists of memories and dreams that pulsate in the rawness of the present. Proximity and distance mark the structural patterning throughout the poem.
In darkness still,
I touch my mother’s face
overhead stars race,
flash their rare markings
Vanish into clouds
whose blue-black milk
seeps out in air

A fragrance most maternal (“Night Scene” 1-8).

The sheer immediacy of experience is crafted in words that easily move from the very close to the most distant, couched in tactile and kinetic imagery. The poet-narrator identifies herself with the dreams and hopes of the mother in the larger canvas of the socio-political reverberations of the pre-independence and post-independence times of the Kerala space. The pristine purity of the Sabermati ambience is evoked in--“father and mother and their group of friends / all from that ashram by the Sabermati, / after their ablutions, after the sung prayers, of / set spinning wheels in the sandy yard / and worked without cease” (18-22). The calendar--like visual--“The full moon floats behind”--that heighten the romantic ardor of Gandhian idealism, break into the bloody bits of violence--“muslim butcher’s carcasses / spin in the night wind”.

The garden is a world of its own. Its denizens range from the budding jacaranda tree, casuarinas, and the guava tree to the thorn bush--“a wild, avid thing / no one planted.”--that harbors beetles, mice, earthworms, bats and ticks. The
trees blooming and fruiting with those cut and splintered crowd the garden. The mother and daughter, “half-blinded by the milky night / that spills from the moon,” are drawn into the past that is interpolated by the present. The garden space enfolds the happy and bitter memories, and the hopes and aspirations of the two women “searching for a lost parallel.” The space also encapsulates the vast dimensions of life and death: “Will it be hot like this, / on the other side of the paradise?” (“Black Water” 16-17) The postcolonial preoccupation of “placelessness,” and alienation vivify a past that refuse to merge with the present. The ancestral house that reverberate with tales of glory, passion and violence, in the magic of the moonlit night dissolve into “a house laid waste” in the lucid daylight. The present, so intensely physical and vivid, is vested with a value that overlaps the vicissitudes of life in order to word the anguish of relocation:

Come, ferocious alphabets of flesh

Splinter and raze my page

That out of the dumb

And bleeding part of me

I may claim my heritage ("Night Scene" 176-180)

Each and every image, be it a bird, a seed, or a saree, attains a peculiar lucidity in the stillness of the present. The imagery culminates in a vision of the future filled with the “whispers of children born into this garden.” The seeds, running riot, and bursting from the old stalk are borne on the wings of the wind to bury them in the
soft earth. The “hot intelligence of leaf / and stalk” empower the poet’s vision of life.

The garden appropriates the extreme silence and sharp fragility of a lyric in her later poem, “Red Parapet” (Illiterate Heart). The garden becomes the space of penitence as the speaker pours out her deep understanding of her ailing sister into her words, that pulsate with tenderness. The voices of mother and the daughter in Night Scene, The Garden linger in the narrative voice. The loneliness and hurt of the sister is being touched upon and eased tenderly. The garden in its sequestered ease spatialised the utter loneliness of the sister. The poet foregrounds the space in the opening line: “Sister, you live in a very private place / an extremity of sense” (1-2). The sick sister is gently persuaded to enter the activity of the garden world; the fragrance of the jasmine flowers lightens the heaviness of the mind, and the stealthy movement of the rain-wet rat trigger the simple act of picking up a stone. The paradigmatic motion of the verbs accentuate the overpowering presence of silence, and the speaker move effortlessly from mere observation (“watch”) to a physical bonding (“touching”) and to a sublime moment (“pray”). Hoping for “a great unhappening of things” and praying for the abatement of misery, the speaker re-visits a childhood incident of witnessing a cobra leaping up the “red parapet.” The act contains the message of blessing: “the whole darting heat of him, / the blessing” (30-31). The garden space is filled with the “bruised fragrance” of pain and hope. The poem offers itself as space and words to indent the magnificent emotion of penitence: “I need to write as if
penitence were / the province of poems” (14-15). The undercurrent of guilt and of unfulfilled duties, and the desire to undo the omission enervate the poem into a “poetics of return.”

Alexander’s choice of the garden as her “primary space” to interrogate the vicissitudes of human life and its fine threads of relationship is deeply entrenched in a “poetics of return.” She identifies her creative zone in the inextricable bonding with her Tiruvalla soil and home--“As a small child, how did I attach myself to place? I shut my eyes and see a child in a tree” (“Poetics of Dislocation” 3). She alludes to that tree of childhood in her poem “Black River, Walled Garden” (Iffiterate Heart):

I swayed in a cradle hung in a tree
And all of the visible world-
Walled garden

Black river- flowed in me. (152-155)

The garden, with the trees and the well, is not only a physical reality, but also a reconstructed truth within the shifting boundaries of a complicated daily life. Connecting space with identity, she confronts her present American reality and space through a re-appropriation of the silent spaces within her in the poetic space. This entails a reconstruction of her lived reality into a second life breathed into the words of her “poems that sought out a dumb, silenced part of myself” (“The Poem’s Second Life…” 79). In the poem “Black River, Walled Garden,”
Alexander bids farewell to the garden space (“walled garden”) of her childhood: “The garden of my childhood flees from me” (1). It points to a space that lies within and without the ‘wall’ and the ‘gate’ of “a simple shining geography” that has lost its relevance and of the perpetually shifting American space that contests boundaries. The introspective question—“Now I have no home in the old way. Is America this terrible multiplicity at the heart?” (Fault Lines 201) is answered most evocatively in the following lines of the poem “Black River, Walled Garden”:

