

The Migrant's Dilemma in Meena Alexander's *The Shock of Arrival*¹

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Abstract

Meena Alexander is a prominent South Asian American writer who has explored the condition of migration and dislocation, fusing poetry, prose and critical thinking. As part of the migrant experience, Alexander is preoccupied with ideas of home, violence, displacement, memory, and loss. This paper seeks to investigate the dilemma that migrants face in the United States as presented in Alexander's hybrid text *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996). The paper intends to answer the following questions: What does "home" signify to an immigrant writer in a new land? Is home a geographical place or an emotional space? Does home refer solely to the reservoir of homeland memories? Does it mean the newly adopted place from which she writes; or does it mean that "imaginary homeland" where she retreats from alienation in her new home?; and finally, how does she portray the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants in the United States? What is the effect of the English language on migrants? Selected poems from Alexander's book will be read within the framework of diaspora and migration studies with special emphasis on the writings of Susan Stanford Friedman, which offer useful perspectives for studying Meena Alexander's poetry.

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Introduction

Meena Alexander is a prominent South Asian American writer and a postcolonial feminist. She is a poet, novelist and critic.² Born in Allahabad, Alexander comes from a Kerala Christian family. When she was five years old, the family moved to Khartoum. She was educated in Sudan. In 1974, she worked in Delhi University and the University of Hyderabad for a short time. In 1979, she moved to New York City with her American husband, a historian. Her writing, as this paper proves, is defined by her transnational migrations, and a constant search for a homeland and a sense of belonging. Having lived in countries as diverse as India, Sudan, England and the United States, she is mainly interested in the areas of fracture between one cultural tradition and another. She has often battled to settle in a new home where she had to deal with racism and xenophobia.

In *The Shock of Arrival* (1996), Alexander tackles her migration journey through her childhood in India to her life as an immigrant in America, highlighting the “shock of arrival” that accompanied such journeys of dislocation and relocation. The shock of arrival and the effects of the shock immensely influenced her. According to Alexander, “the shock of arrival is multifold— what was borne in the mind is jarred, tossed into new shapes, an exciting exfoliation of sense” (*Shock* 1). Susan Friedman remarks, “It is the “shock of arrival,” of multiple arrivals, that compels the writing of Alexander’s memoir” (“Bodies on the move” 207). Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha comments on the book saying that “as the condition of migration and cultural displacement comes to be seen as a metaphor of our times, Meena Alexander’s poignant and perceptive book is a welcome addition” (cover). *The Shock of Arrival* deals with the themes of identity crisis, racism, language, dislocation,

²Alexander has published eight volumes of poetry, including *River and Bridge* (1995) and *Illiterate Heart* (2002), and two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). She has also written two autobiographical books: *Fault Lines: a Memoir* (1993) and *The Shock of Arrival* (1997) which integrates poems and prose passages. She has received awards from the Arts Council of England, American Council of Learned Societies, and National Council for Research on Women. Besides working as the writer in-residence at Columbia University (1988) and National University of Singapore, she has also been a University Grants Commission fellow at Kerala University. For further information, see Seiwoong Oh, *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature* p. 8

and relocation. Alexander delineates her experience as a racial minority, being a South Asian American woman. Drawing on Diaspora and migration studies, the paper examines the migrant's dilemma as perceived in Meena Alexander's *The Shock of Arrival*.

Geographies of Home³

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, "it is a history of dislocation and relocation, displacement and emplacement, of losing homes and making new homes" (Friedman, "Migrations" 264). "To migrate", Salman Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), is "to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible, or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul" (210). In Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* (1973), migration is defined as "broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong" (4). The migrants' dilemma, thus, involves the twin processes of "dislocation" and "relocation", to use Friedman's key terms above. Migrants often lived in a quandary because "they were uprooted" and "in transplantation, while the old roots were sundered, [and] before the new [ones] were established, the immigrants existed in an extreme situation" (Handlin 6).

