Chapter 2

Writing Identity

“It was what I was and in many ways am, this perpetual reconstruction of identity.” (Meena Alexander, “The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity”)

“The hard poem about the self / when there is nothing else quite like it / a tiny “i cleft from its shadow, / hardly breathing, form’s terror.” (“Choric Meditation” 9-11)

“Identity” is a term that problematises what is included and excluded in life and writing. It is a marker, a landmark, and a sign pointing to what is distinctive in the “subject.” Identity is also relational, associative of space, culture and language. Though the term is derived from Latin “idem” meaning “same,” its English version highlights the distinctiveness as “always being the same or always being itself rather than something else” (Heyes 3). Personal identity spells one’s sense of self and its persistence, which is characterised by an emphasis on its inner voice, and capacity for authenticity and the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself. The notion of identity has been problematised in an unprecedented manner in the multicultural modern society. The increasing interest of the 1960’s in the personal voice and the lyric speaker, and the feminist assertion of women’s experiences in women-literature, have greatly revolutionised the concept of identity (Kinnahan 2). In the postcolonial scenario, personal identity is culture-based and posits a general shift in literary studies from the text to the context. The literary work is studied
as a product or symptom of its culture or of its author’s identity, and not as a self-enclosed unit of purely aesthetic elements. Cultural representations are the very stuff of which identities are made, and literature is one crucial arena in which the making is done. In the immigrant discourse, a whole lot of rewriting is done in the making and unmaking of identities. From the personal to the racial, from the local to the distant, the immigrant writer has to travel to and fro in order to forge her identity. The very process of shaping identities has to be historicised for they point to events that are both visible and invisible. The subterranean forces of socio-political changes in erstwhile colonies have catapulted a new consciousness that enfolds in itself the fluctuating realities.

The question of identity in the case of woman writer attains complexity for the simple reason that she has to counter double colonisation—the foreign yoke and the indigenous patriarchy. In spite of the poststructuralist rejection of the lyric speaker and the valorisation of the materiality of language, there has been a growing tendency in women writing to foreground the personal voice / voices (Kinnahan 4). A subjective perspective of events, both individual and social, renders a new and refreshing dimension to this writing. Marginalised as the weaker sex and “lesser” individual, the woman writer has to contend with the linguistic and cultural position accorded her in a patriarchal neo-colonial society. She has to reposition herself through a restructuring of language that has hitherto been the sole monopoly of the male. She has to redefine the language structure empowering it with the intense awareness of her physicality. Her words stem from her day-to-day common chores and her multiple roles as
wife, mother, and citizen. The binary opposition of the mind-body dissipates into a complex self that can appropriate reality in a substantial manner. By using memory as a strategy, she rewrites both her personal and social history. In the postcolonial, multicultural context, the whole understanding of identity has to be revised. The old notion that we can know who we are by tracing our roots, by referring back to some stable point of origin, has to be abandoned. There is no single, pure source. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, the American-Mexican writer, all identities are hybrids, formed over time through the interaction of multiple cultures and being transformed by new encounters in the borderlands between one culture and another (4).

The postcolonial writer finds herself a hyphenated person in both her local space and outside it; the use of English, the imperial tongue, instead of the mother tongue alienates her writing from the readers of her “space” making her linguistically and culturally dislocated. In the case of a migrant poet, she comes to be regarded as a Third World woman poet, whose use of English is always a curiosity for the Western reader. While doctrines of equality press the notion that each human being is capable of deploying his / her reason or moral sense to live an authentic life as individual, the politics of difference has appropriated the language of authenticity to describe ways of living that are true to the identities of marginalised social groups. This postmodernist quest for identity upholds the possibility of heterogeneous selves with multiple identities, and debunks the conservative move to essentialise and generalise identity traits.
Distinctiveness and alterity endorse the multivalent postmodern concept of identity.

One of the most ironic elements of postcolonial literary analysis is the fact that readers and critics alike must access and interact with the English language, the imperial tongue of many postcolonial nations, to write about its hegemonising force on a global level. The linguistic domination of English has created a new stratum of urban society that feeds on the English and western values of art and life. However, the apparent primacy of English in the educational system in India cannot promise to provide a wide readership in the country for creative writing in English. The richness of indigenous writing and oral literature cannot be appropriated by Indian writing in English. Yet, it is this dialectics of language and reality that gives a powerful ambivalence to the writing in English. The whole process of acquiring proficiency in English has to be historicised in the context of women writing in India. A metropolitan-suburban divide is involved in the matter of linguistic choice. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that an “anxiety of Indianness” seizes the writers whose mastery over the current idiom of the metropolitan meta-language of narrative ensures them a favourable reception in the global centers of publication and criticism (83). One implicit expectation from the postcolonial writers is that they will highlight the experience of colonialism as theme or metaphor. She wonders whether colonialism can be upheld as the only major cultural experience of the century and affirms the relevance of the theme of Partition in the postmodern writing in India. A redefinition of postcolonialism is a dire
necessity in order to interrogate its historic and moral implications in the present century India. Though the term stems from the historical space of foreign rule for a period of time, it attains new dimensions of meaning in the overt and covert marginalisation of various groups in the neocolonial state of modern society.

Relevant to the study of women writing in English (within and outside India) is a reworking of a new subjectivity informed by physical, intellectual subjugation borne through ages in both the private and public spaces in a woman’s life. In this sense, women’s position in the colonial and postcolonial worlds is riddled with the polemics of subaltern identity, which can be countered by the acquisition of the very tools of communication, hitherto considered the sole prerogatives of patriarchy. Proficiency in the English language gives socio-political agency to the self, lending visibility and voice to the writers. Oliver Perry distinguishes the context of English acquisition in Indian English writing and Asian-American writing by focusing on the pressures undergone by Indian English poets living under multicultural conditions of production in India and those who have chosen to live abroad (29). To those settled in India, their writing is confined to a small readership, as they have to contend with the more popular writing in the regional languages. Moreover, the content of Indian English literature cannot easily appropriate Indian reality as authentically as found in the “bhasha” writing. In the case of immigrant poets, known as Asian-American poets, a larger canvas is placed before them to paint in vibrant hues the postmodern angst of dislocation and
border crossings. Yet, paradoxically, their fame abroad rests on the basis of their relationship with India and whether they can find new modes of representing the complex reality of their own culture. “There is no getting away from the burden of India if you want to write in English” (Mukherjee, Meenakshi 82).

Set against the Mar Thoma space of Tiruvalla and Kozhencheri, and the multi-cultural metropolitan New York, Meena Alexander attempts to discover her self-hood in her present postcolonial situation. Anna Sujatha Mathai does not project the image of a postcolonial writer hurled into the swirling issues of ethnicity and language. Firmly rooted in India, she probes into the deep, inexplicable regions of human mind and the changes of tone and colour of daily life. She has also to contend with the regional writing and the growing indifference to poetry, especially in Indian English writing. Both the poets encounter the dialectics of language and femaleness in their quest for identity through their creative writing. The politics of space is most relevant to woman as she aspires for freedom to express her identity. Even without a “place,” she can carve out a “space” for her creativity. To Mathai, the space is the interiority of personal experience, the attic of creativity. The borderlines shift constantly and walking on its edges can be both thrilling and hazardous to the border crosser.

Space is a contested element in every creative venture; it becomes a crucial matter for women writing. Space is not merely a geographical entity, for it entails a whole system of ideas and the freedom to express them. It also
involves the idea and making of home / homeland as an affirmation of a history that is both personal and collective. Space spells language and culture. It becomes the way of expression, a writing in of oneself into an intellectual, emotional and cultural space of one’s own. Woman writes herself, her identity in the space of her words that form the text to be read by the world. She encounters the problem of language--should it be the language of colonial power and patriarchal control? Will the words lock themselves to the rhythm and intensity of female experience? Yet, language follows its own course of social legitimacy and hence, cannot be totally ignored by her. Words express her thoughts, emotions and feelings. Helene Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” affirms that women must put their bodies into their writing, for there exists an inviolable linkage between female sexuality and female writing: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (87). Body becomes the source of a woman writer’s pattern of imagery, which reflects her awareness of the reality around. Body serves as a springboard of imagery that governs the text. So women poets use a language that is more frank and an image pattern more pervasive, so as to give it a distinctive identity. Identity is not an already fixed reality out there to be captured by language, but is a process that is shaped by the alchemy of language. The choice of her language of creativity and the manner of coaxing out the cadence and a flow of inner rhythm, centre in a space that is specifically “home” and of the “here and now.”
To poets like Alexander and Mathai, language is also a question of using the colonial language. Set against their mother tongue, Malayalam, they have to carve out their thoughts and feelings in English that is still considered the language of the privileged. In her essay, “Exiled by a Dead Script” Alexander, with great verve and passion, analyses the predicament of making poems in English in India, and observes that “… to make poems in India with English, is to be condemned to the use of a language that in its very being cringes from actuality” (1). The language of poetry is vital, and touches the very roots of existence in a particular space-time. It should appropriate the living reality around and express an “emergent selfhood” (2). Language as a social act, bridges the writer with the landscape and the concrete actuality around her. English becomes “a nowhere language,” and the writer an “exile,” if she is unable to revitalise and transform it’s very structure and rhythm in order to subvert “the invisible ideology of Indian English” (2). The poet would also be unable to identify her aspirations, thoughts and feelings with the raw realities teeming around her that contributes to the making of her identity, and finds herself alienated from the flux of life through the language that is already dead.

Meenakshi Mukherjee has mentioned this predicament in “The Anxiety of Indian ness” predicting that Indian writing in English will remain “a one-stringed instrument” for the simple reason that “the normal ground conditions of literary production do not exist in the case of English in India; it lacks the ingredients that interact to create a new text-culture and its variations, language and its dialects and the centuries of oral tradition and written literature …”
(83). She cites Malayalam as an example to prove her point. Malayalam is not only the language that is spoken and written in a geographic space called Kerala but is a discourse enriched by its films, folktales, riddles, parody songs, nursery rhymes, vidhan sabha proceedings, slogans in processions, political speeches, tea shops humour, kathkali, and a long literary culture. A fictional text produced in this language draws up and echoes the reverberations of this layered plurality that surround and nurture it. English in India, on the other hand, functions on relatively fewer registers, allowing the writer to operate only with in a limited parameter.

Alexander has mentioned this crisis as “two distinct but interrelated terrors” that hold the possibility of the cry of a milkman tripping over a stone, the hoarse call of a child selling peanuts, the chants of women rising in the night becoming a mere “babble” and “de-particularised non-sense” to the poetry written in English (“Exiled by Dead Script” 1). She connects the making of an exile with the futile attempt to appropriate the space and the historic present in a language that resists the vital flow of sense-impressions. Irony lurks in the use of English by the Indian writer to appropriate the correct meaning and, at the same time being conscious of the impossibility of attaining it. But Rushdie affirms that migrant writers are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective because they are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in the two or three spaces occupied by them. “This stereoscopic vision is … what we can offer in place of “whole sight” (“Imaginary Homelands” 118). He also warns against the adoption of a “ghetto mentality.”
“To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile …” (132).

Alexander, keenly aware of the isolation from the social reality of one’s homeland brought about by a colonial language, contests this notion by what she calls the rupturing of its syntax and subverting “the invisible ideology of Indian English” (“Exiled … ” 3). The outworn script of English must be, according to her, made to open “its maws and swallow … the chaosses of uninterpreted actuality” (3). In this encounter, the language will turn rigid, refusing to communicate the intricate working of relationship, between the poet and her space. Alexander posits the necessity of imaging intensely through this very language the barrier between the body of the poet and the objects around her. In short she would wield the language as a “burning brand” / the “alphabets of flesh” to appropriate the spaces she lives as an immigrant writer.

Belonging to Allahabad (where she was born), to Kerala (her four years of childhood), to Sudan and England (her education and teenage years), and to America (where she is established as a reputed academic and poet), Alexander’s writing spans many a space and time. Though Malayalam (mother tongue) remains a spoken language, she affirms the presence of its rhythm in her poetry (“Poem out of Place-Zone of Radical Illiteracy” 2). Life, in its turbulent variety, resonates in a language that always resists this poetic appropriation. To a poet, whose identity is multiple and fragmented, English becomes her tool to forge ahead and seize the truths of body and mind. She
dares to tear off the fine skin of the English language to express her ‘otherness,’ and to appropriate its rhythm and vitality in order to foreground the subterranean tension between words and reality.