The leaves of the rose tree
Splinter and flee, the garden
of my childhood returns to the sea
The piecework of sanity,
the fretwork of desire,
restive bits and pieces edged into place,
Satisfies so little. (177-183)

The garden that had been the locale in her persistent negotiation with her past and ‘self’ dissolves into shards of imagination. Renamed as “memory’s unquiet place,” the childhood place of dreams, anxiety and exhilaration vanish at this moment of realisation and forgiveness:

Shall I turn, make peace,
peace to the first gate
she will never enter again. (174-176)
The garden, a repository of both happy and painful memories, is exorcised out of her consciousness. She has to encounter the pulsating life of America by splintering the complacency of wholeness and innocence. "After all it is in the very nature of a present time to invade, to confront, to seize" (Fault Lines 202). She ponders over the social and political dimensions of poetry in a world that is split by ethnicity and violence. The surging lava of violence and racism is to be countered by the poetic response and struggle for social justice and human dignity. The value accorded to the garden space is negative, a denial of the very reality of this space justifies her statement on the process of creative writing as “both an evasion and a discovery,” as “procedure of loss; the notion of composition as structured by loss” (“The Poem’s Second life…” 83).

Anna Sujatha Mathai’s poems flow unfettered by theoretical reasoning and philosophical ruminations. She renders her total ‘self’ and vision of life in her poems that amaze the reader by their stark simplicity and lyrical beauty. Acutely aware of the agony and ecstasy of creative writing, she cajoles her words to gather grace and wholeness “inch by inch” in her poem “Goddess without Arms” (Life-On My Side of the Street…). It is a poem on the making of a poem, a meta poem that hinges on the binary opposites of the ideal and the real. The opening line--“My poetry didn’t come full-blown” implies the necessity of ruptures in the making of a work of beauty and grace. The slow process of gaining a form is fraught with moments of doubt and anxiety. The poem needs time to evolve into a full-fledged piece of art, which is both graceful and complete. The poet cannot
aspire for the perfect beauty of a goddess, (Venus or Saraswathi), as she is painfully aware of the inadequacy of language to ‘word’ the world. The dire necessity to re-invent a new world for herself must have made the poet in her, dwell on the making of a poem. The regal splendor of Venus and the divine grace of Saraswati are visually and specifically identified:

It was never a goddess
Rising from the waters

……………………………..
A Canova Venus or Saraswati,
Resplendent in her plenitude,
Certain of her sovereignty    (4-5, 9-11)

Her life- experience has taught her otherwise:

No. It grew painfully,
Armless
Limbless
Somewhat blind.        (13-16)

A poem is born of pain, desire and ecstasy; it is the flower of muteness and silence.

To Mathai, “a poem is a perfect coming together of words, rhythm, and meaning, creating a pattern which moves and illuminates” (Letter). Poems come alive as imperfections, revealing their seams. Alexander refers to the mechanics of writing in a similar vein: “I needed my stitching like my writing to show its seams,
its baste lines, its labor” (Fault Lines 125). Out of the attic of random thoughts, painful memories and tales, the poem evolves into a form that speaks to the reader; the meaning ferried across the fissures to the heart and mind of the reader. The poem “One-Armed Goddess” generates questions on the formal attributes of poetry, the concept of perfection, and the role of the reader. The ardour of love and the power of knowledge coalesce in the vision of Venus and Saraswati emerging from a shell and a lotus. The poem grows into perfection in the second life bestowed it by the reader. It is a perfection that is ever dissolving and evolving into new shapes and meaning, thereby debunking the static value of perfection.

The experiential resonance of a poem strikes a chord of recognition and understanding in the reader. The poet as ‘seer’ or ‘reader’ is invested with almost divine properties of foretelling the future, and creating a world of poetic imagination. The poet becomes the bard, blessed with a powerful vision of life, and the lyric, an embodiment of perfection. The poem attains grace and beauty through the thorny path of pain and doubt. The deep undercurrent of sorrow and humanity help resuscitate the pallid words into an eloquent song of power and beauty.

In another poem, “The Pattern,” Mathai muses on the possibility of the poem mysteriously taking shape within her. Poetry is her inner voice; it is the tremendous source of energy and rhythm, the external manifestation of her inner harmony. The poem is a tapestry woven in many colours; she had intended it to be one of joy, but it eventually turned out to be one of sorrow. The ‘original design’
surrenders to the whimsical weaving of a pattern that surpasses all understanding.
A mysterious power propels the colours to shape them into a tapestry that defies all preconceived notions of poetry. “The Pattern” is a poetic statement of the kaleidoscopic vision of life, revealing the hidden layers of meaning within a text that overstates its intention.

I’ve woven a tapestry of sorrow
in many colours
It was meant to be a
pattern of joy. (1-4)

The centre is unfixed, its authenticity interrogated by the peripheral strands of words as “The design began to shape itself” (13). The poem keeps changing its hues and pattern, the poet being its weaver, not its designer. The colours and threads decide the pattern and they “weave themselves as they will.” The fixity and arbitrariness of rules must accede to an easy flexibility and growth that can accommodate new ideas. There exists a rift between the tapestry woven in the mind of the poet and the new patterns evolving out of the multivalent meaning of words. The poem, described as the ‘tapestry,’ ‘design,’ and a “carpet for people to tread,” becomes the site of a revolt wherein “colours walked out on their own, / The design began to shape itself, / It refused to be commanded”. (12-14) The act of poetic interpretation and the centrality of the ‘self’ are questioned. The poem evolves into newer dimensions and meanings in the possibilities of multiple readings of the text, its textured presence enhancing both its substantiality and
elusiveness. The ‘muse’ having entered the poet’s writing, starts leaving its stamp on the ‘design,’ and almost seems to inhabit the poet’s body, using her for its own purpose. This posits a kind of ‘possession,’ of magical spell.