Ethnic American writers have been preoccupied with different meanings of "home". Edward Said defines "home" as "a place where we experience some fundamental notion of belonging; a sense of rootedness, home is...like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever..." (143). Migrants, thus, arrive at different understandings of home after migration. Their sense of home is often marked with disruption, reconstruction and change. Some of them yearn for a stronger psychological, social and cultural security in the new land. They learn to see and interact with the world and understand it rather than renounce it for the sake of their original homeland. The "loss" of homeland is replaced by collective efforts to maintain a wider home outside the limits and confines of the homeland. Chandra Mohanty in "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America" writes:

³ The subtitle is borrowed from Loida Maritza Pérez's novel *Geographies of Home* (1999). Pérez is a writer born in the Dominican Republic and raised in the United States; she explores the definitions of "home" through the varying perceptions and memories of a large Latino immigrant family.

I have been asked the home questions (when are you going home?) periodically for fifteen years now leaving aside the subtly racist implications of the questions (go home you don't belong) I am still not satisfied with my response. What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community-my people? Is home, a geographical place, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space? (351)

Migration has thus diversified the meaning of home. It becomes more than just a single geographical place. Instead, home becomes many physical sites and psychological spaces. As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, safety and fear, home is invested with meanings, emotions and experiences. Rosemary Marangoly George highlights such diverse meanings of home in *The Politics of Home*: "today the primary connotation of 'home' is of private space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life...the larger geographic space where one belongs: country, city, village, community." She adds, "Home is also the imagined location which can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography" (11). Within George's definition are several ideas of home, the private space, the wider space, beyond the confines of the private, and as a narrated home, the home of the mind, which Salman Rushdie refers to as the "imaginary homelands." In her work *The Shock of Arrival*, Meena Alexander presents all three levels of home, the private space, the wider sphere, and the imaginary home.

The migrant's dilemma involves the twin processes of "dislocation" and "relocation". In between these two processes is a "transitory psychological paralysis" which is the consequence of a "cataplexy of uprooting" and "shock of arrival" (Vijayasree 131). The idea of in-between space significantly gesture on the connotation of hanging between worlds. In her poem "Alphabets of Flesh", she writes:

I stand in the middle of my life.
I cannot see my mother
I cannot see my father
I cannot see my sister
Or my brother (7-11)

As shown in the above quotation, Alexander's migrant identity gets stuck in the in-between and "liminal" space which is both ambiguous and ambivalent. Migration not only uproots migrants from their homeland, but also disrupts their sense of home. Especially for migrants, "home is often the perpetual object of desire, a longing that is never fulfilled in the ambiguity of existence caught between a consciousness of roots elsewhere and the realities of routes, of life shaped by movement through different locations that are never quite home" (Friedman, "Migrations" 278). The feeling of being caught between two spaces makes Alexander sensitive about home as reflected in the poem "Sidi Syed's Architecture." She writes:

But this terrible hunger
loosed between twin earths,
one underfoot by the riverbed,
the other borne in the heart's hole. (18-21)

Alexander's longing for her original homeland has been transformed into "terrible hunger." The heart of the migrant poet is throbbing so hard on this hanging position "loosed between twin earths" (19). As new roots are created and new routes sought, the concept of "home" invokes a hybrid meaning. The idea of in-between space has been used differently in various cultures but significantly gesture on the connotation of hanging between worlds. In Ethnic American literature, the term *Trishanku* is usually used to denote a compromise.⁴ Such is the condition of the migrants who continuously move forward and back from their original home. Their in-between and "liminal" space prevents them to become completely a part of the mainstream culture. The migrants create an "imaginary homeland" of their own.

In another poem, "Hotel Alexandria", Alexander portrays "an old bag lady" who has been evicted from 'Hotel Alexandria', a building which has to be transformed into a condominium. The fact that Alexander calls her "the

⁴ The concept of "home" is explored through the lens of the mythical character of *Trishanku*, implying in-between space and homing. *Trishanku* is a character in Indian mythology from the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. Though he belonged to earth, he had desired for a heaven in his own wish. However, Vishwamitra enables him to ascend to heaven but the king of gods, returned him back to earth. As he fell down through the ethereal space, Vishwamitra froze him and built a virtual heaven for him. His failure in attaining both worlds led to his permanent discomfort and uneasiness. See, Bhat, Shilpa Daithota. *Diaspora Poetics and Homing in South Asian Women's Writing: Beyond Trishanku*. Lexington Books, 2018