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, she recollects “the hot unease I had first felt as a small child learning to repeat English words” and “a shame of being improper …” (114). She calls herself a “woman cracked by multiple migrations … uprooted so many times, she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew” (3). She sees herself as “a mass of faults … split asunder, and broken into tiny fragments by faults” (3). The fragments of a broken geography, multiple languages and selves jostling her consciousness, and splintered voices form the collage of a postcolonial identity. The poet decides to change her name from Mary Elizabeth to Meena, when writing becomes a matter of perpetuating life and voicing identity--“Sometimes I think I write to evade the names they have given me” (73). In this willful transformation can be deciphered an eager shedding off the colonial burden. Though Alexander resisted the overwhelming power of English in school, she began to write poetry from the age of twelve a valve to express her inmost feelings and suppressed femaleness. Right from her childhood, she learnt to demarcate her schoolwork from her creative personal writing. Poetry flowing out of her immediate experience and of her body had to be concealed as something too private to be published and to be fiercely ashamed off. Hiding and writing--the twin aspects of a shameful act--made her relate language with shame: “I also learnt to write in snatches a skill that had served me well” (113). This enforced
privacy is to be partly identified with her mother’s disapproval of Alexander’s poetic efforts as something illicit and unbecoming of a girl. The meticulous learning of English carries the burden of physicality, for her “blackness stuck out like a stiff halo all around [her]” (Fault Lines 113). She imbibed English so perfectly well in the sense that she came to be considered an oddity, both among her cousins and friends of Tiruvalla. Proficiency in English made her stick out as a “madamma” among her Tiruvalla cousins, for she could speak the language in “sssss” like a veritable “madamma” (112).

The childhood desire for conformity persisted in her adult life. She was a child from Tiruvalla and that is what her flesh made of her, and she knew no reason to let her mouth betray her by speaking flawless English, painstakingly learnt from her English mistress in Khartoum. Yet, in other places and other times, English carried her through the invisible “barbed wire” of a burden she had not chosen. As she grew older she realized the forked power in the tongue she had acquired—“English alienated me from I was born to; it was also the language of intimacy and bore the charged power of writing. Through it … I might some day unlock the feelings that welled up with in me” (Fault Lines 116). She started to use English in order to reach out to the new world.

Through an inability to read and write the script in Arabic and in her mother tongue Malayalam, Alexander maintained an immediacy of sound and sense in those two great languages of her childhood years that enabled her to dissolve the canonical burden of British English. She was hesitant to learn the script of her childhood languages, for she “wanted only to listen, to let the spoken
language wash over [her]” (119). She considered the script too confining; she associated her escape from the rigours of the Malayalam script with her childhood attempts to elude the mesh of proprieties enforced by her paternal grandmother. She had already decided that learning one script was sufficient to translate herself in and out of an English braided with all the languages that welled up in her. But what really prompted her was “the need to protect the quick of herself” (Fault Lines 119).

Scripts spelt hierarchies and propriety, while speech promised an immediacy of sound and sense, the freedom to break rules, and to attain simplicity. Though the lyric fascinated her with its first person singular, she also realised the significance of history and its many voices. She encountered the difficulty of translating her Tiruvalla childhood into English, but realised how the English language opened the windows to another reality. She confronts this paradoxical state through the lyric that can rupture the syntax to create new resonances. Alexander tries to blend Malayalam words into her main poetic structure in her later collection of poems--Illiterate Heart:

A pencil box in hand - *girl, book, tree-

those were the words you gave me.

Girl was *penne*, hair drawn back,

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*pusthakam* pages parted

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

spreading fire in a tree *maram*
You murmured the word, sliding it on your tongue.

(“Muse” 7-9, 16, 19-20)

Here the English “words” given by the muse are literally translated into the Malayalam “penne,” “pusthakam,” and “maram” in the poem. One detects a self-conscious attempt of the poet to retrace her linguistic roots in the light of her American present, with the search culminating in the wisdom of her muse—

“Write in the light / of all the languages / you know the earth contains”(32-34).

Her few years of teaching in Hyderabad motivated her to interrogate her stand as a poet writing in English and to reposition herself in the context of Indian writing in English. Her quest to make sense of poetry written in English in India, for a privileged section of society prompts her to study its role in the context of Indian literature and its readership. Her years at Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad brought her into a close involvement with the issues related to precise speech, correct pronunciation, appropriate usage and status of English in India. Though there were some who considered English as a superior language, there were also others who realized that the future of English in India lay in its ability to blend itself with life all around, streets and market places. She discussed avidly with Susie Tharu, a faculty member, what it meant to write in India, and what sort of art could come out of the streets and market places. Through Jayantha Mahaptra, whose works she admired, Alexander learnt to understand the poet’s bond with place. She even debated the question of poetry written in English with poets like Arvinda Krishna Mehrotra. Colonialism seemed intrinsic to the burden of
English in India and Alexander felt robbed of literacy in her own mother
tongue, Malayalam. She explores the nuances of meaning in the use of English
by Sarojini Naidu, the celebrated poet and politician of the Nationalist
movement in her powerful essay “Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and
Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers.”

Meenakshi Mukherjee’s comment that the new generation of writers in
Indian writing in English is indifferent to the ways in which the writers of the
older generation responded to the creative urge in English, is invalidated in
Alexander’s perceptive analysis of the writing of Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt
in English, along with that of Lalithambika Antharjanam and Balamaniamma
in her “Outcaste Power.” The distinction between the passive, weak images of
femininity in her poetry and the powerful political attack on colonialism in her
mellifluously vitriolic speeches is identified by Alexander. The poet confronts
both the iconic presentation of the feminine and the overwhelming colonisation
of language in her own special way by using English to strike at the roots of
patriarchal domination and colonisation. She elaborates on the strategies
employed by Indian women writers in English and Malayalam to confront the
“iconic presentation of the feminine” (12). The focus is on the “unbearable
tension between a culturally sanctioned femininity and female imaginative
power.” The social constructions of a hierarchical society and the humiliation
of a colonial order are to the female imagination the same old story of
suppression and repression; a rift grows between the culturally sanctioned
image of woman, and the more ferocious, authentic image of “self” which
questions it. The body / form used to image this rupture of the feminine icon is not dependant on an established aesthetic. She works with materials that have no previously sanctioned place, and the “fierce outcaste feminine imagination” will take over to contest the decadent hierarchy. The icon is torn apart, the language used to express the rupture is itself ruptured, and new forms emerge thereafter to couch the free female imaginative power. Alexander speculates on the possibility of a dichotomy between the poet and the politician in Sarojini Naidu leading towards a complex and covert process of creativity. Her poetic language is repressed desire, sensuality and vapid romanticism, while her political language is a scintillating and eloquent defiance of colonial suppression. The tale of Sita, the pure and the chaste, haunts the female imagination; unable to bear the humiliation imposed by Dharma and her god Shri Rama, she cries to her Mother Earth to swallow her. This tale stirred Sarojini Naidu and she put this to political use in addressing India as Mother India--an image that is both tender and explosive.

In the case of Nalapaat Balamaniamma, the questioning of the iconic presentation of the feminine is seen in her poem “The Story of the Axe” which deals with Parashurama’s remorse on his matricide, “a son betrayed by the cold logic of Dharma” (27). Parashurama recounts the event--the reason behind the murder, his father, Sage Jamadagni’s jealousy and suspicion of his young lovely wife Renuka, Parashurama’s mother. “I alone, the beloved of my father stepped forward” to slay the gentle mother at the behest of the father. The poem ends with Parashurama, ages later, seated atop a sacred mountain
contemplating Kerala and its inhabitants whose lives are “Stamped with my axes’ tip.” Balamaniamma rewrites the familiar Puranic version of the matricide in which Renuka, the mother is resurrected by his father’s mystic power, in keeping with Parashurama’s wish. However, in Balamaniamma’s poem, the son is betrayed by Dharma. The mother cannot be brought back to life and the son is left to vent his rage in further murderous acts. Parashurama’s overt surrender to Dharma portrays the fierce masculine and destructive social order into which the feminine artist must plunge in order to refine and define her art. The iconic femininity (maternal figure of forgiveness and suffering) is underplayed to foreground the inherent sexuality of young Renuka.

Lalithambika Antharjanam’s *Agnisakshi* is about Tethi who declares as Devaki Manampally—“I am the representative of the women folk who have been subjected to suffering for centuries. … But this load of sorrow which is our very own was your creation …” (20). Thankam, the narrator of the novel is both an insider-outsider, as she is the offspring of a Nambudiri who is the master of the Illam, and of a Nair mother. Though intimate with the rituals and order of a very conservative, patriarchal Nambudiri household, Thankam is debarred from it and thereby becomes the witness to the installation of the iconic feminine, the new bride Tethikutty of Thankam’s brother. Shackled by the iron fence of rituals, deprived of all intellectual and emotional sustenance, the heroine, Tethi slowly transforms herself into a volcano to erupt and disrupt the decadent social system of not only the Nambudiri Illam but of the iconic feminine as decreed by the patriarchal society. Tethi changing her name from
Devaki Manampalli to Devi bahen the Nationalist and to Sumithraananda, the ascetic indicates a world that is swiftly transforming and encouraging “a female identity that is necessarily irresolute, mobile and anguished” (22).

Most probably, Alexander identifies herself with the un-naming and re-naming process. In her memoir Fault Lines she writes “I felt I had changed my name to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden” (74). Traversing the manifold experiences of self-discovery, the poet undergoes a sort of a border-crossing. Raised on the stories of Civil-Disobedience as told her by her maternal grandfather, “Illya,” she found it easy and natural to relate intensely with the students’ demonstrations in the streets of Khartoum against the Sudanese dictatorship. English helped her to reach out to this new world. Braided with Arabic and French, her English could voice the note of liberation, along with the persistent “otherness” in which she lived and moved.

In this context, Alexander redefines the concept of translation by connecting it with poetic composition. Just as the translator tries to reach for the inner meaning beneath the text, similarly the poet aspires to reach “beneath the hold of a given syntax, beneath the rocks and stones and trees of discernible place in order to make sense” (“Poem out of Place …”6). It becomes “the place” beneath “a place,” the “zone of radical illiteracy” where words elude, definite meanings and which ignores the rules of syntax (8). The poet writes out of her “self” and body, making the poem a raft to travel through space and time, across borders, national and linguistic boundaries. The “soul” or
inwardness, according to Alexander, is directly related to identity, as “that which is unique to myself and can be possessed by no other” (“The Poetic Self …” 168). Her intense research in the Phenomenological aesthetics in Romantic poetry has coloured her perspectives on art and has enforced her implicit faith in the inner dynamism of words that reveal the poetic self. The Romantic poets sang of the “self,” and of the varied hues of Nature: Wordsworth exulted in the spontaneity and purity of emotions, Shelley sang of the sweetest songs that tell of saddest thoughts, Keats was captivated by the perfect and immortal beauty of art. In their poetry resides a perfect blend of the ideal and the ‘self,’ cutoff from the daily transactions in the life of the common man. However, this romantic ideal of selfhood and its visionary freedom was not easy to come by for women writers. Brought up with a different sense of identity, meshed with other lives in familial bonds of care and concern, women could not easily aspire to reach this ideal. If the essence of Romantic poetry lies in the keen emphasis on subjectivity, women writers have questioned that intense self-absorption. Freedom, solitary and boundless, had little place in the work of women. It force them to undertake a careful scrutiny of their own lives, and they turned to the concrete world around them, never strained too far from their origins in daily life or the values of a communal existence. When the Romantic imagination sees in the concrete, the vision of the ideal, the woman poet deals with the natural world that is contained within the boundaries of the visible world. She has to resurrect and heal a “self” that is mutilated by the societal dictum of what is permitted to a woman. She glimpses power within her, the
knowledge of maternity. With the grasp of the personal self, the intimate “I” of the Romantic period, the process of writing for the woman involved a tormenting contradiction. But the act of writing could be cathartic, for even as it played out the themes of displacement and alienation, it permitted a momentary poise and a balancing act.