A similar experience washes over the protagonist in Alexander’s poem “Muse” (Illiterate Heart). But it is embroiled in the postcolonial debate over the use of English in creative writing. The ‘muse’ or poetry that visits her in the guise of the colonial language--“A pencil box in hand-girl, book, tree- / those were the words you gave me (7-8), gets transformed into a “bird shedding gold feathers, / each one a quill scraping my tympanum” (25-27). The speaker experiences “pure transport” when the ‘muse’ murmurs in her ear, “write in the light / of all the languages / you know the earth contains” (32-34). Alexander reiterates the postcolonial theme of linguistic alienation from her mother tongue, Malayalam. The anxiety of writing in a language that is cut off from the vital speech of the people prompts her to designate English as “the dying letters of an oppressive bureaucracy and its concomitant educational machine which, through the manifold strictures of repetition, seek to control the very pith of utterance” (“Exiled By a Dead Script” 1). She intertwines the English words—‘girl,’ ‘book,’ and ‘tree’--with the Malayalam--‘penne,’ ‘pusthakam,’ and ‘maram,’ to highlight the linguistic tension underlying her creativity. The linguistic grafting carries the overtones of an inordinate sensitivity to a natural estrangement from the language of her ancestors. The fact that English is a language of social status and visibility cannot be ignored, and poets like Alexander have only stood to gain acceptance in
a wider and global sense, as an Asian-American poet in New York. Yet, the
insatiable urge to reclaim the primary space of kinship and language relegated to
the Tiruvalla childhood mature into a deeper vision of life in all its vivid
complexity. More than a metaphor, the inherent affinity with Malayalam, deepens
into a ‘poetics of return.’

To Mathai, this linguistic tussle is subsumed by the inner urge to voice
“the hidden inner voice” of poetry. In her poem “Fugue” (We The Unreconciled),
Mathai underscores the dilemma of ‘wording’ the erratic rhythm of life. She
compares life to a ‘fugue,’ a musical composition in which a melody (the subject)
is taken up by the successive ‘voices.’ The infinite variety of life, with its
unpredictable detours cannot be contained within the constricting medium of a
poem. The speaker is overwhelmed by the desultory flow of events that cannot be
named nor contained between the “Coming Going. Being. Doing / the Curtains.
Flowers. Vases. Children” (23-24). Words tend to displace the significance of life,
for “Labels do not ease a tragic destiny” (3), and the speaker refuses to label and
categorise all human activity as a series of actions and a mass of objects. She
wonders--“Can we avoid it / Though we aspire / Towards the furthest star?” (26-
28) Poetry can make visible the hidden layers of meaning by enfolding within
itself the rhythm, texture and colour of life in a subversive manner. The reiterative
blandness of the “Coming. Going. Being. Doing.” carry the symphony of life that
flows into the marrow of words.
Mathai’s poems move towards the ‘self,’ her personal longings and pain. Padded with words of contrastive shades of meaning, her poems tend to surprise both the reader and the poet with their sudden, smooth swerves into the stark reality of subjectivity. Her poems are “the flowers grown in the deepest space of / my fertile imagination” (“Casual Encounters” 10-11). Her poems enact a journey into the inner self, in search of the divine strains of womanhood. The “Poem” (The Attic of Night) is a succinct testimony of a phase in a woman’s life.

Women and fading roses
Are often compared
But this fading that I feel
Is tight-budded, anguish touched
And the relief of falling petals
Seems far away.

The six-lined poem conveys with a remarkable felicity of diction and intensity of emotion a peculiar phase in woman’s life when she feels inwardly the fading of youth and joy. Decrepitude, accompanied by loss of beauty is often compared to fading roses. But the poet contests this ostensible fact by attributing the slow death of youth in her not to old age, but to a pent-up anguish without the relief of “falling petals.” The literalness of “women and fading roses” is punctured by the “tight-budded” anguish that negates the possibility of the relief of gradual ageing. The language is “tight-budded,” tautened by the inexorable anguish of a premature wilting of buoyant youth. Within the six lines is embedded the agony of waiting
for the final moment of relief. The poem becomes the space to enact the stultifying emotion that refuses to dissolve into nothingness. The poem, remarkable for its superb control of rhythm, imagery and diction, carries the resonance of the “tight-budded anguish” into the heart and mind of the reader.

Mathai’s poems, one after another, delve into the ‘attic of self’ to unravel the paradox of life. The poem “The Shell” (Life On My Side …) is a masterpiece of quiet beauty and philosophic import. The seashell is a riddle of an inside-outside interface that questions the structural binariness and moral completeness of the shell. The seashell, devoid of all meaning and significance in its evolving stage, is transformed into a perfect artefact that teases human mind out of its complacency. The inwardness of the shell-life, so self-contained in its perfection becomes the poem, and the lyric. The diminutive grace and harmony of the lyric form contains the secret of life.

