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## FAULT LINES: A DIASPORIC INSCAPE

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### ABSTRACT

*Fault Lines*, the famous autobiographical memoir by Meena Alexander documents the hassle of diasporic experience unravelling the search for 'identity' and for 'home'. It reveals the authors multicultural life experiences among diverse ethnic and religious communities on four continents. The memoir describes the postcolonial problematic of subjectivity of a woman writer who encountered severe sense of isolation and marginalization due to gender and race. The touching account of the cross cultural journeys and border crossings she has undertaken gives a moving depiction of the traumatic subjective experiences of an immigrant writer. The work clearly delineates the sense of displacement she feels when her heritage and its associated memories as a member of an elite Syrian family in Kerala entering into conflict with the ethnic, cultural and linguistic estrangement in the west. Memories and language play significant roles in the narrative structure of the work in making the portrayal of her diasporic inscape very poignant.

Key Words: displacement, diaspora, hybridity, postcolonialism, expatriate

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### INTRODUCTION

*Fault lines*, the autobiographical memoir by Meena Alexander portrays her disparate inscape composed of elements of her heritage and of her cultural displacement. It also represents the diasporic dilemma faced by the postcolonial writers who are silenced by the dominant literary traditions of the imperial past. Alexander unravels the complex and diverse dimension of subjectivity problematic, she faced as a South Asian woman writer living in America. She was brought up as a South Indian, Syrian Christian, Malayalam speaking girl, lived in many villages, towns, countries and continents. Her life experiences traversed through Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, within the boundaries of India; Kartoum in Sudan, Nottingham in Britain and Manhattan, in America. The sense of displacement and

homelessness she felt throughout this diasporic life is very clearly portrayed in her autobiography. She states in *Fault Lines* "That's all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migration" (3).

Diaspora is a global phenomenon today which denotes communities of displaced or relocated people who migrated from their homelands to Newlands for social, political or economic reasons. The immigrant writers are forced to write from the margins and therefore the focus of their work is off-centered, it is not her/ his story being narrated, but a narration of the alienation, hybridization and marginalization. Diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity- cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries, demarcating nation and diaspora. The rootlessness, insecurity and adverse financial conditions place the

emigrants under pressure. The absence of a sense of home creates anger and resentment in them.

*Fault Lines* shows very poignantly the alienation Meena Alexander feels in the new land that comes in conflict with her attachment to the homeland. Her memories often go back to her childhood spent in Kerala. Her memories of her home land are filled with fond remembrances of her parents, grandparents, relatives and maid servants. She becomes eloquent about her grandfather, Ilya who had great influence on her during her childhood days. By invoking memory in her autobiography, Alexander is able to raise epistemic questions about history, cultural production, experience, truth and selfhood.

As Stuart Hall points out, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference" (120). Even though Meena's experiences extend to four continents, her memories and lineage are deeply rooted in Kerala and they provide her an anchorage in her agonies of displacement. She says: "When I think back through earliest childhood, the houses I lived in, the real, solid places I knew shine out for me, various, multiple, bound together by the landmass of India, an accustomed geography. The constancies of my life, the hands I held onto, the rooms or gardens I played in, ripple in memory, and sometimes it is as if the forgotten earth returns" (53).

This imaginary homeward journey through memories, "help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (Said 55). In *Beginning Post colonialism*, John McLeod describes how in the displaced subject position of the migrant, the imagination becomes more and more the primary location of home.

He says:

Although the migrants may pass through the *political* borders of nations, crossing their frontiers and gaining entrance to new places, such 'norms and limits' can be used to exclude migrants from being accommodated inside the *imaginative* borders of the nation. The dominant

discourses of 'race', ethnicity and gender may function to exclude them from being recognized as part of the nation's people. Migrants may well live in new places, but they can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home. Instead their home is seen to exist elsewhere, back across the border (212).

Alexander in the novel shows the importance of restoring 'the homeland' in providing certainty and equilibrium to a fragmented and displaced mind of an immigrant in a foreign land. "Alienation or sense of not belonging anywhere has become the major obsession of Alexander. She is always travelling and feels a stranger wherever she goes and is living on the margin in alien lands amongst alien people. Her memoir is writing in search of a homeland. She indulges in a voyage of self-discovery" (Sujatha 45).

In her expatriate life, she had to meet with discrimination and marginalization because of her gender and race. Her colour of the skin made her feel inferior and alien in the settled land. In the memoir she describes many incidents of discrimination. She describes her attempt to learn and speak English in Khartoum. As the first "Non-White" child in clergy house school, she is ridiculed for her dark skin. She says, "My blackness struck out like a stiff halo around me" (113). Experiences like these drive her to a sense of inferiority and she becomes an introvert. But she gradually overcomes this and begins to exert her identity through writing though she feels that her gender and ethnicity stands in the way of her success. Alexander writes, "I am a poet writing in America, but American poet – An Asian American poet – a woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a Third world woman poet" (193). But she triumphs over her displacement and inferiority through creativity. The memoir thus records her conquering of the sense of unbelongingness and alienation. In this sense *Fault Lines* is a text about her growing up as a woman, as an expatriate and as a writer.

#### Conclusion

*Fault Lines* is a unique work of autobiographical fiction dealing with the problem of

subjectivity of an expatriate writer and her ultimate victory over her cultural and ethnic dislocation. It is through memories and internal voyages to a faraway home land that Meena Alexander makes her journey of inscape so poignant and memorable.

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