Keenly aware of the painful tensions involved in female creativity, Alexander turned to her own physicality to discover the root of fresh imaginative knowledge. Part of the knowledge came from the inexplicable bond to other women and cycles of generations. It is intimately concerned with what it means to be a mother. Her powerful poem “Passion” (*The Shock of Arrival*) articulates the elemental rage of passion, of intense suffering [liturgical sense], and of sexual passion, “that place where all the elements meet when we overstep the borders” (“Poem out of Place” 4). The poem sews together the body bursting agony of childbirth, “the tenth month’s passion” and a maimed bird’s agony of its bleeding head hanging on “by a sinew or two.” The embodied self--the poet consciousness--identifies with the woman figure undergoing experiences knotted into the anguish and pain of childbirth, divine ecstasy, and trauma of sexual assault. “I am her sight / her hearing / and her tongue” (66-8). The fourth and the last section of the poem is a powerful and spontaneous identification with every aspect of female experience-- the bloody and grueling pain of childbirth, the dumb terror of rape, the ascetic madness of a Meera and the passionate yearning of a Radha. Though ‘tongue less in rhapsody,” the “Ai, ai,” a cry of pain, breaks into a searing awareness of “I,” or
‘self.’ Alexander reiterates with pride the resonance of Malayalam rhythm in underlying the rhythms of other languages. “I speak as someone who even as she writes in English, thinks through the rhythms of many other languages, Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French, so that the strut and play of word, the chiseled order of lines permits a sense crystallized through the seizures of dislocation” (“Poem out of Place” 2). The poem “Passion” is the refraction of another time-space, a country road, an old house, near the Mar Thoma Church. In this spatial-temporal shift, one discerns the inexplicable power of poetic imagination, which can travel eons of space-time. Alexander describes how when she wrote this poem she felt that she was evoking a condition, which could not be easily worded: “I wrote it [poem] in Manhattan … yet, I was translating into the landscape of the small town in Kerala where I come from, and out again, into the space of the page, using the concrete and palpable present as an invisible frame” (8) Webbed in this strange sense of the incompatibility between the scene perceived and the words to be used to paint them, the poet experiences the tautness of translating a particular consciousness into another, apparently different. The poem, composed in Manhattan, is resonant of her Kerala, as emotion, memory and identity. Alexander relates the complex process of creativity with what she calls “the zone of illiteracy” in her essay, “Poem out of Place- Zone of Radical Illiteracy.” The zone is “radical,” for it triggers unpredictable changes, its “its fiery muteness endowing it with a state of wordlessness that spells “illiteracy”(9).
The zone of “radical illiteracy” is the inner landscape of poetic imagination that knows no borders, where new spaces are “translated” out of palpable space-time, which is the concrete present. To Alexander, the sheer creativity of translation release another consciousness, and language that could hark back to her ancestry and Kerala. The route/root of language is invisible, a memory. And her poem is the ferrying across wordless, tangled thoughts and sensations into the inner recesses of the mind—the poet’s and the reader’s. 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 re-creation 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.

Tracing the preoccupations with language and identity, through her poems, one can easily detect a consistent development in the use of poetic devices. The road taken by Alexander is fraught with the rubble of dislocation, dissonance and loneliness that are overcome, to a large extent, by her acute sensitivity to the cadence of poetry within her. Her earlier poems--The Bird’s
Bright Ring (1976), I Root My Name (1977), Without Place (1978) and Stone Roots (1980) follow a pattern that is woven with her quest for a personal space carved out by words that elude clarification. She experiments ceaselessly with English as her language of poetic imagination, all the time, acutely aware of the subterranean flow of other languages she came across in her childhood and college years.

I Root My Name is a collection of poems that cruise through startlingly clear and precise images of violence and dislocation that evoke nostalgia, rootlessness and alienation poignantly. The images soaked in violence, pain and numbness, open to the light of ancestry, endowing them with a positive touch. The ‘words’ that are ‘stained’ and ‘veined’ cry out their physicality and tautness to propel her search for moorings in her ancestry. Like leaves falling, dissolving and changing hues, her identity dissolves, changes and attains its true colour. The questions “who am I? Whence from I come?” prod the movement of the poems. Her earliest collection of poems, I Root My Name that inaugurate her writing in search of homeland. The book, divided into eighteen short poems, open with an invitation to participate in “the body’s brimming festival” (“Invitation” 8). But death-thoughts violate the celebratory mood of the wedding--“The time for mourning is come” (6),--in blatant opposition to the wedding tone. Her hennaed hands, in the patterns of the stars and moon, point to an imposed designing of life on the woman. Moments of passion escalate into territorial encroachment though “I know you are my place” (“My Brazen Days” 11). The sagacious statement, “But we need time”
(12), reflects the resolving of spatial disjunction by the soothing passage of time. The kinetic image of “a long slow swallow / feathers sunk with exile” (“Bird Head” 5-6), reiterates the desire to fly beyond the reach of alienation.

The walls of the prison and the bars of ethnicity are no different: “Jerusalem is harsh /… you lie within its bars” (“Veined Words” 22, 24). In the title poem, “I Root my Name,” the poet juxtaposes the permanence and majestic power of the ancient trees and the river with the transitoriness of fire and words:

Between the night trees
racked with leaves
and ancient timber
groaning into earth
I root my name. (14-8)

The marked difference between the past and the present is resolved by “the marking of stained words to a page” (12). Another poem “Her Mother’s Words” highlight the possibility of the writer revealing her true self to the reader, unaware of the revelation:

If you sit in a dark room
no light behind you
no one passing in the street can see
my mother said to me. (1-4)

The practical suggestion of the mother to the daughter to conceal her identity, by sitting in the dark sans light behind her provokes the question “how should I write these lines / with out a light, how should I see?” (7-8). The
shocking realization of the reality that ‘the street’ views her in a way that
negates her identity as a woman, who inscribes her body and soul in the white
pages, leads to another realization of the hidden power of language that can
annihilate racial and gender prejudices. It amounts to a rewriting of words in
order to foreground these distinctions. Language bodies forth the invisible in
the visible to the reader. Alexander learns from her mother “a shyness in the
face of the world, a fear of looking straight at the lives of others,” which
developed into the art of withdrawal, “of thinking inwards so that no one could
look and tell from a woman’s face what her heart might hold” (Fault Lines 67).
“Light cannot mutilate / as sight does” emphasises the searing power of social
‘gaze’ that can obliterate the identity of the migrant poet (“Stained Words” 12-
13). The resonance of this poem is carried into a later prose piece “Poem out of
Place – Zone of Radical Illiteracy,” published in 2000:

I think of the poet in the 21st century as a woman standing in a
dark door way … she hovers in a dark doorway … at the
threshold to find a balance, to maintain a home at the edge of the
world … she has to invent a language marked by many tongues.
As for the script in which she writes, it binds her into visibility,
fronting public space, marking danger, marking desire. But
behind her in the darkness of her home and through her pour
languages no one she knows will ever read or write … (9).

Without Place explores tentatively the contradiction inherent in the
carving of a space she calls her own in a language she cannot call her own. The
poet calls it “that horrible, involved poem” and a “maiden attempt” to “overcome the rhetoric of false problems” posed by “academic critics” (Tharu 73). The space carved out in a colonial language posit certain issues related to Indian writing in English: Why write in English? How authentic the writing would be? The long poem follows the trajectory of woman writing, a reality that aggravates the linguistic factor. The Prologue initiates the movement into the silences and restraint implied in woman writing:

A poem by a woman, wiping
her voice dry of fire
and flood, reining it
to speech which is not hers
though its syllables
cut her dusty foot soles
like rats’ teeth turning
a great black mill of time (9-16)

Imaging queen Cleopatra’s tumultuous passion for the “hot heavy Antony” at her lacquered and perfumed feet, “A Mirror’s Grace,” torpedoes the conventional patterning of the story. The tragedy is rendered mute, and the lines resonate the queen’s loneliness through the refrain-shifts: “rimes fair Cleopatra” and “rimes rare Cleopatra” (17, 46). One of the earliest and most urgent themes treated in her writing is the act of speaking, how speech can be curtailed, impaired and, invalidated in the case of an ‘exile’ and woman: “Our lips / must gash to speak” (“To all Exiles” 9-10). Alexander avers that she
writes in order to find out who she is, and in the process experiences the inadequacy of her being a woman--“For to be a woman today, is not to know what oneself is, even more acutely than for a man …” (Tharu 74). ‘Without Place’ illustrates as to how English can be manipulated, contorted to squeeze out the authenticity of experience. The poems abounding in startling animal images--‘rat,’ ‘lemming’--negotiate the trauma of being ‘unspaced,’ unhistoricised’ by Alexander. Language seems to be in the throes of being cajoled and sometimes, coerced into meaning in her third collection of poems.

Stone-Roots contains thirty-three poems wherein disparate places and various crossroads appear to disappear. Many of the poems reflect the urgency in the poet’s response to the Kerala landscape, blending moments of deep lyrical intensity, love and despair. The poems reveal the urge to reach out to one’s roots. Tiruvalla and the house provide that ‘home’ emotionally.

“Sometimes I am in A Garden,” is coloured by the issue of English as the vehicle of poetry with a deepening realisation of its inadequacy in expressing her inmost feelings. The garden and the trees with their bark of ‘burning alphabets’ become the space of her creativity. The language of poetry, of passion and power can flourish only in this garden-space of her homeland.

Another space is etched into her consciousness-- the narrow space of her room in America, and the bare concrete walls, that will not allow the vital language of poetry to grow. It is the “cruelest discipline of space,” where she would wait for the “curious alphabet / articulate with flame” (9-10). Like the poet waiting for the Muse to ignite in him the right words, in Nissim Ezekiel’s poem “Poet,
Lover, Bird Watcher,” the poet in this poem awaits the fiery alphabet to burn to ashes the pallid expressions of an alien language. The American space will have to be transformed into the garden space that has come to lose its specificity, having dissolved into the realm of poetic imagination. The narrow walls of a colonial language built by years of discipline, will crumble down into mere babble. The garden becomes the inner landscape wherein “my heart’s blood” is scraped into poetry. The “featureless garden” attains sharp features in her later poems as the nostalgic space where the poet encounters the complexity of her postcolonial existence. The elemental power that surges through the veins of poetry is sometime devastating, leaving “A bruised fragrance / in the bark / at the root / the lash of a forked tongue” (“Rootedness” 15-8).

House of a Thousand Doors is an intricate tapestry of poems and prose pieces, in which the figure of the ‘grandmother’ is woven in the brightest colour. The garden space is again used to thresh out a creative dialogue between the past and the present. Certain images—the garden well, the mirror, and the ancestral house—accentuate the poet’s urgent need to situate herself in a past, to compensate the lack of history in her present context. History is woven with delicacy and finesse; fact and fiction intermingle to encompass a vast period of time and space. Her search for an identity has to necessarily encounter the working of a larger history, the Freedom struggle and the active involvement of her maternal grandparents in the Nationalist movement. The Mar Thoma community in Tiruvalla, like other communities was divided in its
loyalty to the British. Alexander’s maternal grandparents--K.K. Kuruvilla and Elizabeth--were actively involved in the Nationalist Movement. As a child, she was exposed to the contradictions in the adult response to the colonial rule. Though ‘Illya’ and grandmother ‘Kunju’ were dedicated Gandhians, the other members of their families occupied distinguished posts in the Civil Service and were, one way or the other compliant to the foreign rule. This compliance juxtaposed with the fierce patriotism of the grand parents must have entered her consciousness from her childhood, creating in her a rift and a fault line. The complex familial relationships, the sensuous memories of childhood spend both in Tiruvalla and Kozhenchery, the fine values of patriotism and Gandhism imbibed through her ancestors, the feudal system in her paternal house and the heavy dusty books in her Illya’s library must have marked her identity. The very question of choosing the language to write is underpinned by the guilt of not mastering the script of Malayalam, her mother tongue.

The House of a Thousand Doors is not only about ancestral houses and ancestors, but also about the ‘house’ the poet will build through her writing. To Alexander writing is a building process where the materials used are as concrete and physical as the body with its bones, blood and flesh. Intensely aware of the perennial self-division in nature, she relates this dissonance to the human mind. In her memoir Fault Lines, she refers to Kamala Das’s poem “Blood”: “how early that poem had entered into me and remained: a Kerala woman’s tracing of her blood lines. I think that poem was within me when I looked backwards to my grandmothers, forward to my son and daughter” (75).
Our great grandmother said one day,
You see this house of ours
Now three hundred years old,
It’s falling to little bits
before our very eyes
………………………………………..
For I love this house, it hurts me much
To watch it die
…………………………………………
She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
………………………………..
I have let you down
Old house, I sake forgiveness
………………………………..
But do not blame my blood
So thin, so clear, so fine
The oldest blood in the world

The ancestral house, the great grandmother and the young child are interlinked by an inexplicable and poignant sense of belongingness; the kinetic
energy coursing through the ancient structure informs the patterning of the poem. The gradual decay of the house reflects the slow death of the great grandmother and the dreams of the young child. Born of their ashes, is the realisation that the ‘purity’ of their blood and the rebuilding of the ancestral house are a figment of imagination. Kamala Das’s poem is coloured in the dark hues of pathos and subtle irony. The poem becomes the house, interwoven with the rhythm of life and death. Alexander is drawn to this poem for its strong overtones of nostalgia and the dominant mood of tracing one’s roots. But what finally stays is the looping of nostalgia with the creative act of ‘building’ a poem as the house that will be torn down and rebuild with words carved out of her intense awareness of the ‘body.’ She affirms in an interview that the “making of a house” is “absolutely crucial to the way [she] think [s] about [her] writing. … Maybe it has something to do with a childhood where there was never one house, but always two and each separated by eight thousand miles” (Tharu 11). She observes the inescapable divisiveness within the ‘self’ that can be set right only by using the very materiality of the body to build the poem.