No one questions the life of

A shell

its meaning, purpose, or morality,

till it’s done, and then

there’s the complete life, (1-5)

Emotion is crystallised through images of a lyric, freeing the poet from the burden of experience. The lyric becomes the place of extreme silence, protected from the world. The imagery is enriched by a synaesthetic blend of the tactile, visual and the aural:
the spiral, the twist, the sheen
and the deep, dark bends
where pain has burnt
a purple-green smoky flame (6-9)

The shell, though shaped by the lashing waves and the white brittle sand, remains outside the ambience of the sea as a perfect piece of art. Nature and art blend to imbue it with a life of its own. The shell holds the mystery of ocean life, with infinity grasped in its finite form:

the surface vibrant with
the mystic life within,
hints of the sea’s boom,
mysterious under places,
wild cries of birds
and the surf breaking
on remote shores, caught in the shell’s crevices.

breaking through, breaking through (10-17)

The poet withdraws into the shell of her being, “exploring the world, /resting within itself” (21-22). This ardent yearning for aloneness persists in all her poems, highlighting a dialectic link between the inside-outside worlds, and the mind and the reality outside. The shell also contains the tale of pain, isolation and sacrifice.

The evolved shape of the shell achieves a quiet mastery over the tangible sea-
world, above and below. The shell’s discrete identity is carved out in its mute and immobile form in the poem itself.

Family connotes not only relationships but also a common value-system and language that is moulded by the socio-religious institutions. The basic unit of society is rift with contradictory values to the poet of contemporary times.

Mathai’s “Families” (The Attic of Night), “Mother’s Stories” and “Tight Rope Walkers” (Life On My Side …) are evocative poems on the tenuous bond between the individual and family, the present and the past. A palpable return to the roots is vested in the warp and woof of familial bonds that are subject to the changing values of contemporary times. The family, as the cornerstone of society and the basic unit of social organization, may become a millstone and a supportive system to the individual who carries the blueprint of her family with her for the rest of her life:

It seemed to me that families

held each other’s dreams down,

That families blocked the stairs

that led outwards. (“Families” 4-7)

“It seemed to me,” reiterates the “outward look” of another poem ”My World” (The Attic of Night), and hints at the possibility of arriving at the point of realisation--a space-time that has covered vast experience. The family is an inflexible, restricting system of relationship in which growth is blocked and dreams are strangled .It is also a network of secret bonds that lead to immensity of
experience, freedom and comradeship. Family signifies both an inexorable prison-
house and a solace to aching loneliness. Sociologists refer to the “interiorization of
family interaction patterns” which prevents the freedom of self and development
of the individual in her own right. Self-awareness is smothered under the blanket
of the family (Parsons.T 330). The first twelve lines of “Families” focus on the
stultifying force of kinship and its dull routine in the existence of the individual.
The monotonous rhythm of work carry the burden of familial obligations and
obedience.

The search for the lost moorings begins on an entirely different note, in
opposition to the binding power of family. “But now, alone, and without family”
(15), catapults the narrator into a realisation, couched in a homily:

Families are boats where

strangers cling together,

Saying, ‘you are familiar, so familiar,

I’ve known you all my life.

Hold tight. Don’t let us drown.’ (24-28)

The narrow space of a nuclear family widens into the vast space of
universal bond. Experience is treasured as the only authentic inheritance that is
bequeathed by the older generation. Experience, passed on from mouth to mouth,
is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. “Mother’s Stories” and
“Tight Rope Walkers” are poignant testimony to the deterioration of
communicable experience in the new generations. The ‘visibility’ of the
consumerist generation marks the ‘invisibility’ of the “lost generation,” the “tight rope walkers” and story weavers:

Parents living with children

soon become invisible,

cut off, doors to the past

which are never opened, -

uncomfortable reminders of mortality,

the pain of old age to come       (“Tight Rope Walkers” 1-6)

The crude reality of loneliness of the aged haunts the lines. ‘Grandpa’ and ‘Grandma’ of the fossilized generation open the doors to the magic beauty of the past, woven with the vibrant colours of dreams and exploits. “It’s the pain of magic / and the magic of pain / woven with arthritis and failed dreams” (14 – 16).

The extraordinary road to the past, fraught with challenges and risk, is lit up by the torch of stories and legends of the unknown. Daunted by the strange and extra ordinary:

So, the young and ruthless,

shut out the magic-makers,

shun the challenge,

cut all those links with the irrelevant past,

slams the doors on the extraordinary,-

and settle, with relief,

into the known, - into their Today! (26-32).
In “Mother’s Stories (thematically a companion poem to “Tight Rope Walkers”), the poet listens with discerning sensitivity to the voice of a lost generation that fades into the cold silence and indifference of contemporary life and society. The rope tautened between the past and the present is to the “weavers of tales,” the only tangible proof of their identity. The stories are the “codes, life-capsules, from past generations,” quickened with memories:

I could dip into,

a granary, a storehouse, rich with stories,

of people and places,

relationships, hates

loves, and jealousies,

pettiness and forgiveness      (7 – 12)

The stories reveal the continuity of life that could fast dissolve into forgetfulness if denied “some space,” and “some light.” Mother’s stories generate new versions and tales in the poetic imagination:

I’ll grope for stories all alone

or perhaps some of them will wake up

and talk to me.              (22–24)

The stories evolve into the compact design of the poetry with reality glimmering through their fabric:

They’ll say

give us some space,
some light,

hang us out to dry

and see how life will glimmer through

our worn and thread bare fibers (27-32).

Alexander uses a similar metaphor in “Lyric Poem in a Time of Violence” to describe the process of writing—“I think for me writing a poem is like rinsing the language [and] presenting a poem in public space is like hanging it out in the sun light …” (“Lyric Poem in a Time of Violence” 10). Story telling is an art, according to Walter Benjamin, “for storytelling is always the art of repeating the stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained” (91). The rhythm of storytelling enters the listener imperceptibly to endow her with the gift of retelling them. “This is how today it is becoming unraveled … after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship” (91). Lidia Curti associates the narrative function with the feminine, commencing with Sheherzade, who as a persuasive storyteller, provided the means for the continuation of life (“Female Stories …” 87).

