



**BIRTHPLACE WITH BURIED STONES: POEMS BY MEENA ALEXANDER –
A CRITICAL EXPLORATION**

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ABSTRACT

Meena Alexander, one of the most significant voices in contemporary diasporic literature, uses poetry as a medium to navigate her complex identity, influenced by her experiences of migration, exile, and memory. Birthplace with Buried Stones, published in 2013, is a collection that captures the essence of these themes and takes readers on a journey of deep introspection. It showcases Alexander's ability to weave together personal history, collective memory, and political consciousness, all through the lens of lyrical beauty. This paper explores the thematic concerns, stylistic choices, and symbolic depth of Birthplace with Buried Stones, analyzing how Alexander uses poetry to articulate her experiences as a migrant woman of color.

KEY WORDS: race, ethnicity, gender, exile

Introduction

Thematic Concerns: Migration, Memory, and Identity

The predominant theme in Birthplace with Buried Stones is the experience of migration and the longing for home. For Alexander, who was born in India, raised in Sudan, and lived in various other countries, home is both a physical and emotional space, always shifting and elusive. Her poetry reflects this fragmented sense of belonging and the difficulty of reconciling her multiple cultural identities.

In poems like Genesis, she delves into the origins of her selfhood, connecting her past with her

present. The poem, with its allusions to creation and birth, is a meditation on identity formation. In House of a Thousand Doors, she speaks of the longing for home as a space that is forever out of reach:

"What door will take me back? / Where is the threshold of bone, / The flesh's belonging?"

This longing for home is complicated by the layers of history and personal memory that are inextricably tied to her sense of self. Alexander's poetry often reflects on the burden of memory and how the past shapes the present, particularly in

terms of her experiences of colonialism, displacement, and the post-colonial condition.

Gender and the Body in Exile

Another major theme in Birthplace with Buried Stones is the female body and how it is affected by exile and migration. Alexander's poems reflect her feminist concerns, often depicting the body as a site of trauma, displacement, and reclamation. For instance, in the poem A House on the Backwaters, she writes:

"The body carries its own thirst,
in each bone a seed
of what we once were."

Here, Alexander portrays the body as a vessel of memory and pain, one that holds the trauma of migration and displacement. The physical body, for her, is not only a personal entity but also a political one, affected by historical forces like colonialism and globalization.

Furthermore, in poems like Muse, she subverts traditional notions of the female muse, portraying her as an active agent rather than a passive object of male creativity. Alexander reclaims the female voice, giving it power and authority in her exploration of identity and belonging.

The Intersection of Place and History

Place plays a crucial role in Alexander's poetry, and Birthplace with Buried Stones is no exception. Each place she writes about—be it India, Sudan, or New York—carries with it layers of personal and collective history. The title itself, Birthplace with Buried Stones, suggests a sense of origins that are hidden, buried, or fragmented. The "stones" can be seen as metaphors for the weight of history, both personal and collective, that Alexander carries with her.

In poems like Indian Redhead, Alexander addresses the historical legacy of colonialism and how it shapes her understanding of identity. The poem deals with the intersection of race, history, and memory, highlighting how the colonial past

continues to affect her present. Similarly, in Cochin, she reflects on the layered histories of India and the violence of colonialism:

"The salt wind bruises my cheek
as I stand by the Chinese nets,
fingers curled in prayer
for what the sea swallowed long ago."

This blending of the personal with the historical is a hallmark of Alexander's work. In her poetry, place is never just a physical location but is imbued with historical, emotional, and cultural significance.

Symbolism and Imagery: Stones, Birds, and Water

Alexander's use of symbolism and imagery is central to the depth of her poetry. In Birthplace with Buried Stones, recurring symbols such as stones, birds, and water serve to evoke the emotional landscape of migration and exile.

Stones, as seen in the title and throughout the collection, symbolize both the weight of history and the fragmented pieces of the self. They are metaphors for memory and loss, representing the pieces of one's identity that are buried beneath the surface. In Buried Stones, she writes:

"I pick up a stone from the riverbed,
it speaks of the miles it has traveled,
the earth that cradled it
before it washed away."

Here, the stone becomes a symbol of the self, shaped by the forces of migration and displacement, yet still carrying traces of its origin.

Birds are another recurring symbol, often representing freedom and the desire to escape, but also the fragility of existence. In Flight, Alexander uses the image of a bird in flight to convey the dual feelings of liberation and vulnerability that come with migration:

"A bird rises, wings cutting air
but it does not know

where the next branch will be."

Water, a frequent image in Alexander's work, symbolizes both life and death, renewal and loss. It connects her to her Indian roots, especially the rivers of Kerala, but also signifies the distances she has traveled. In *The River Speaks*, she writes:

"The river sings to me,
its waters speaking of all
that has been carried away."

The river becomes a metaphor for the passage of time and the inevitability of change, reflecting Alexander's constant movement across borders and cultures.

Stylistic Features: Lyrical Elegance and Fragmentation

Meena Alexander's style in *Birthplace with Buried Stones* is marked by its lyrical beauty and emotional intensity. Her language is rich with imagery and metaphor, yet there is a sense of restraint in her use of words, as if she is carefully selecting each one to convey maximum emotional impact.

The fragmentation in her poetry mirrors the fragmentation of her identity as a diasporic writer. Her poems often move between different times and places, blending memory with the present, and the personal with the political. This fragmentation can be seen as a reflection of her own experiences of migration, where identity is never fixed but always in flux.

Her use of enjambment, where one-line flows into the next without a pause, creates a sense of fluidity and movement, mimicking the flow of time and memory. This technique, combined with her vivid imagery, gives her poetry a dream-like quality, as if the reader is moving through different layers of consciousness.

Conclusion

Birthplace with Buried Stones is a profound exploration of identity, memory, and migration, told through the lens of Meena Alexander's personal experiences. Her poetry reflects the complexities of being a migrant, a woman, and a poet in a world marked by political and cultural fragmentation. Through her lyrical language, powerful symbolism, and emotional depth, Alexander captures the pain of displacement and the longing for home, while also celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. In doing so, she has crafted a body of work that speaks to the universal themes of belonging, exile, and the search for self in a constantly changing world.

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