“Tangled Roots” is an evocative prose piece in The Shock of Arrival … in which Alexander explores the interstices in her postcolonial identity with remarkable perspicacity. The title resonates both figuratively and metaphorically in the persistent quest for the ‘imaginative source’ in order to withstand the pressures of life in her new world. There was the dire necessity to unearth and ‘cut through to the soil’ of her life in order to gather the deep matters of the heart, to reach the roots of her very being by tracing a genealogy.
The two grandmothers were entirely different from each other--the maternal grandmother, Kunju, was active in Nationalist Movement an ardent Gandhian, the first woman member of the legislative assembly of Travancore and Mariamma, the paternal grandmother, uneducated, married off at a very young age and who hardly left her husband’s property. Yet the two women were similar to each other in their strength of character and high determination to overcome all the hurdles related to their separate spaces of experience. Her brilliant career as an activist culminated in an act of indomitable courage--she chose a man who was a Nationalist and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Grandmother Kunju’s life upholds the fine values of Gandhism and individual freedom of woman. The paternal grandmother though married young to a feudal landowner was the daughter of a Sanskrit scholar, who strangely enough was not an advocate of women’s education. Yet, in spite of a sparse education she was able to rule her household with an iron fist. Unlike the widely travelled Kunju, she hardly left her household. Alexander marvels at the uniqueness of her female ancestors and discovers her fractured selves in them. “How different they were. … I struggled to figure out how each could be part of me, the woman in the public world, the other held within the traditional fear of domesticity, barely stepping out of her house” (36). The great changes that were taking place in the social and political structures created ripples in their lives that were to shape their identities in a more pronounced way. Despite the confining space of domestic duties, grandmother Mariamma proved her mettle as a staunch anti-colonialist with her silent disapproval of her husband’s feudal
ways. To the poet as a very young child this grandmother became the living example of stoic forbearance and quiet efficiency. From her, she learnt the secret strength of silence and stillness. However, the maternal grandmother, whom she had never seen lived in the tales and memories woven around her, while she could touch the past through her vital link with the paternal grandmother. “I was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth open, permit me to speak. I skipped a whole ring of life and made up a grandmother figure, part ghost, part flesh. She was drawn over what I had learnt of grandmother Kunju. I imaged her: a sensitive, cultured woman; a 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).

The common features underlying the ancestors, along with their disparities offered a rich legacy of female experience and strength to their grand child, the poet. In them, she saw the subtle blending of the private and the public spaces in a woman’s life in the pre-independence period of India. Most probably, this legacy must have gone a long way to bringing in a harmony within the postcolonial descendant, despite her multiple anchorages. A series of poems that revolve around the grandmother figure, interweave into the fabric of her poetry. House of a Thousand Doors and The Shock of Arrival ... become the site of poetic and prose interventions in order to fathom the depth of the ‘tangled roots’ of ancestry. The poems—“Poem by the Well Side,” “Her Garden,” “House of a Thousand Doors,” “Looking through Well Water,” and “Salt Spray” and the prose fiction—“Burnt Hair” and “Grandmother’s
Letters” become the warp and woof of this fabric of writing. The garden well situated in the sequestered realm of a garden becomes a mesmerising yet terrifying space of contemplation and death. In her memoir, Alexander unlocks not only her family history through her female ancestors but also the larger issues of gender bias and patriarchal power over female sexuality. The well becomes a dominant trope to accentuate the voiceless and sightless history of women in India. Fed with terrible stories about women jumping into wells, Alexander, right from her childhood experienced vicariously the helplessness and vulnerability of the ‘fallen’ women. Overwhelmed by the possibility of women doing away their bodies for no fault of theirs, the poet realises with a jolt that “[she] [came] from a long line of well-jumped women” (Fault Lines 107). The image of women jumping into wells was constantly with her during her childhood. The Malayalam term ‘perachathe’ (fallen) was attributed to every woman who dared to flout social norms of decorum and dress code. Alexander observes that woman ‘falls’ by her physicality, unbridled curiosity and sexuality spelt certain doom for her. As it sets off a trajectory of this desperate image of women ‘jumping over wells.’ This transition proclaimed a new era of womanpower, destabilising the existing patriarchal and neo-colonial system and tolling the death knell of her subaltern position. The grandmother figure became the “imaginative source” for the poet to withstand the pressure of ordinary life.

“Poem by the Well side” (The Shock of Arrival) is a dialogue between the past and the present conducted over a garden well. The narrative spins
through various phases of the poet’s life--the child of seven peering into the well and seeing her own face in its waters, and the immigrant poet chiding the fierce old woman who invites her into the murky depths of the well. “I will not turn to her / I will not perish” (19-20). “Looking through Well Water” (House of a Thousand Doors) is a poignant poem in which the images of the grandmother and the well side blend into a searing awareness of the present and loss of an ancestral house with its associations. The well, with its dark, sinister depth, contains the answer to the mystery of life and death. The absence of her grandmother becomes the vital presence for the protagonist. The cruel reality and finality of death draw the line of boundary between the poet and the grandmother figure. Death images crowd the poem, almost stultifying its meaning. The grandmother figure is usually associated with loneliness, isolation and death, in her poems, while in her prose pieces and memoir; the figure is an epitome of courage and love. “At the well’s mouth / fern fronds dark as hair / on an infant skull / nibble into stone” (5-8) and “I hear the koil crying in well water / its beak is glazed with blood / it’s tilted on a nest of clouds / afloat and burning” (20-3) accentuate the contradictory pull of maternal strength and brutal death. It is this complexity of the grandmother image that imbues her writing with a glow of vision. The powerful portrayal of Kunju, the Nationalist, who could spurn the muscle power of the British (“Burnt Hair” 18), and the brave wife of K.K. Kuruvilla, waiting for his release from the jail (“Grandmother’s Letters” 19-29) is a remarkable blending of fact and fiction.
Amazing stories of “Rakshasis” and a special girl “Susikali” ignited her poetic imagination to unimaginable heights. A “Katha” recited in a deep singsong voice by her maternal grandfather Illya about Susikali, who with her magic powers could race through miles in pursuit of Rakshasis. In the recitation, Alexander identifies herself with both Susikali the magic girl and the Rakshasi: “… she was me. I was she, Susikali, exact replica of my four-and-a-half-year-old self granted the boon of magical powers. But I was also the rakshasi. I loved the fierce glitter of that mad woman, the power that let her leap over the rice fields swollen with water, bolt up the highest Indian mountain.” The “stone-eating” girl (Fault Lines 85) is born of reality and imagination, whose penchant for swallowing stones, makes her a female icon of stern discipline and a “perfector of an art” (85). The poet as a child, is totally fascinated by the stone-eating feat of the frail sari-clad girl, seated under the village tree, drawing a large crowd of men. While, to Chinna, the servant, the girl was “making an exhibition of herself“ for the youth and drunkards, the poet discovers in this propensity, the lethal power of language, born of marginalisation and dislocation. The very act of eating stones is a gauntlet thrown at the restrictions and norms of a society that overrule all distinctiveness. The stone-eating girl has developed a language of silent strength and opposition, a feat that opens up new spaces of understanding; the absolute stillness of the stone and the ostracized girl point to the incendiary power of language. Familial stories about certain aunts and cousins who had deviated from the social norms of female decorum and patriarchal values were
cited as examples by her mother, in order to discourage in her daughter the surging passion for independence in her daughter. Topics ranging from the dress code to arranged marriages were discussed avidly in both the family circles and outside in the Khartoum University.

Though coming from a highly educated family, and with a mother who soared to great heights by her brilliance and social interventions, the poet’s mother viewed her daughter’s rebellious nature with anxiety and some trepidation. Deprived of maternal warmth at an early age due to her mother’s frequent visits to the jail and foreign travels, amma (poet’s mother) responded to this loss by advising her daughter that the place of woman is with her family and to “... always remember that your role is to be there at their side, at home” (Fault Lines. 14). Alexander’s journals kept as a teenager contained lines scrawled in between pages of poetry and quotations from Proust, Camus, Wallace Stevens: “If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me? / Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life / God, why teach me to write?” (102). The invocation to God was not to any idea of God, but rather a desperate cry aimed at her mother. The fault lay in the tension she felt between the claims of her intelligence, what her father had taught her to honour, and requirements of a femininity her mother had been born and bred to. Femininity required an arranged marriage, which was the narrow gate through which all women had to enter. Once they entered it, they had to forget their accomplishments other than those that suited a life of gentility. According to the Bible, the first act of disobedience committed by Man stemmed from female sexuality, described as
the Fall of Man. Her Christian background must have contributed to the conflict raging with in her, and propelled her to question the rationale behind the patriarchal code of conduct.

The poems “Her Mother’s Words,” (I Root My Name), “Letter to my mother,” (House of a Thousand Doors), and the long poem, Night Scene, The Garden, reveal the various strands in the texture of the poet’s relationship with her mother, the design woven in the backdrop of the vast social changes under cutting this bond. “Letter to my mother” is a seventeen-line poem on the paradox of rootedness and freedom. The poem is a reference to mother’s letter about how she had planted five new trees and the necessity of a small sharp pruning knife to steady her hands while cutting the branches. The word “planted” signifies the rooted ness of generations to a specific place. It may also imply a stagnant state of mind that discards new thoughts and ideas. Often it becomes a dire necessity to free oneself from such bondage. At the same time, gaining freedom at the expense of rootless ness and loss of identity may not be desirable. The casual exchange of news about planting new saplings in the Tiruvalla garden generate in the protagonist conflicting emotions that propel a trajectory of a philosophic questioning of freedom and kinship.

“Mother, will fruit / trees cut with your knife / shake themselves free?” (15-7) underline the inextricable and inexplicable bond existing between the mother and the daughter. The metaphor of the “five new trees” planted by the mother and of the pruning knife, “something small and sharp” needed by her, launch the poem to multiple levels of meaning. The poet affirms the stabilising hold of
ancestry notwithstanding the spatio-temporal distance between her and her home in Kerala. The mother planting the trees in the rich soil of her garden help to reaffirm the organic unity of the roots with their branches, and of ancestry. In an interview, Alexander explains the connection between the “self-division” of the body with that of the trees (Tharu 69-70). Under the soil the roots divide and in the air the branches divide, yet the pain of the root flows back into the bark, the branch, the twig and the tree flowers. She calls it mostly aptly “the anguish of perennial division.”

Her long poem, Night-Scene, The Garden is a lyrical rendering of the loneliness, desolation and stillness of life-moments centered on the making and unmaking of home. Every little event and moment attains a peculiar lucidity in the stillness of the present. She had started working on the poem in the months after Svati Mariam was born when the experience of childbirth was still fresh with her. Alexander probes into the dynamics of language that can transform the rawness of life moments, the heat of flesh and immediacy of experience into a poignant long poem. She exhorts words to world her past in the present. “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” 179-183). The violence embedded in her femaleness and the massive destruction sown around point to the space of radical dislocation bound by the “barbed wire.” The poem-play is a saga of an ancestral house, its desecration, and its hidden reverberations felt in the lives of its dwellers. The various threads of personal narratives interweave with the social narratives to create a
poem of great resonance. The voices of the mother and the daughter move on parallel lines, sometimes discordant and oppositional. In to this “poem-play” is woven the delicate strands of relationship of a mother and her daughter, caught in the vortex of social changes. They are the “two women / searching for a lost parallel, / drawn by the dim / confusions of our blood” (“Black Water” 4-7). The voices of the mother and daughter weave an intricate design of dreams and fear, of marriage, kinship, and the ancestral house, in the cool darkness of the garden. The narrative voice break into the story telling of the mother and the daughter with time and space doubling themselves in their reminiscences. Into this long poem play is woven the delicate strands of relationship of a mother and her daughter, caught in the vortex of social changes. “Child, my oldest child, / your sisters still unmarried / and you so far away” (22-4) carry the burden of anxiety and loneliness.