Alexander describes her memoir Fault Lines as a ‘katha,’ in which “a story of my life,” along with other lives before her, weave into a net without which she would drop ceaselessly (5). The stories reeled out to her, a child of four, in a deep sing song voice of her maternal grand father ‘Ilya,’ flowed smoothly from the Bible, Mahabharatha and stories of Buddha to his own tales of a ‘special’ girl, Susikali. The avid listener identified her self with the fast moving wonder-girl
Susikali, and complemented Ilya’s tale with her own fabricated one—“I made up the ending about her. … She was I. I was she, Susikali, exact replica of my four-and-a-half year old self granted the boon of magical powers” (32). The childhood fascination for stories persisted, as she listened to her husband, David Lelyveld, a historian, weaving stories that “wrapped [her] in his voice and held [her] there” (147). She was fascinated “by the sense that through narrative he was making up his life, his autobiography” (147). The memory of her “small improvised marriage in the Hyderabad courthouse, no family present,” to David Lelyveld is juxtaposed with the grand narrative of her mother’s marriage. Alexander and her sisters bask in the warmth of their amma’s marriage narrative—“I longed for her voice to go on and bathe me in the downpour of detail …” (217). Curved round their mother on the old verandah they were the very listeners she would have wanted (219). It marks a ‘return’ to her mothers world on the wings of poetic imagination—“The web of our mothers words warmed us …” (219). The stories pulsate with the life-blood of a particular clime, soil, and people, to which the listeners easily identified themselves and found therein their anchor. The identification is intense, as it sets aflame the deep shades of contrast in the fabric of narration. The stark reality of the present, “child, my oldest child, / your sisters still unmarried / and you so far away” (Night-Scene, the Garden), and juxtaposed with the ceremonial grandeur of a past—“the gold slippers were part of an impossible dream” (Fault Lines 219), afflict both the teller and the listeners imperceptibly. The concrete nature of
memory is transformed into a universalising metaphor of reciprocity, of sympathetic understanding, and a principle of continuity.

Yi-Fu Tuan, the humanist geographer, describes home / homeland as the centre of the world for the individual, the focal point of a cosmic structure, imbued with supreme value for the individual: “With the destruction of one ‘centre of the world,’ another can be built next to it, or in another location altogether, and it in turn becomes the ‘center of the world’ by the human recuperative powers (149). The ideas ‘place’ and ‘space’ require each other for definition, for according to Tuan, “place is security, space is freedom,” being the basic components of the lived world. Space allows movement, while place restricts mobility with a ‘pause,’ and each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into ‘place’ (3). Bachelard Gaston in his *the poetics of space* relates a geographer’s factual description of dwelling to a phenomenologist’s mode of seizing upon the “germ of the essential.” ‘Space’ comes to bear the essence of the notion of home as ‘inhabited space’ and the dwelling as the “original shell.” In Gaston’s ‘space of the house,’ the movement of time is annihilated, for “memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are”(9). Time stands still and the lived space palpitates with a presence of memories we recognize as our very own. “Through poems, … more than recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house”(6). Thus, the poem becomes the metaphor to transcend the specific and the literal.
The “multiple anchorages” experienced by Alexander as an Asian-American writer in New York, ascertain the instinctive need to ‘spatialise’/ inhabit new places through the power of poetic imagination. Looking out of the window of her Manhattan flat on to the wet and leaf-strewn streets below, the Hudson Bay and the desultory flow of life, she establishes a connection with the American place through the memory of the Tiruvalla garden and the ancestral house, thereby blending the old and the new in her poetic vision:

“Nadu” is the Malayalam word for home, for homeland. Tiruvella, where my mother’s home, Kuruchiethu House stands, together compose my nadu, the dark soil of self. I was taught that what I am is bound up always with a particular ancestral site. Perhaps I will return there to be buried, my cells poured back into the soil from which they sprung (Fault Lines 23).

In every Malayali resides the ‘nadu,’ which s/he tries to recreate in moments of displacement (not necessarily geographical) as images of complex and often ambivalent feelings. The changes engulfing society today in India have altered the nature of relationship with the ‘nadu.’ The context of alienation is of paramount importance. Very often, social mobility stems from the desire to achieve material and intellectual success at the risk of negating ancestral bond and kinship. The use of English for creative writing in India engender a restricted readership, when compared to the reception accorded to the writing in the regional languages. The immigrant Indian writer, however, gains greater visibility in the
global context, yet loses her ties with her native soil and language. To the second and third generation migrants, in India and abroad, ‘home’ reside in their space of imagination, rather than in their nostalgic recollection. According to K. Satchidananda, “for them, home is not a place to return to but a place to fantasize about, or maybe to visit sometime as a guest or a tourist” (In Diaspora … 19). He refers to the Malayali diaspora in Delhi, the Tamil diaspora in Bangalore and the Bengali diaspora in Bombay in the context of regional writing and how urban life affected them differently: “This appears in their poetry as distrust in the system, fear of the crowd, the experience of boredom, philosophic detachment, fragmentariness of expression and a kind of nostalgia for their lost villages in Kerala that get transformed in their poetry into emerald green spaces of pristine purity and simplicity”(21).