bag lady” highlights her migrant identity and foregrounds her nomadic state. Alexander writes, “The poverty-stricken families, the drunkards, the addicts who lived there were all being evicted. The pain of homelessness brought out in the rocking figure of the old bag lady was something I could not escape from” (28). The sense of dislocation and homelessness of the old bag woman haunts the poet. She writes, “She kneels on the icy ground, and rocks back and forth. A weird rocking creature...whose house is this? I dare not cry...let me speak now, my voice imprecise, my ignorance that of perpetual immigrant, a woman with nowhere to lay her head” (31-32). Alexander identifies her migrant identity with the homeless dispossessed woman. She states, “Her flesh, her voice entered into me, a woman dispossessed in this crowded city, the great metropolis of North America” (28). In fact, “Hotel Alexandria” is a diasporic prose poem about home and homelessness that is regarded by the poet “as portals to [her] life, entry into a new world”. Alexander asserts, “Memory drew me here, the danger of the unlit passage” (*Shock* 28- 31).

The poem “House of a Thousand Doors” carries the dream memory of Alexander’s original house. The ancestral house and grandmother lost in the shadows of a past are retrieved in Alexander’s poem. The poem reveals the diversity of Alexander’s migrant experience and highlights the different challenges she has to face: dislocation and relocation, gender, language and identity loss. Habib Chaudhury and Graham Rowles assert, “Home provides a sense of identity, a locus of security, and a point of centering and orientation in relation to a chaotic world beyond the threshold” (3). Losing her home and feeling insecure, Alexander tries to regain the security through dreams of her homeland. Home, here, is a symbolic construct in terms of memories and longings.

She reconstructs the image of the original home she carries in her mind. In an interview with Susie Tharu, Alexander identifies the essence of her poetry as the “*making of a house*” (11). Alexander calls the poem “a dream poem...the house rises up in pure space of the mind, as a dream might” (*Shock* 27- 28). The image of the house is based on her mother’s ancestral house in Tiruvalla, which was built up by her maternal grandfather. The house is a mixture of images and values experienced through memory, such as the image of the “incense tree” of the Tiruvalla courtyard. As such, home is not necessarily a physical space. It is often a symbolic construct in terms of memories and longings. As highlighted by Bachelard Gaston in *The Poetics of Space* (2014), the house is “made out of

memories and experiences.” It is “the topography of our intimate being, both the repository of memory and the lodging of the soul” (6).⁵ For the migrant, “memory is the point of transit between old and new, past and present, there and here. It is the funnel, the channel, the technology of contact” (Friedman, “Migrations” 278). Azade Seyhan writes in *Writing outside the Nation* (2001), “memory dwells at the crossroads of the past and the present” (31). Memory marks a loss. It is always a representation, making present that which once was and no longer is. Friedman states:

The act of remembering—past lives, past homelands, past ways of being—is symbolic...What has been forgotten can often return in the form of haunting, ghostly traces of the past, longings that don't quite dare direct expression, mourning for what was once and is now lost. (“Migrations” 278)

Alexander yearns for her mother, grandmothers and the home left behind. The poem “House of a Thousand Doors” exposes the lives of two grandmothers, one homebound and the other was the political grandmother. The two grandmothers kneel at each of the thousand doors whose bronze sills are three feet high to avoid any creature to enter. The doors are presented as strong forces against all kinds of troubles. Alexander revives her faith in her grandmothers. She asserts that the grandmother figure is drawn from memory and dream; “she stands as a power permitting me to speak in an alien landscape. The sense of newness, of the persistent difficulty of another landscape, another life, becomes in those poems part of a search for a precarious truth” (“The poem's second life writing” 81). She conceives the figure of the grandmother as an anchor to the migrant's awareness of “dislocation” and loss of identity. Alexander discovers her lost identity in her grandmothers, stating that “in [her] quest for an imaginative source sufficient to withstand the pressures of life in a new world, [she] made up a grandmother figure” because she “needed her ancestral power in a world where so much of what [she] knew [herself] to be was hidden, veiled, could not appear.” Alexander asserts: “through such a figure I might be able to cut through to the soil of my life. In order to live in this new world I needed to cut through into the rich loam of my earliest sensations and practices” (*Shock* 35).