The anxiety of dispossession is the main strand running through the tapestry with the “house / riding its own grave” as its overriding image. The epigraph--“The house I had / they took away from me” and “the House we live in hasn’t really / been ours for a long time” is a discerning statement about a house that is snatched away with all its security and joy of childhood, and of a house that disowns its denizens. In this way, the house, the land, and the body become sites of desire and possession leading to a conflict in identity and ownership. The long legal battle fought against the crooked broker over the ownership of the Tiruvalla house by the narrator’s father is also the affirmation of an emotional bond with the “dark, resinous soil,” the swelling incense tree
with its hard, brown fruit, shining leaves and dipping blossoms. The deep knowledge of pain and loneliness inflicts the narrative voice of the poet confronting the postcolonial dislocation. The hardness and sharpness of alienation are imaged in the “barbed wire,” and “granite posts,” against which she leans in a world that is “no man’s land / no woman’s either” in the middle of a life. She is ‘nowhere,’ both spatially and temporarily and “the lost child / lips lifts her eyes / to mine” (176-8). The narrative breaks into the dual voices of the child and the adult; the desolate feelings of the child recur in the adult narrator.

The sixth section of the poem, “Night-Scene” is a marvelous piece of metaphysical musings on the intuitive force that is embodied in nature. The structural patterning of proximity and distance, the tangible and the intangible, accentuate the sheer immediacy of maternal warmth, and the feeling of oneness with the universe.

In darkness still,
I touch my mother’s face
overhead stars race,
flash their rare makings
Vanish into clouds
whose blue-black milk
seeps out in air
A fragrance most maternal (“Night Scene” 1-8)
A sense of belonging to one’s place and house stem from the ‘touch’ of the mother and the fragrance most maternal wafting from within and without. Loneliness and dislocation are shared by both the mother and the daughter:

Child, I cannot tell
all that I see, sometimes
I press my hands against my eyes
 ...........................................................

It does not help that much (“Keeping House” 105-7, 110)

The oppositional stance of the mother towards the British rule is well sketched in “a twelve-year-old / in oiled plats / refusing to sing “Rule Britannia.” The mother confronts the changes by “standing up and mimicking / the words, swearing for India, / learning her English / getting by heart her Malayalam slokas / positioned well for the new world” (“Night Birds”). The same strain of opposition empowers the language of the daughter who invokes the “ferocious alphabets of flesh” to help her claim her heritage. The mother’s anxious words--“your sisters still unmarried” highlight the necessity of marriage for a girl “at the right age” to allow her to cross the threshold of her ancestral house. Alexander reflects on the “narrow gate” of marriage in her memoir (207-209). She bursts out against the decorum of marriage by confessing to her mother that she had been almost destroyed by the “traditionally sanctioned dream of waiting for a man” because she had secretly yearned to be carried into “that land, a house, an old family property” by the man of her choice (Fault Lines 208). Marriage also spelt a feminine form of
transportation, sanctioned by culture, for the simple reason that it was only after marriage that women went places, accompanying their husbands. The social acceptance and respectability accorded to married women is a reality that sears her painfully:

… it came to me, like a petticoat string that cuts into flesh … the only way I had been able to make my way back to this house, into this family, was by marrying and having children

(Fault Lines 208)

Mother shares her inmost thoughts with her daughter:

I used to dream
You and your sisters
Will build homes
And pick the fruits of the Tall green plantain, bring Sons and daughters to our ageing feet (“Cutting Trees” 51-6)

Her dream cuts into the vacant air of the garden to evolve into the shining vision nurtured by the daughter:

And in the empty hold of air Whispers of children Born into this garden (“Glimpsed in Indigo” 51-3)

The Night Scene: the Garden, “Letter to my Mother,” and “Her Mother’s Words” offer a therapeutic release to the poet caught between the silent turbulence of her female ancestors and her own migrant sensibility.
Mother’s voice indenf in the poet’s mind a deep admiration for her quiet strength and understanding: “And watching her stitch a torn hem … or outside, in the garden stooped in the shade of a neem tree, … [she] learnt to love her, love the slow persistence with which she had learnt how to live her life (Fault Lines 14). Her maternal grandfather being no more, amma was her thickest bond, with the gardens of her Tiruvalla childhood, “the blood bond with that life” (100).

Her lifeline stretched from her ancestors, both male and female, to her children Adam and Miriam. ‘Illya’ and her father gave her that essential sense of security and oneness with the soil of Tiruvalla. She writes of her beloved ‘Illya’ in her memoir as a rare personality who, though a great theologian, could inculcate in his young granddaughter an exhilarating relationship with the soil, the trees, the flowers and the animals. “I think of the Tiruvalla house, the courtyard, the clear blue of the pre-monsoon sky, as filled with the spirit of my grandfather. It is where I trace my beginning” (8). He had brought her up upon recitations of the ‘katha’ he made up for her. Besides the Bible, Mahabharatha, and the Buddha stories, he made up his own tales with a special girl ‘Susikali’ playing the heroine with whom the granddaughter identified herself. ‘Illya’ the ‘katha’ spinner enthralled his granddaughter, and initiated her into the magic world of words. She recalls an incident that highlights the infinite love ‘Illya’ had for all the creations of God. Carrying his granddaughter to witness their cow Suseela giving birth to a calf in the dark of midnight and later watch the little calf tug at its mother’s teats, ‘Illya’ very lovingly
predicted: “See, Meena, that’s how we all were. Look carefully. Some day you will make this into a katha.” Saying so, he gently scooped her into his arms so that she could see the nest of a bulbul and a gulmohar leaf freckled with pink (Fault Lines 35).

He led her “from sound to sound, from sight to sight, … a relentless consonance of sense, …” (36). It struck her later, after his death, that her childhood, coming so late in his life, must have seemed a rare gift to him. A gentle soul, who saw in every peace of Nature the presence of God, who very gently but persistently sowed the seed of knowledge and love of books in his only grandchild, Alexander could not imagine a life without him. She drew nourishment from him, as a young thing might from an older being already gnarled with time. “Even now, … almost three decades after his death, I can touch a wall or a tree in the Tiruvalla garden where we spent many hours together, and a stream of feeling will flood me. Sometimes in my dreams I cry out his name and wake up confused at so much longing welling up out of a grown woman” (36). Yet, Alexander considered his death timely and necessary, “in the nick of time,” for her desire for freedom and a fresh life would have been in conflict with Illya’s Gandhian values. “And I was a female child, three quarters of a century younger. The blood that skipped in me had another pulse. So I learnt early that the deepest loves bear a dissonance within them. … Where everything is fractured, plural and multiple” (36). However, she imbibed a keen awareness of social inequalities and the need for social justice from her close association with her Illya. “The plasticity of their (Illya’s
and Kunju’s) lives in the early decades of the century, the sense that the future could be remade in the image of justice, fascinated me” (154).

In the *Illiterate Heart*, dedicated to her father, the poems “Port Sudan” and “Elegy for My Father” may be cited as some of those rare poems that breathe out the hidden feelings of love and admiration of a daughter for her father. “Port Sudan” describes vividly her first crossing the borders and the sea at the age of four. The scene is knotted into memories of her father running down the pier to carry her. That first ocean crossing to Sudan remains etched in her memory “as a figuration of death” (*Fault Lines* 65). The poem recreates the tumult of joy and relief experienced by the little girl as she dances her way into the strong arms of her handsome father. Her ‘appa’ had invented a tale that never failed to excite her—the tale of recognition. He fabricated the story of how, on espying the white steamer carrying his daughter, sailing up the waterway from the terrace of his hotel, he raced to her in his taxi to carry her up in his arms. “I made appa repeat the tale of recognition. … The narrative repeated made an entry for me into a new life, affixing a running stitch of child and father, appa and I” (*Fault Lines* 68).

“Elegy for My Father” is a powerful statement of a daughter’s deep relationship with her father, who is no more. Sometimes bewildered and often ‘dislocated’ in her postcolonial world of experience, Alexander found great solace in the lucid and frank centrality of her father’s vision of life. Order in life and clarity of thought appealed to him and he believed in keeping his own emotions under firm dominion. Though, as a meteorologist he was well
informed of the instabilities of the winds and the waters, he believed in the
“geometric precisions of a physics that could refigure all things in a divinity
without division.”

You are tucked and seamed
in my blood when I dance in my sleep
fire light in my hair
and all my joints crackling
I am not other than I am

…………………………..

When you touch the air
I shall be your mother,
a disparate body
broken by blood

(“Young Snail” House of a Thousand Doors 10-4, 20-3)

The body knows the pain and thrill of creativity, and to a woman, her body is
the gate through which, she relates to the outer world.

The act of writing and the experience of domesticity have deeply
enriched and nourished her poetry. The divisiveness of ‘self’ and multiple
identities, the conflict among the poet, academic and immigrant in Alexander
are subsumed in her experience of motherhood. The poet in her perceives
Nature at close quarters and at odd angles through the eyes of a child, of her
son and her daughter. The purity of infancy and the freshness of childhood
create an ambience that is essential for a deeper insight into the mystery and
hidden joys of life. The migrant sensibility draws on the newer responses of the second generation to border crossings, both cultural and geographical. Certain questions loom large in this context. How do the new generation relate to a place identified by their parents (the first generation immigrants) as their ‘homeland’ or ‘nadu’? Do they undergo an anxiety of dislocation as keenly as their parents, or do they adapt easily to their ‘home abroad’? Will India remain for them a land of strange customs, exciting tales and a perennial curiosity? Are they not influenced by the naming patterns of the west? The following three poems in the *House of a Thousand Doors* hurtle through the rough terrain of writing out one’s identity. Every little experience and moment are refracted through the children to attain new meaning and dimensions of thought. The sheer physical immediacy of motherhood is pervaded by a peculiar sense of continuity of generations. “Written before Child Birth” celebrates the first buds of a tree, and the music of life within the womb of the woman. The first bloom of the incense tree planted by Illya is sensuously described. It throbs with life anticipating the new birth of the flowers--“the heaving bloom parted at the heart / with tongues of flesh” (5-6). The sensuous beauty of the flower unsettles the immigrant mother in whose womb the first stirrings of life are felt: “Another heart is panting” (10). But unlike the certainty of the bud blooming in its own space, the bud within the womb, bloom to reveal eyes--“tired, remote.” The eyes of the child, so remote and distant highlight the predicament of the border-crossing generation of being unable to bloom in a single space, like the buds of the incense tree.
Alexander recollects her son drawing his map of the world after a visit to Kerala (Fault Lines 171). He identified the three places he knew the most and recognized as his own--Kozhencheri, Delhi, and the sixth floor of Manhattan. “He beamed in delight at his own creation, the hereness, the honey of the life included in it” (172). The tension surrounding self-definition emerges in a scene where Alexander’s son, Adam, encounters a man who asks him: “What are you?” Adam of mixed heritage, chooses to identify himself as neither American nor Indian, but, rather a Jedi knight. (172). Alexander wonders, “What did my first-born wish for himself? Some nothingness, some transitory zone where dreams roamed, a border country without passport or language?” (172). Even choosing a cultural identification has its boundaries and borders by which to abide. “Spring 1981” has a photographic brevity and impact; the first step taken by her son is captured in its suddenness and vitality. “He turns, toes askew, to reach for me / a stalk snaps” (15-6). The opening line “what I love will not be measured / in hand span, thumb-thickness, width of nostril or hair,” is the gauntlet thrown at the skeptics who would aspire to measure the intangible. The method of measuring in hand span is also a reference to the alleged measurement of Indians by the British for anthropological survey, and of the fertile land to be conquered. “What was surveyed could be known, controlled by sufficient use of force” (Fault Lines 94). There abides in the suddenness of the babe taking his first steps, the flash of the receding mist and the melting of the snow, a mysterious power “minted in darkness / burst from root and womb, deciphering time” (18-9). The organic
growth of maternal love becomes the staying power for the immigrant poet. “Waiting for Rain” is a remarkable study on the dialectic relationship of the language with place. Parthasarathy’s discerning statement about words loosing their colour, like leaves, under alien skies. [Rough Passage] bound back to Alexander’s “I’m too new in this place / to name, unpin themselves, let go …” (11-2). To the young son of three, the complex task of ‘naming’ the trees and flowers in New York, gets sublimated into a wordless joy—“No words / come to spell out / the shining / in him” (5-8). Bliss resides in the utter simplicity of the single word “look!” uttered by the child to contain his first thrill of rain: “Look! he cries / then nothing” (3-4). Absolute stillness and perfection blend in the kinetic expression ‘Look.’ The simplicity of language is juxtaposed with the unnerving adult experience of the incompatibility of words and the place—“why does the oak that shades us / lock its limbs?” (12-13). The impossibility of naming the trees and the flowers of a new place disturbs the poet, accentuating the vulnerable state of an immigrant. Her memoir unravels the path of self-discovery undertaken by the poet, and her struggle to forge a sense of identity is set against the unstudied response of her children to the frequent queries put to them about their identities.