A medley of thoughts and feelings colour the poetry of Anna Sujatha Mathai, bringing to the surface many of the hidden, half-emerging thoughts that had been tormenting her. An almost inordinate desire to burrow deep into the recesses of loneliness, tinged deeply by the awareness of social injustice and patriarchal control, lend a fragility and tentativeness to her words that await expression. “Nailed to circumstance / I wandered only in my imagination” marks the opening line of her poem “Casual Encounter” (The Attic of Night). It asserts the speaker’s crucifixion to certain trying circumstances in her life that paradoxically enhance her poetic imagination and set into bloom “flowers grown in the deepest space / of my fertile imagination”(10-11). “Human encounter” that
has always gifted her with anguish and desolation is sublimated into prayer, for
“The tree ironically flowers / Even in the hour of death”(25-26). The pain of
desolation, sometimes, burden the fragile and tenuous flow of words, with the
death knell of monotony--“I enact my own death / many times over” (“Eyelids”1-2). Mathai excels in wording her ruminations on life and love with finesse and
grace:

But love is always
A stretching out into
Unknown water.
It is the charting of
Unmapped territory,
And the discovery of forgotten
Lands. “Voyage” (The Attic of Night 17-22)

In another poem “Frozen,” love is succinctly described as “a small space in
the sun,” countering the freezing weather of disdain. The image carries a note of
optimism, despite ‘love’s’ imminent death in a hostile and callous world. Love
defeats death most marvellously:

Only the smile on the face
Of the frozen person
Will tell those who care to look
About the hopes of spring,
How bright they were. (7-11)
Caught in the vortex of dislocation, creative writing surges forth, sometimes floundering over questions of moral values and religion. Religion is an unseen force entering the nooks and corners of existence, cohabiting with other social and political institutions. Its tentacles stretch out into the very heart of human life, engendering friction and tension in the individual. On the peripheral, the rites and theological disputes, and in the core, the search for truth in life and relationship, religion becomes the site of conflict to creative minds. Both the poets belong to Tiruvalla, “a typical Mar Thoma space” in South Kerala. Alexander’s memoir, *Fault Lines* is also a narrative of the Mar Thoma Church history as experienced almost personally as a child in Tiruvalla in the ancestral house of her maternal grandfather Ilya, who had been ordained a priest in his younger days. It was Ilya who initiated her into the essence of Christianity for he led her, “from sound to sound, from sight to sight, the moving surfaces of the garden …” (35). Ilya’s calm words “We are all God’s children, as far and wide as the eye can see or heart hear” made her realise that “the ‘I am that I am’ of Hebraic religions is much akin and realises in the child of mud and blood and skin an irremediable joy, the closest we get to any paradise” (38).

The human element in the divine, fore grounded in Nestorianism must have helped her grand father to experience Nature and Life as one beautiful manifestation of truth. Alexander related to the theological disputes as part of the great crisis undergone by the non-Roman faction of the Kerala Church. Though she took in her stride the major theological disputes that raged in the discussions
Illya had with his friends, she could not brook the bare asceticism of the Mar
Thoma faith that frowned upon the worship of images of Virgin Mary and the
saints. Its bareness hurt the child and the woman in her, “and gazing on that
blankness, [she] felt as if [she] [was] in perpetual hangover” (37). Alexander
argues for a multiple life- perspectives, without which the fluids that vitalize
human beings would thin down to fanaticism. In the constant motion of the
American life, Alexander was sucked into the vortex of an inexplicable experience
of ‘otherness.’ Crossing the borders, she founded not only a family but also a new
self in another country. Her Syrian Christian past was buried and entombed, for
she wanted to breathe the clear air of America in order to free herself from the
weight of hierarchy, authority and tradition. The divisiveness and incompleteness
haunting her poetic sensibility sharpens her affinity to Nature and the human
world, and enhances her sensitivity to the underlying dissonance and fragility of
life. The Gandhian values and social gospel of Christ imbibed through her beloved
‘Ilya’ break into the rainbow of poetry, silhouetted against the “barbed wire” of
estrangement:

How could I sing of a plum tree, a stone that weeps water?
How could I dream of paper filled with light?

(“Paper Filled with Light” River and Bridge 49-50)

Clouds consume the palaces

of the gods

Stone chariots stir in soil
all Sarnath is covered in dirt.

There is no grief like this,
the origin of landscape is mercy.

(“Deer Park at Sarnath” River and Bridge 18-23)

I am blind
I cry into water
Look, this house is burning
Sash and sill, lips’ hair, eyes.
O Kabir, who can I tell?

(“Kabir was a Weaver” House of a Thousand Doors 23-27)

soul
my soul
she shuts her wings
she does not like captivity
soul
I sing to her
soul
my soul
all the rivers of India
are slipping to the sea

(“Singing to my Soul” House of a Thousand Doors 8-17)
The poet in her realizes that the sacred dwell in the power and beauty of words that can translate the chaotic, the discordant masses of existence, and seize upon the fleeting joys of life. She counters the powerful forces of violence that infiltrate into our lives imperceptibly with the magic of words. “The struggle for social justice, for human dignity, is for each one of us. Like ethnicity, like the labor of poetry, it is larger than any single person, or any single voice. It transcends individualism” (Fault Lines 203). The poem can incorporate the scansion of the “broken steps, the pauses, the blunt silences, the brutal explosions” (“Lyric Poem … 6). The brittle boundary lines of insensitivity and intolerance demarcating the world will accede to the harmony of truth and light, “whose immensity, far from being mystical--in the sense of a pure thing far away, a distance shining--casts all our actions into relief, etches our lines into art” (Fault Lines 203). The path of her creativity forges into the unknown depth of selfhood, riddled by the anguish of dislocation that find voice in the linguistic tussle of her earlier poems, the haunting power of memory and the urgent pull of the present, resonating in her later writing. Yet underlying this dissonance flows the cadence of the Upanishadic “Tat Tvam Asi” and the Hebraic, “I am that I am” that has seeped into “the child of mud, and blood and skin” who has realized “an irremediable joy” (Fault Lines 38) in the Tiruvalla of her ‘Ilya’s’ secular love.