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the two concepts of *house* and *home*, see Bachelard Gaston's *The Poetics of Space* (2014), an interesting exploration of home and an examination into the meaning of intimate spaces which preoccupy poetry.

Alexander traces the path of her grandmothers. “Both were born into an era of great social change for women in India, yet how differently their lives had marked them” (*Shock* 36). The two grandmothers mingle in her writing as a living persona who negotiates with a past deep-rooted in Kerala, and a present burdened with postcolonial complexity. Their distinctive characters not only colour the memories of her childhood, but also create a dialogue with the world. Her political grandmother had dared to cross the border of social taboos to pursue her studies, travelling to Peking and London and other foreign places. She chose a man, who was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi (*Fault Lines* 11). Her grandmother Mariamma, on the other hand, hardly left her house, “but she ruled that household on the hill with an iron fist” (36). Alexander creates an image of herself as a girl watching the figure of the grandmother kneeling in turn before each of the thousand doors. She writes:

In dreams
waves lilt, a silken fan
in grandmother's hands
shell colored, utterly bare as the light takes her.
She kneels at each
of the thousand doors in turn
paying her dues. (13- 19)

The kneeling of the grandmother figure supersedes her tough activities. In this sense, Alexander tries to reveal an identity closely linked to her original homeland. In another poem “Her Garden,” Alexander says:

I imagine her sitting
under the mulberry leaves
.....
She died so long
Before my birth
That we are one, entirely
As a sky (10-11, 41-44)

The grandmother figure sits by the garden well, looks through water and gazes for hours into its mysterious depths, as if trying to comprehend the female anguish of her own life. Alexander identifies her migrant identity with the grandmother figure. The garden space is used to create a creative dialogue between the past and the present, “that we are one / entirely as a sky” (43-44).

Alexander upholds the transforming power of memory. "Memory in this postcolonial world transforms what lies around it...What I recollect best is what shines up in the face of present danger, luminous with the shock of arrival. All that I see in this arena of our displacement is to be elaborated, spelled out, precariously reconstructed" (*Shock* 6).

In *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander painstakingly tackles the dilemma of home loss as a result of migration. She highlights the different meanings of home; the original homeland, the newly adopted home from which she writes, beyond the limits of her primary home, and the "imaginary home" where she retreats from alienation and estrangement in her new home. Alexander creates a "narrated home" of her own as a result of her experience of "dislocation" and "relocation" and the feeling of alienation in the new homeland. Writing has granted her the power to return home and to create an imagined home, a symbolic construct of memories and values. Then home is no longer just one place. Janet Zandy defines such home as "an inner geography where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of 'otherness', where there is, at last, a community" (1).

The English Language as being no man's land

In addition, like other Ethnic American writers, Alexander struggles with the use of English language. A full migrant, as highlighted by Rushdie, suffers "a triple disruption he loses his place, he enters into an alien language and he feels himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour is very unlike...his own" (277). Roots, language and social norms are three of the most important parts of the migrant's identity. The migrant, denied all three, is forced to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. Friedman maintains that "Itineraries of multiple migrations create a linguistic hybridity of a different kind, a sort of geographic palimpsest with linguistic aftereffects created over time" ("Migrations" 280). Alexander has grown up speaking many languages; Malayalam, English, Hindi, the Arabic of Khartoum, and French and is now flooded in the different Englishes of New York City. Her family home is in Kerala, where Malayalam is the mother tongue, but she first learned Hindi because she was born in Allahabad. Growing up with North African French and then the Arabic of Khartoum, she was later educated in Britain and moved to the States. She never learned to read or write in Malayalam, although the "rhythms of the language first came to me, not just in lullabies or in the chatter

of women in the kitchen . . . but in the measured cadences of oratory and poetry, and nightly recitations from the Bible and the epics" ("Alphabets" 145). Friedman maintains: "bilingualism and multilingualism are key markers of transit; of the refusal to assimilate completely; and of the insistence on retention of the past, other homes, and other cultural identities. ("Migrations" 280)