In “Blood Line” (River and Bridge), dedicated to her one-year-old daughter Swati Miriam, the poet celebrates the elemental power in the female psyche through her girl child. She is Nature’s child, “the rain on the tamarind tree,” “an enemy to burnt grass,” and the precious link along the matrilineal line.
She is my mother’s
mother who cries in me,
my line of blood
our perpetuity. (9-12)

The poet exulting in the bounty of freedom and joy of childhood, recognises in her child, the grandmother figure who had paved her own path in the jungle of orthodoxy. In her daughter, she sees herself--“a girl child of four who has climbed up the smooth bark of a lovely apple tree … her face is free for the light to shine on it … gently rocking back and forth as the visible world flows through (“Poetics of Dislocation” 3). The birth of her children also mark the birth of her new self, in another country. Implied in this rebirth is also the unsettled feeling of being drawn into the vortex of an otherness. “… all that [she] was, contracted into being a wife, … a woman who had crossed a border to give birth in another country” (Fault Lines 164). The silent strength of her paternal grandmother, who never stirred from her home but ruled the household with an iron hand, seeps into her consciousness as being a part of that matrilineal lineage with her daughter, Miriam, its last link.

Some of her early recollections of the learning of English are associated with her skin colour that isolated her from her European classmates in Khartoum, and the “shame” experienced while learning to repeat English words and of not getting them right (113). It gave her a sense of dislocation and of living a border existence, of being bisected between her Indian past and the English present. Her Tiruvalla days filled with the musty fragrance of soil and
grass cannot be translated in a foreign language. She strongly felt that her Tiruvalla childhood revealed a reality that hardly blended with her Sudan teenage years, for “I could not turn the Malayalam utterances into English” (Fault lines 121). She asks herself why she should ever want to “turn those words of the language where I lived and moved in my inmost being into an English that could never carry that emotion” (Fault Lines 121). In an interview, she refers to a stream of Malayalam oral poetry entering her poetic consciousness—the Syrian Christian church services, the songs of the peasants and workers (“Lyric Poem in a Time of Violence” 8). Though the lyric and the first person singular fascinated her, she realised the inextricable link between the private form and social realities. She explores the possibilities of the lyric, the intensely private form, to bear witness to history. A tenuous relationship exists between places and histories, a reality to be confronted in poetry. This is visible in Alexander’s innovation of the lyric form, which grapples with multiple geographies and languages of migrancy, as well as confronts the personal and public facets of dislocation and grief through the working of memory. According to her, the act of crystallising emotion through images frees the poet from the burden of experience. Language renders the intangible world of emotions and experience in images, which “seems to be the great gift of poetry” (3). In other words the intense privacy of the lyric form should negotiate with and appropriate the history of an event, though “… the histories … are often brutal and violent” (“Lyric Poem…” 3). Thus, poetry bridges the personal space and the public. History abides in the visible and the invisible, in
the external world of events, and in the “irruptions of the imaginary” to weave
in an internal history of the poet. History, to Alexander is also a space into
which memories can flow, and “a depth of shared sense” (“Bordering
Ourselves” 63). The “barbed wire” of segregation and violence becomes the
dominant trope in her close encounter with language that shapes her identity.

The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience is in the
form of a large piece of ‘migrant music’ with an overture and a coda. The
poems and prose pieces are structured neatly as “Piecemeal Shelters,”
“Translating Violence,” “Making Up Memory,” and “Skin with Fire Inside:
Indian Women Writers.” It is a crucial text in the immigrant discourse that
examines in a comprehensive manner the multi-dimensionality of
postcoloniality. The epigraph from Kadambari strikes the keynote of this long
piece of postcolonial musings. The king Sudraka questions his newly gifted
parrot Vaisampayana not only about its birth but also of its previous life—“…
Tell me every thing about yourself starting with your birth. … Do you
remember what happened to you in another life? … How were you caught in
this cage” This notion of previous births and the subsequent identities work as
the overarching principle in this postcolonial text. It explores the spatio-
temporal configurations marked by language and memory along with a
perceptive analysis of Indian Women writing. The text moves on the twin axis
of a ‘shock of arrival’ to a distinct space-time of the present, and the ‘shock of
recognition’ of a distant space-time. Inherent in the postcolonial angst of
displacement is the nostalgic bond to a space-time that remains a mirage
despite its visceral quality and emotional impact. The present is constructed as being complicated and confrontational. Alexander probes into the labyrinth of self-discovery in a multi cultural context, set apart from her Mar Thoma moorings in Kerala, in a sensitive manner. Written under the sign of America, her poems foreground the complexity of finding one’s space in both her writing and the world she lives in. In “Accidental Markings,” a prose piece in The Shock of Arrival …, the theme of ancestry revisits the second generation of Indian immigrants in America. Alexander connects ancestral memory with history, the past with the vital present in an amazing manner through the question posited to her mother--“what would it be like for her grand daughter … to try to take back that tree, that river, that ancestry, and in such naming make the world over again?” (2) The naming of things equals owning them and the reconstruction of memory / history, counters the grand narratives. The ‘markings’ shape and reshape identities. In another essay “Bordering Ourselves” (The Shock of Arrival …), Alexander writes of borders shifting within her. As an immigrant in America, she felt she was living in a place where she had no history. Questions like “who was I?” “Where was I?” and “When was I?” assail her. Her very dress--jeans, short hair--meant that she could be some one from Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, a part of the shifting diaspora. But clad in sari, her Indian identity stands out as a flag. Close encounters with racialism prompted her to rethink on how to live her life in New York, how to walk the streets, and how to enter public space. The fact that “one is marked by one’s body” confronts at Alexander, the Asian-American poet. She confesses
that though equipped with an American passport that guarantees her a free entry, she is still bewildered by racism prowling in the dark corners of the street. The enticement of America is in its dazzling multiplicity, but shifting borders can also be tormenting. It is the body, the clothes, hair, skin colour that ‘mark’ her.

In *The Shock of Arrival* …, she confesses in the essay “Language and Shame” that “my mother tongue approaches the condition of dream. Its curving syllables blossom for me in so many scripts” (11). She realises that being coloured and female in America is an “incendiary” experience that has “extraordinary valency.” Her body butts into view as something alien in a space that is America, and in a time that is present. She finds an inextricable link between her body and language, for she connects creative writing with shame. As a child, she used to hide out to write in Khartoum: the only place where she could write in peace was a toilet for no one would thrust the door open on her. She also learnt to write in snatches partly because she was conscious of her mother’s disapproval over her poetic efforts. Hence her early attempts at writing poems had an aura of “something illicit” and shameful. Languages are washed over her, Hindi, Malayalam, Arabic; it was however, in English that she learnt to chisel her thoughts and feelings, with Malayalam remaining the language of her dreams. She as a “truly postcolonial creature” learnt to live in an English that bends and sways to other territories and tongues.
The introductory poem “Provenance,” in the *Illiterate Heart* sets the tone for the new book of poems. The primacy of the pulsating rhythm of the heart is reiterated. Relationship, kinship and memory jostle each other to resolve into the tranquility of self-knowledge. Words mean nothing as they enter the blank space of a page as verbs and nouns:

I lead you into the page

With you I enter space where verbs

Have little extension, where syntax smolders. (7-9)

The poems as a whole, mark a journey back to one’s roots, to the inner recesses of the self and to the eternal play of language. Alexander is haunted by that invisible space where meaning is made and unmade. The indigo, colours the poems, as evoked in the concluding line of the poem “Indigo,”—“I search for myself / in the map of indigo” (19-20). A medley of speeches-- Kya, Kya Hum Kon Hai? Ithar Hum Kon Hai? / Nammal Ivide Aara? Ivide Nammal Aara?” (87-88) in the poem “Gold horizon” accentuate the migrant sensibility to it’s fullest:

This is the immigrant’s fury, no,

Who understands my speech?

Further what is my speech?

Dropped, pounding as rice grains might. (26-29)

Language not only refuses to mean anything but is also bared to illegible handwriting. “My script hovers / at the edge of the legible” (“Indigo” 11-2).

Returning to the ancestral house in Tiruvalla, and thumbing through the *Heart*
of Darkness on the damp floor where grandfather’s library used to be, the poet rediscovers territories of herself: “I was Marlow and Kurtz and still more / a black woman just visible at the shore” (“Illiterate Heart” 9-10). The narrative voice in the novel refract three perspectives of the experience of colonisation--of the observer (Marlow), perpetrator of crimes (Kurtz), and the dumb victim (African). Metaphorically, the three viewpoints merge into one and persist in the human psyche as experienced by the poet. This ambivalent stance complicate her journey of self-discovery. The slow discovery of self engenders the coining of words that jostle each other self-consciously:

You think you write poetry!  Hey you-
As he sidestepped me dressed neatly
In his kurta and dhoti,
A mahakavi from the temples of
Right thought.
Or one in white flannels
unerringly English, lured from Dove Cottage, (15-21)

Caught between a “Maha Kavi” in his Kurta and Dothi and a person in white flannels “unerringly English,” a struggle evolves in the appropriation of English to convey her unformed and evolving subjectivity. English sounds are to be mastered and ‘mouthed to perfection,’ and ‘Tom and Bess’ in the Reading Made Easy books would show her the way. In their sailor and caps, the ‘children’ were white as milk and seemed to the narrator as unreal and pallid as the dead. Most probably, the poet in Alexander would prefer to voice and body
forth her intense feelings and thought in a language that does not carry the burden of intimacy and accountability: “I longed to be like Tom and Bess / dead flat on paper” (82-83) and “I’ll never be locked in a cage of script” (105-106).

Among the many languages, she spoke and learnt--Malayalam, Arabic, Hindi, French and English--she had to master the colonist’s language, English as an expatriate Indian child in Khartoum. It was the only practical way to encounter the new challenges of immigrant life. A distancing is achieved when the heat of emotions is couched in a language other than the mother tongue. Arabic, Persian, Hindi and Malayalam crowd in to her hot head, yet the heartbeats of ‘the Illiterate heart’ cannot be teased into writing. When words are disembodied and cutoff from the pulsating heat of the body, they lie “dead flat on paper.” “I will never enter that house, I swore, / I’ll never be locked in a cage of script” (106-107). The “cage of script” could refer to her mother tongue Malayalam that bore the burden of propriety and custom; yet, its spoken form enriched by the musty vigour of Kerala soil. One detects an evasive stand towards a systematising of the language of desire, the words that embody the “self.” The language could be either her mother tongue or any foreign language, for to Alexander, a creative outpour of words is necessarily associated with shame. In the chapter “Language and Shame” of her Fault Lines, she describes her encounter with English as an “outsider.” She is ashamed of her inability and unwillingness to pronounce the English words--“duck,” “pluck,” “silk,” “milk,” as her English tutor would have her say. But
the words were known to her in a different way, the Indian-English way. Having ironed out all traces of the non-English, Alexander found herself an “outsider” for the simple reason that she could speak English almost perfectly. Right from her childhood she had identified two ways of using the language she had so meticulously learnt—the essays, exercises and schoolwork open to public scrutiny, and the explosive words that tore into herself in the form of lyrics, that are fiercely private (Fault Lines 113). “What beats in my heart? Who can tell? I cannot tease my writing hand around that burnt hole of sense, figure out the quick step of syllables” (63-6).

A parallel reading of “The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity” and of “Body, Memory, Desire in Asian American Art” (The Shock of Arrival …) provide a better insight into the ambivalent nature of identity in the personal and the social space. “The Poem’s Second Life …” is a perceptive study of the incalculable resonance of the nostalgic space in the resurrection of a poem. The self, being inextricably bound to a place, the confusion caused by the constant uprooting and displacement indent on the identity of the poet. Alexander compares her incongruous presence on the streets of Manhattan, with the village boys sporting their synthetic bright T-shirts on the hillside of Kozhencheri. She would like to scrutinise the extent to which her sense of self-identity was being eroded by the gaze of the world that proclaimed her the ‘other.’