Gopal Gandhi, the writer and critic, stresses the relevance of the Syrian Christian community, an important segment of Kerala, in the Indian creative writing with reference to the poems of Anna Sujatha Mathai. He opines that
“Indian creative writing in English has by-passed this remarkable community. Sujatha Mathai’s poems are a step towards supplying that lack. They do so very non-denominationally, unself-consciously” (“Quiet Questionings” 20). The “non-denominational “and “unself-conscious” interventions of Syrian Christian elements in her poetry maybe gleaned in the titles of her books—Crucifixions, and We The Unreconciled, and in the poems that criss-cross between the mundane and the dramatic moments of life. The river of existence flows on, oblivious of the inner rhythm of godliness imbued in the smallest creations of God. Preoccupied by thoughts of mortality, and beset by the “vague comprehensions / of an eternal mystery,” the poet transmutes her Syrian Christian faith into a fine poetic sensibility. Her poems reveal a keen awareness of the evanescent glow of life, set against the Biblical call to “build your house on rocks”. The search for certainty is like trying to touch the fast- receding horizon:

Build your house on rocks,

He said.

……………………………

Some certain knowledge,

The knowledge we hold so precious keeps changing

Like the colours in the magic glass

I looked through, when a child,

Always the outlines were changing.  (1-2, 8-12)
The kaleidoscopic patterning of shape and colour that used to enthral the poet as a child conveys a new meaning today—the uncertainty of things, and of knowledge as an integral part of human existence. The inevitability of change is juxtaposed with the human aspiration for permanence. Yet the poet-heart thrills and beats in rhythm to the flux of life, clasping close the raptures of transient bliss, and builds, instead, a dwelling of words on the turbulent seas of life. Mortality stalks every moment etched in her poems, of love’s passion, pain and loneliness, and the startling beauty of Nature. The imperceptible presence of truth pervades her vision of life and poetry. The underlying strength of her poetry lies in her infinite compassion for the weak, the vulnerable and the tormented souls deprived of justice, and her sensuous grasp of the vibrant world of passion. The short poem in her first collection of poems—*Crucifixions* seems to mirror the poet herself:

She is not one of those

Tightly guarded

Self-preserving

Ones,

But self revealing,

Sharing,

Gloriously giving

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

she renews others

therefore is renewed herself, (“He Speaks of His Love” 1-7, 14-15)
In another poem, “Passer –By,” the poet bridges the gap between the ‘I’ / poet and the ‘you’ /passer-by, caught in the whirlwind of time, with a flash of recognition. The hurried pace of time, the choiceless race of life do not deter the speaker, who takes in her stride the growing estrangement in human relations:

Recognition is a sparkling
Shower-fresh feeling

Dear passer-by,
Always passing
Shall I let you pass again?
I have no choice
Seeing a breath or movement
Would turn your eyes to stone
And me into a pillar of salt.

Passing.  Always passing.
Passing. Passing. Passing.  (1-2, 11-17, 26-27)

The anonymity of the passer-by could be that of the reader, in whose response, and flash of recognition, the poet and the poem lives and re-lives. The poet does not attempt to arrest the relentless motion of time, but discovers an intriguing sense of security in mortality, and in anonymity. The reiterative force of “passing” and its trochaic rhythm enhance the thematic structure the poem. One perceives a
distinctive blend of nostalgia and a keen sense of the immediacy and urgency of contemporary life. The poems, “Poem,” and “Our Todays” capture the two perspectives of life, cushioned by sagacious statements:

Memory has no pain,

It is the prison of our present,

The knowledge of our helplessness

That crushes us. (6-9)

Each day carries all the reality

Of our life

…………………………………

And my heart knows the radiance

Cast out by a perfect day,

Or by its perfection recognized. (1-2, 14-16)

Empathy flows to the mute and the dumb, embracing all creations. The poem, “Pain” enforces the tangible and physical aspect of pain that co-equals all mental agony. The sheer reality of the physical torture inflicted on Christ and its vicarious experience in the spectators cannot be obliterated by sublimating the ‘body’ to the ‘soul.’

What the calf feels

Is the dumb part of our pain’

The pain we can never express

The heaving, silent pain
That tears at the stomach
And makes the heart beat,
That does not know the relief of tears.

………………………………………

This mute pain, dimly recognized
Is the bond between all creatures,
And is the root from which love grows.

Our common destiny of pain
Makes each of us part of the other (1-7, 10-14)

The binariness of the body and the spirit, a cornerstone of Christianity, is investigated with a discerning simplicity in “Fallen Angel” of her second collection of poems entitled We The Unreconciled. Lucifer, the fallen angel, is Man himself, aching for the world of the spirit. The flesh aspires for the sublime, and the vibrant music of earth-life flows endlessly to enter the hidden harmony of the soul. The sensuous apprehension of this “world of the spirit” can be achieved by the realization of the harmony of flesh and spirit. Man remains ‘fallen’ lacking this realization, haunted by the “possibility of the impossible”:

It is the flesh that aches
with longing

For the unattainable, for the world

of spirit (‘Fallen Angel’ 1-4)
The poet attempts to unveil the “profound message” of divine grace in the ordinariness of daily life in the poem “Hints in a World Caught Between Living and Dying” of her third collection of poems, *The Attic of Night*. The main thread weaving through the imagery is Christian; hints thrown to the “searcher” or the magi by the winds, the “litany of praise” sung in full-throated ease by the birds, the “sombre chant” of trees. The waves of turbulent passion beat the vulnerable shores of life again and again, the subtle signs of divine grace, being swallowed up by their deafening roar. Oblivious of the presence of godliness on earth, humanity trudges forth, irresolute and entrapped in the mesh of sensuous joys.