She aspires to bring back to life / resurrect her Tiruvalla past, which in her poetry forms the edifice of her later migrant experience. She terms this
process the ‘second life’ in poetry. Poem is both words and ideas and their mutual interaction create a symphony of significance that carries the strain of memory, of a “threshold where soil slips and holds” (80). To arrive at the resonance of the hidden and dumb spaces of her mindscape she uses the grandmother figure to mediate between her inner self and the world. “In my search for an imaginative source sufficient to withstand the pressure of ordinary life, where so much of what I knew myself to be was hidden, veiled, … I fused with her: not one, but two, the radically disparate facets of my grandmothers known and unknown haunting me, till … [they] threatened to annihilate my separate, distinct self” (82). The process is fraught with the unpredictable discovery of a self that can withstand the shock of recognition. She considers the writing of a poem to be both an evasion and a discovery--the evasion of elements that hinder the flow of the poem, and the discovery of the untappable self. The discovery is made possible by the very materiality of the language and the unintended reflexive communication among the words. If migrant poetry gains strength from the experience of dislocation and border crossings, Asian American Art, in its search for new identities is also energised by dislocation and the jagged boundaries of the disjunctive world. Cast into a strange new setting, the creative self has to respond to the query, who I am. Memory works its way in the Art Exhibits by way of reinterpreting the history of one’s country found in the untold myths and stories that have enriched culture. To the poet, the re-telling of history is an intensely personal experience, its warp and weft being, the ambivalence underlying the familial
and the social. It points to the necessity of an ‘aesthetics’ in order to balance
the disparities and disjunctions of a postcolonial life with the inner rhythm of
the ‘self’ embodied in words.

Anna Sujatha Mathai’s poems, in general, oscillate towards the interiors
of the mind. The poet chisels with finesse the nuances of physical details that
ultimately dovetail into some philosophic statement. Spatial specificity and the
resultant complexity of social and cultural configurations form the hidden
layers in her poetry. The interiority broadens out to embrace or confront a
world of ideological values--of patriarchy or of colonialism. More than
valorising the postcolonial angst of a hyphenated self with multiple anchorages,
the poet undertakes a tortuous journey into the dark interiors of the self in order
to substantiate the inextricable link between the inner and the outer space. The
mundane stillness of daily life, the listless days and lonely nights colour her
moods, her words and help to augment her sensitivity to the smallest stir in the
outer world.

An intense awareness of Life’s transitoriness, the anguish of loss,
separation and unwantedness are webbed into the poetic design in mellow
shades of telling metaphors. Yet, the imagery reveals the rare gleam of
goodness and untainted joy in the murkiest depths of life. Mathai reveals in her
letter--“a poem for me is a perfect coming together of words, rhythm, meaning,
creating a pattern which moves and illuminates.” Her first book of poems
Crucifixions is a tentative introspection into the dislocation suffered by the
‘lyric self’ in a personal space where love is hard to find. The poet strives to
achieve wholeness and a harmony with the world outside and within her. She speculates on the varieties of human freedom and the bonds across space and time to explore personal relationships.

She tries to create an identity, despite the growing desolation. The poem “Creativity” is a sensitive study of the umbilical cord of creativity that nourishes the poetic persona, sans motherhood. A woman’s identity is closely linked with her body and her motherhood. “Not for me the wonder filled / recognition of mother by child / any woman could pity me / and I flinched from pity’s wounding stare” (8-11). Her identity rests on the axis of how she is viewed by society and how she views herself. It is her body, or her physical appearance that makes her ‘visible’ to the world, and indents her personality. Her ‘barrenness’ is transmuted into the fecundity of poetic imagination, that can recognise ‘other miracles’ in Life. “But I have known other miracles / and have drunk deep from joy’s cup” (12-3). To the poet, identity is her sense of self, characterized by an emphasize on the inner voice and the ability to find a way of being that is authenticated by that self. Identity is also relational and associative of the family, community, language and religion. The private space of her home and family is erased by the patriarchal norms of society. She comes to focus on the body of writing, when the sheer materiality of ‘place’ is exterminated. To Mathai, space is the interiority of personal experience, the ‘attic’ of creativity. She learns to use words and silence, and adopts the defensive strategy of speaking from more than one point of view. Her ‘I’ is never definite nor singular and it eludes both the writer and the reader. Her
poems, in general, can be taken as a long narrative of the ‘I,’--the female, the
daughter, the wife and the adult--each relating in its distinctive way to the
patriarchal society, at the same time forming and re-forming an identity that
eludes definition.

Gloria Anzaldúa, the Mexican American writer and activist, the
advocate of a new ‘mestiza’ consciousness, makes a pertinent point regarding
the societal norms imposed on women. “Educated or not, the onus is still on
woman to be a wife / mother … women are made to feel total failures if they
don’t marry and have children” (39). The cultural sanction of marriage and
respectability doled out to a married woman is considerably weakened when
she fails to bear children. “For a woman of my culture there used to be only
three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a
prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice:
entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-
autonomous persons. A very few of us” (Anzaldúa 39). This ironic observation
on the meagre options thrown open to woman can be easily applied to women
of all times and place.

In the tangled terrain of a gendered reality, there are territories to be
fought for, to be won and to be guarded as their turf if women have to preserve
their personhood. The woman with a strong sense of the self will still find
herself up against the granite wall of a community that forces her to first
qualify as someone ‘useful.’ To carve a space for herself that goes beyond this
domestic utility a woman has to be brave enough to give up what does not
matter anymore. She needs to cross over barriers that belittle her worth and maim her potential in the name of social respectability (Kannan, Lakshmi 5).

In Mathai’s poem, the movement is from the ‘other’ to the isolated self, in the direction of a larger reality. There is clear indication of the external landscape becoming an extension of the interior landscape in her poem “My World” (The Attic of Night). The nerve center of the structural pattern of juxtaposing the urban and the rural, the ‘outward’ and the inner, the past and the present is the identity crisis experienced by the protagonist. The space and the self interact in various ways. An excess of adjectives in the first stanza—‘gleaming bridges,’ ‘glinting highways,’ air-conditioned cars, blind city built of stone—move into a personalised space of nostalgia. A keen sense of loneliness colours the nostalgic space-time of “a childhood evening / in my own country / when the colours of the sunset were young / filling me with a strange, raw pain” (10-13). The binariness of the urban-rural, of estrangement-intimacy is questioned in the last stanza:

You- leaned your head against my shoulder
and… suddenly… the city was no longer a stranger (21-23)

Space is relative, for in the ‘crowded car,’ the poet experiences the expansion of joy and identity in the closing of space and moments of intimacy. The ‘other’ in her is annihilated in one single expression—“this is my world.” The poem exemplifies the interaction of space and self in a paradoxical way—the contraction of space and the expansion of ‘self.’ External factors get subsumed in the moment of self-realisation, “and deep in the heart of stone / a flower
bloomed” (28-29). “Between Two Worlds” (The Attic of Night) is a beautiful balancing of the self and the world. Waking from the mist of other worlds, the ‘self’ confronts the mundane reality with a resigned air, watching with trepidation the slow death of her dreams, and her world of imagination being corroded by the glare of the day. Between the two spaces of experience--the surreal world of dreams and the concrete world of reality, is the in-between world of the self. Awakening from her deep slumber, with the mist of her dreams hovering by, she has to encounter the mundane rush of the morning hours. “The sun is already more cruel / the maid arrives to clean, and do her quick stint for the day” (26-27). The relentless flow of city life stifles her creativity, hurling her on to the edge of meaningless existence. The ‘other world’ of poetic imagination is engulfed by the real world of “clatter, mess and rush.” But, it is the brittle reality of ordinariness that anchor her drifting world of imagination and challenge “the mind hovering like a lost bird” to seize the quickness of life at its raw. The interior and outer landscape converge into the crisis of the self, caught between the magic hour of stillness and drowsy dreams, and the crashing din of the concrete reality.

The seashell containing within its spirals and twists ‘the mystic life within,’ the sea’s boom, wild cries of birds, and the surf breaking on remote shores epitomise the ‘self’ exploring the world by “resting within itself” (“The Shell” Life On My Side …). Yet, this penchant to withdraw into the stillness of interiority is almost totally absent in her other poems--“Tiruvella,” “Mother’s Stories,” “Tight Rope Walkers”-- that focus on familial ties. Culture forms
beliefs and shapes identity of a community. It focuses on kinship and relationship and very often, the welfare of the family, the community and the tribe becomes more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin and last as self. In the poem “Families,” Mathai examines the dialectic relationship of the individual with the collective. The elemental strength of familial bonds give the individual, in the prime of youth, no choice but surrender to the tides, rhythm and pull of families. Kinship becomes a dead albatross to be thrown aside for freedom. But old age, infirmity, and loneliness create an urge to enter the web of relationship. Inherent in this realisation is the fear of loneliness, and one way of countering it is by acquiescing to the collective interests and dreams, and relinquishing the personal. Anzaldúa writes of how she took the decision to leave her home, a difficult one, as it implied cutting herself from her source, the mother. The freedom to live one’s life endorses a definite disengagement from the family. “I had to leave home so I could find my self, and find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me. … but I didn’t leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away taking with me the land …” (38). Meena Alexander writes of almost a similar experience when she left her parents at Khartoum to fly to London for her Doctoral studies. “I think I was calm, ready to move on. I had already cut my bonds. I would fly loose” (Fault Lines 136). The visual of her amma pleading her not to forget “our people,” and to go to Church, with her arms wide open and empty, as her daughter stepped away, blend easily with Anzaldúa’s vivid memory of an old
photograph of her holding her mother’s hands and her tremendous strength to leave her mother and all that picture stood for (Anzaldua 38).

In Mathai’s poem, “Families” (The Attic of Night), two disparate images of family are etched--the inflexible, restrictive system of relationship, retarding the growth of individuality, and a network of secret bonds that lead the beleaguered self to the immensity of experience and collective wisdom. An inexorable prison house, but a solace to aching loneliness, “families are the steps that / lead out of the well / the way down to the river / which leads to the sea” (19-22). An unquenchable desire to connect is couched in a profound statement, “families are boats where / strangers cling together” (23-24). The social system of family is scrutinised through two entirely different stages of life--of robust youth, (impatient of rules and duties), and of infirmity and old age, (wallowing in loneliness). A contextual shift from the poetic to the cultural is achieved with ease and grace in the poem. The resonance of Kerala lingers.