The reader detects an auditory quality in her poems that lends them an inherent dramatic resonance. Gopal Gandhi writes of this trait thus--“The poetry in *The Attic of Night* is conversation, where emotion expresses itself in the rise and fall of the poet’s voice” (19). The words ‘converse,’ move in and out in a smooth flowing narrative. “The Last Supper” is one such poem in which the Christian element predominates. It has all the settings of an Absurd play--characters sit awaiting the last scene of betrayal, as immobilized cut-outs, words pitted at each other aimlessly. The opening lines: “We sit at the table / the four of us, / Silently eating our food” vibrate with the possibility of an eruption of emotions that are now properly sealed with a stultifying silence. The three lines pin the context, and set the stage for the play of words floating in the air, clutching at the straws of reality. Heavily laden with Christian motifs, the voices interweave the mundane with the unreal, and the simulated dialogues among the parents, ‘A,’ and the ‘I,’
carry a surreal strain. The narrator’s voice propels the vapid bits of conversation, blending the literal with the metaphorical. The poem seems to resemble the ‘fugue,’ a musical composition in which a melody (subject) is taken up by successive ‘voices’ in imitation, so that the original melody seems to be pursued by its counterparts. The term “fugue,” from the Italian “fuga” (flight) is also referred in psychology as a disturbed state of mind during which the patient behaves, apparently consciously, in ways of which s/he has no recollection afterwards. Disjointed and de-contextualised, the voices float as insubstantially as the table that “floats in mid-air, grail-like, / a suspended altar” (36-37).

Mortality is our crust
Death our bitter wine.
It’s not the last supper,
The betrayal is not yet,
Though it’s just around the corner.

A says Tidy the room, the guests
Are coming.

Fine ladies in the ante-room,
Preparing for the last scene of the drama.
Now the betrayal is done,
The time of anguish is upon us
Suddenly I want to take the
Whole world upon my lap
And kiss away its tears.

(“The Last Supper” The Attic of Night 5-9, 19-20, 26-29, 38-40)

The careful interspersing of the factual with the symbolic lends a deep note of irony and playfulness to the lines in the poem:

Mother says It’s been well done
Father says It’s the time of forgetting.
A says Why this? Why this?
I reply The fruit is ripe and rich
And everything has its season.
It’s late evening, the room is darkening,

(“The Last Supper” The Attic of Night 31-36)

The final outburst of love and compassion converge into the all-embracing catholicity of Christ and Mother Mary. The famous ‘Pieta’ enters the reader’s mind.

In the latest collection of poems--Life-On My Side of the Street and Other Poems: Dialogue and Other Poems, there is a perceptible evolution of thought from the abyss of despair and desolation to a deeper and broader understanding of ‘self’ and the world. Pain and loneliness purify the dregs of passion and the soul knows no bliss except in the sanctuary of God. Yet the glimpses of godliness and
pure joy “in the conversations of humankind” elicit the eager cry--“enough for me.

Life lives right on this street, / someday, she’ll turn-and look directly into my eyes
/ There you are. Here I am, she’ll say.”

The poem “ Life- On My Side of the Street” celebrates the rhythm of Life

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

Enough for me she lives

On the same busy street,

Life…always on my side of the street

I follow her, and glimpse her, (12-15)

The poet aspires to assuage the hurt of estrangement, the torment of faithless bond

with her poems that are “at least songs.”

Even the gentlest voices are clearly heard

On a day when the wind is quiet

And Time stops to meditate.

‘Not even songs, not even flowers?’

you ask.

Yes, surely. Those sleep in the

Wind’s hiding places,

And will seize the unexpected moment

With their fragrance,

Their still living, poignant voices, -

A massive choir singing forgotten tunes (“At Least Songs” 19-29)
These flashes of poems and prose, the overlapping of theorizing and poetry create different rhythms and cadences which break the linearity of the composition and invite the discerning reader to take a pause and listen to the soundless recreation of her own associations, imagination, and reflection. Trinh T. Minh-ha, in a conversation with Anna Maria Morelli, speaks of the necessity of the creative act to take in the unpredictability in its movement, to explore the various paths that open to the poet-mind, and allow itself to give in to the gradual unfolding of thoughts and feelings, as words keep on displacing themselves from their intended or given meaning” (“The Undone Interval” 6). The material reality of the language and the reality out there interweave into a resonant text. The poems mark a ‘return,’ a spatial-temporal review of the past, and of life-perspectives and relationships. It also implies new ways of appropriating space as identity, memory, and dynamics of language. The space, thus appropriated, becomes the vital site for new truths and meanings, that evolve from the interstices of dislocation. The materiality of a poem points to the labour behind it, the laying of bricks to build a ‘home’ for the poet and the reader. The lyric as music transports the reader, yet is also part of the history of a particular place, the ‘homeland.’

Poetry,

The bridge suspended between

History and truth

Is not a way towards

This or that:
it is to see
thee stillness within
movement. (Octavio Paz, Nocturna of Il defonso)