“In Tiruvella” is firmly set in the Kerala space of Tiruvalla. All the familial tropes are woven into the poem--the grandparents, the old house with grandfather’s library and his “wonderful-smelling old books,” grandmother’s kitchen and the old well where the children loved to help her draw water. Yet, beneath the conventional tropes lies a sharp critique of marital relationship, of the apparent incompatibility between her grandparents. The disconcerting advice of her grandmother, “get her married / before the light goes out of her face,” makes the granddaughter ponder on the strange transience of the ‘light,’ in the life of a woman. The light is the radiance of youth, joy and hope that
briefly visit a girl on her life-journey. The aftermath is a long story of adjustments and patient suffering by which she learns “to live in candle-light / When other lights went out” (“Light”14-15). The linear flow of the family narrative retreat into the cold rockery of reflection. Harsh memories that assail the persona must be hushed into a stillness of silence. The poem plays on the imaginative flow of memory investing it with irony, the ideal family ambience being punctured consistently. The visuals are contrastive and realistic enough to highlight the tension inherent in every human relationship. The poet never attempts to paint the family portrait in bright hues and gloss over its ‘fault lines.’ The poem begins with an ironic statement on the graves of her grandparents--“My grandmother’s grave has no flowers upon it / They have built a railway line close by” (1-2). This leads to the wry observation--“Even death has not parted my grandparents / Though life did, / and their graves touch / though they never were close in life” (5-8). The ancestral house has slowly succumbed to the onslaught of time and forgetfulness, the coconut trees yield less fruit, and the majestic jackfruit and temple flowers have withered. Moments of excitement--“We loved to help her draw water from the old well”--are coupled with a new awareness of female sexuality--“She never thought it seemly / that we young girls / Should sit and argue with grandfather / In the presence of other men” (17-20). Personal identity is held by the invisible strings of family, community and religion, and reminders that “we were growing up now,… / And would soon be married, if we were lucky” (18-19), would soon elicit the query “what was it, this light, in my young face / And
what put it out?” (25-26). Light and shadows flit in and out—the silence of pain and detachment fill the void of forgetfulness. The magic of understanding weaves its way into the labyrinth of human relationship. “The kind old grandfather,” considered ugly by his wife, “helped her learn enough English / to wade through the works of Dickens and Thackery” (45-46). Nostalgia for the old well that mirrored the young face of the grandchildren, the oil baths with ‘inja,’ and the “wonderful-smelling old books” in grandfather’s study, coagulate into a knowledge born of experience of mute suffering that is bequeathed to the grandchildren visiting their ancestral house. Nostalgia gives into a new understanding of a past, and of ancestral experience in the light of the present. Bitter years of childhood and youth spent under a step mother, make the grand mother confess to her grand daughter, “Don’t tell anyone, but I don’t think there is any God” (57-58). Religion, like the institution of marriage, is distinctly patriarchal, and the ‘God’ moulded by it will not give justice to woman. Yet, the same grand mother, after her death, came to her in a dream to express her great joy—“You know I was never happy / But now I know this great joy. Can you feel it?” (78-79) The ancestral house carries knowledge embedded in memories of childhood vacations, and the poem “In Tiruvella” marks the site of complex human relationship and the beginning of female awareness. The easy flow of the narrative, the dramatic and auditory quality of description peel off to reveal flashes of intuitive truth. The poet experiences vicariously the throes of gaining female identity through her grandmother. The passage of time and generations cannot demystify the complex nature of life
and human relationship. Beneath the apparent incompatibility of the grandparents is the firm terrain of security and reliability that protects their marital bond. “She had been beautiful once, / but had been married at eleven, / to a man she did not find handsome” (40-42). But after his death, “grandmother in her despair could only say, / Grandpa always knew where the stamps were kept” (72-73). Their mutual dependence is highlighted in grandmother’s assertion that “If it weren’t for me he would be completely cheated.”

The poem “Coming Running Jumping,” can be taken as a counter-poem to “In Tiruvella” and “Families.” Marital discord is foregrounded in a setting that is distinctly postcolonial. The old maid Angela narrates with gusto and drama, the ‘coming, running jumping’ of the doctor husband, carrying a bag stuffed with money and going off in his car most unceremoniously without a backward glance. The action is fraught with layers of significance, and the narration swings from the protagonist (wife) to the maid-- the sufferer to the sole witness. The title vibrates with the bewildered excitement of old Angela and the silent anguish of the wife. Indian-English is abundantly and dexterously used as a poetic strategy to cushion the drastic impact of the collapse of a family on the protagonist and the reader. Angela’s breathless narration, by its conversational style, carries much irony; and the class differences between the mistress and the servant evaporate into an invincible woman-bonding. The crude desertion of the husband stultify the wife, and “Angela, being deaf, didn’t hear my gasp” (26). Yet the knowledge born of this brutal act weighs on the protagonist, its resonance also felt in the old caretaker, Angela who has also
had her share of the burden of loneliness—“Angela knows about long silences / and loneliness” (29-30). The mistress and the old caretaker are bonded in this experience of sorrow, loneliness and unwantedness. The reverberations of Angela’s pathetic query—“who care for me when I be old? / Who bury me when I die?” (33-34) linger in the protagonist and the reader. The narrative moves in jerks, to keep pace with the frantic hurry of the ‘master,’ the breathless indignation of the old caretaker, and the silent gasp of the wife. The tranquil ambience of the Tiruvalla house, the stoic acceptance of the ups and downs of marital life by the grandparents afford an incisive contrast to the hurried and distraught pace of familial life confined within the four walls of a city apartment. The modern woman has to confront the shattering of marital bonds, deprived of moral strength and companionship. The dilemma of identity assaults her as never before. Loneliness overpowers her when she loses the life-line of a lost generation and community that has faded into the cold silence and indifference of contemporary life and society.

Startlingly simple, the poem “An Old and True Beauty” (Life-On My Side … ) arrives at the peak moment of realisation of “the otherness of the self / like another shore” (7-8). The paradox of searching for the remote and the new and discovering the strange in oneself is ‘startling’ in its sheer unpredictability. The ‘remote’ and the ‘strange’ are not as ‘startling’ as the old and the familiar in the ‘self’ itself. The poet achieves a total vision of identity by being able to see beyond the apparent rupture of identity and accept the ‘other’ in the ‘self.’ “The oneness with the other / like an old claim / from
another birth” (9-10) marks a giant leap into the arduous path of self-realisation. Trinh. T. Minh-ha in “The Undone Interval” writes of the incendiary power latent in the strategy of revisiting the ‘old’ in order to bring out the ‘new’ and to re-open a different space of meaning (11). The ‘old’ in this poem is an unclaimed, strange part of ‘self’ that had been consigned to an ‘otherness,’ and when reclaimed is discovered to be an integral part of the ‘self,’ a part of the whole. Breaking the barrier of the ‘self’ and the ‘other,’ the fragmented self of the postcolonial writer is resolved into ‘wholeness’ in this succinct twelve-lined poem.

“A Line Drawn in Water” is the life-line of the poet, so meagre and transient. Life begins to attain a form, voice and a meaning, only when identified with the social reality and suffering, and with the ancestral figures, who have transfused their blood into their progeny. The ‘I’ becomes the tiny ‘i,’ cleft from its shadow to merge with the many ‘i’s / eyes. In search “of a distant sanctity,” the poet encounters the harsh reality of life, and draws the line of empathy. “I shall restore unto you / the lost language of the heart”(22).

In “Forest Paths,” Time is spatialised into the tortuous forest-paths that hinder the poet’s search for meaning in life. Years meander into devious forest paths that mislead the poet. She has spent years in search of her ‘self,’ groping and falling, desolation growing large. She discovers the way out of the labyrinth of Time by delving deeper into the heart of Timelessness-- “To delve deeper, yet deeper / Into the forest’s very heart” (11-12). The process of discovery is also one of self-discovery, to the centre point of Timelessness, to “my heart’s lost
secrets.” This is a movement towards absolute subjectivity, and pure interiority evoked poignantly by Kamala Das: “ … other / journeys are all so easy but / not the inward one, the longest / route home and the steepest / descent…” (14-18) (qtd. in Raveendran 153).

The outward movement invariably shifts to the personal evolving in the merging of the ‘i’ with the ‘other’ as expressed in the poem “The Woman Before.” The poem revolves round the ‘other woman,’ “ you loved so long, / the woman you loved before me” (7-8). Curiosity and jealousy blend into a burning need to investigate the details of the woman allegedly loved by her man. The natural urge to seek the other woman turns a somersault in the sudden realisation of being bonded with her by her femaleness. The distinctiveness evaporate into “ Is she me? Or was I her? / Aren’t all woman one?” (9-10), culminating in a sea of anonymity--“In love don’t we lose identity?” (11) Yet, the option of distinctiveness cannot be overlooked:

Or do we stand shining and apart
with a halo round the head,
scarred and marked
by over love, by the love of
a man for us (12-16)

Love, the great leveller, eliminates all distinctiveness, identity. A feminist assertion of identity hardly occurs in the poem. Mathai is quite categorical about her stance regarding feminist issues and interests in her letter:

I don’t like the label of feminist. My deepest concerns arise from
my human consciousness, my need for justice, a better world, one in which love and concern for others can operate. Feminist concerns arise naturally from my shared experiences with other women. I write as a woman, but I do feel for both man and woman (Letter 2002).

This close bonding with the ‘other’ woman is already anticipated in an earlier poem “Waiting” (Crucifixions): “As I watched her face in the mirror / I felt no hate. Only aware of a bond … / Of our common womanhood, / And the secret knowledge of suffering, / Something shared, not spoken of” (8-12). The ‘I’ gets subsumed in a feeling of oneness and universal love. The emotion of love moves from the individual to the collective, from vulnerability to strength and comradeship. The lines “We know” and “I felt no hate” transcend the limits of the ‘self’ to enter the vastness of “common womanhood.” The cognitive (‘know’), and the emotive (‘felt’) blend to raise the experience from the depth of passivity to a positive empathy, revealing the moral strength inherent in the ‘waiting.’ A feminist self-consciousness is subtly felt in the poems, “The Woman in the Falling House” and “Hysteria” (Life- On My Side ...). The walls and the floor of the domestic space crack open to let out the free spirit of the ‘woman’ trapped under the heavy, dead tradition of patriarchy. The paradox of woman being considered the light of her house and bound by the “tight warp of tradition is critiqued thus-- “…If I am a bondswoman, / how will my children be free?” (22-3) The confined space of her home becomes the battleground for evolving an identity both for herself and her progeny. This
evolution of her identity as an individual who has control over herself
necessitates the shattering of the “doll’s house,” “as the house falls away from
her, / the pillars, the steps, the earth”(38-39). The subaltern is struck mute
“when our fathers, our brothers and our sons, … struck us and betrayed us, /
and sold us and wounded us” (26-29). She is just the ‘body,’ coarsely used and
the fuel to be burnt on the funeral pyre. Denied the mind and the soul, she is
branded “with seals of ownership.” The moment she overcomes her enforced
subaltern state, she is deemed hysterical--“women are like that, / especially
when they menstruate, especially /when they stop menstruating …”
(“Hysteria”). The poet speculates on a painful phase in woman’s life, when she
feels inwardly the fading of youth and joy in a six-lined poem, ”Poem:”

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 lines convey with a remarkable tautness of diction and intensity of
emotion the pent-up anguish of woman without the relief of ‘falling petals.’
The poem arches over the commonplace allusion of youth with roses, in order
to highlight the premature decay of body and mind in woman.

“June 1969” is an honest appraisal of the pangs of dislocation, the
bewildered ‘self’ caught between the beckoning ‘new world’ of computers and
the “past-oriented / Anxious searchlights flashing / Across the barbed wire / That holds the past” (19-22). Earth becomes totally alien where the ‘I’ gets blotted out, and the “lonely self” hankers after some certainty that would reaffirm the value of kinship and love. The cry, “The I blotted out / No earth of mine /And what should I return to, / to become again?” (1-4) carries the burden of existential angst in a fast-changing world. “To become” posits the process of attaining ‘selfhood,’ and a wholeness not to be found in the fragmentariness of modern life. The ‘self’ yearns for a space that spells certainty (“two and two make four”), security (“a child is warm”), and love (“love is love is love”). To love and to be loved is the basic need of every human being, the sole panacea for a ruptured ‘self.’ The anti-locative style in postcolonial writing whereby ‘home’ is displaced and wholly replaced by the transforming experience of relocation is absent in this poem, though it is celebrated in another poem “My World” (The Attic of Night) in the space of her personal relationship with her beloved. Non-identity as defining feature of human experience in modern times is treated with a keen sensitivity in the poem “Tight Rope Walkers” (Life –On My Side …). The “lost generation” of the parents and grandparents perform the dangerous feat of balancing themselves in order to salvage their last vestige of identity in a nuclear family. Their desperate attempt to overcome ‘invisibility’ is fraught with much risk and bravado. “Grandpapa throws ribbons of many colours, / glimmering with shades” (11-12) and “grandmother’s an acrobat / who walks the tight rope / between past and present” (17-19). The “uncomfortable reminders of mortality” ravage the
sensitivity of a generation of “the young and ruthless,” and “shut out the
magic-makers”. According to Daruwalla, “Mathai is a poet of twilight.
Receding memories, personalities fading with age, parents becoming irrelevant,
the ‘loss’ of children which is equated with fledglings flying away—all this
comes out in her poems” (xii). There is an inner strength in her poems, and she
seldom flounders in self pity. In “Hot Coal and Diamonds” she says:

I have looked into the abyss

Over the edge of the volcano crater

And the fire has singed, but not burnt me. (19-21)

Trinh T. Minh-ha has rightly pointed out that “a creative event does not
grasp, it does not take possession, and it is an excursion” (3). Sound and silence
interweave to draw new relationships among old objects, events, thoughts,
feelings and memories, and through the changes effected, open up an unspoken
space that resonates without being named. “Words are blades of grass pushing
past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the
body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as
substantial as fingers and hand” (Anzaldua 93). Mathai and Alexander carve
out new spaces of meaning in their writing, working with relationships in the
wider sense of the term: relationships between one word, one sentence, one
idea and another, between one’s voice and other women’s voices and finally,
between oneself and the other.