Alexander writes "There is violence in the very language, American English that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned" (*Fault Lines* 199). She records how she lost her language, Malayalam, while she picked up other languages as she migrated from one place to another. She states, "Colonialism seems intrinsic to the burden of English in India, and I felt robbed of literacy in my own mother tongue" (*Fault Lines* 128). She agonizes over her use of English which has "robbed" her of literacy in her mother tongue, while at the same time she "demonstrates mastery of the English language and makes it her own" (Oh 8). In her poem "Alphabets of Flesh", she describes English language as "no man's land / no woman's either" (5-6). This is a poignant image as it stems from growing up in a post colonial country, where boundaries and borders are blurred into a "no man's land". Alexander asks, "Was English in India a no man's land?" (*Fault Lines* 126) She wonders if the use of English was a betrayal to her past. For Alexander, "language is supercharged, a multiplicity of places and identities" (Friedman, "Migrations" 280).

Xenophobia: the Violence of Fear and Hate

Furthermore, in *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander thoroughly portrays the xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants in America.⁶ Xenophobia, as Schaefer defines, is "the rejection of the different lifestyles or cultural or religious value systems of immigrant groups, the fear of society becoming "flooded" by immigrants, and the perceived threat to prosperity by heightened economic competition" (1419).⁷ Xenophobia is immensely manifested in a range of

⁶ Xenophobia is an increasingly common response to migration within the new world, often taking the form of violence against immigrants. The term xenophobia comes from the Greek words (*xénos*) 'stranger' and (*phóbos*) 'fear'. It refers to the "unreasonable fear" (*phóbos*) of "strangers" (*xénos*) or "foreigners." It has been defined as "a general fear of difference, an intense discomfort with people from other cultures, or hostility and intolerance toward people who look, speak, dress, and act differently from those in one's own culture". For further information, see Delanty, Gerard. "Theoretical Considerations on Xenophobia"

⁷ Michael Banton explains the distinction between xenophobia and racism as follows: "Racism can then be the name for that dimension by which persons assigned to another group are kept at a distance

negative stereotypes in *The Shock of Arrival*. Alexander recalls, “When I wear a sari ... Those who might be concerned see it as a flag for ‘Indianness...’ India, that strange land, far away... Land of maharajahs and snake charmers and poverty so desperate it ends in the plague” (64). Alexander recounts an incident where her own identity as a racial minority—as a South Asian American woman—is exposed when a white male biker in Minneapolis calls her a “black bitch!” Shocked by the incident and afraid to tell her white husband, she tells an Indian friend who understands “what it mean[s] to be Unwhite in America” (*Fault Lines* 169). “One is marked by one’s body” Alexander glaringly deplores (*Shock* 64).

Otherness is only one part of the immigrant’s identity, an identity that is, as Sarup points out, “constantly changing” (98). Alexander realizes her otherness there in America. She narrates another racial incident, when one of her students from “a proud Muslim family”, walking home late one night, was terribly assaulted; “Hindu, they called me Hindu, then threw eggs at me.” A group of skinheads in a car. I ran all the way home” (64). Alexander feared walking along country roads where no other people of colour are to be seen. “My fear of coming across men... all the xenophobia of America sitting squarely on them” (*Shock* 65). Alexander’s condition was similar to other Indian women in America who were forced to give up their saris and wore western clothes for fear that they lose their jobs and those Indians who lived through racial stoning and murder and in fear of the “Dot Buster” skinheads. The “Dot Buster” was a hate group in New Jersey that advocated organized violence against South Asians and attacked and harassed Indian women. Alita Masson told *India Abroad*, “The south Asian community was terrified by the community xenophobia” (qtd. in Karam). Ethnicity draws violence; Alexander asserts that “ethnicity in such a world needs to be recast so that our moving selves can be acknowledged” (*Shock* 7, 66).

Moreover, xenophobic attitudes are clearly exposed in her poem “Arts of Pariahs.” This poem was occasioned by a series of racist incidents that took place in New York City. Two black children were spray-painted white, a white

because they are considered racially inferior. Xenophobia can designate the way that others are kept at a distance because they are considered different.” See, Banton, Michael. “The Cultural determinants of Xenophobia,” *Anthropology Today* 12.2 (1996): 8.

child was raped in retaliation, and an Indian child was stoned. Haunted by these events, Alexander writes:

Two black children spray painted white
their eyes burning,
a white child raped in a car
for her pale skin's sake,
an Indian child stoned by a bus shelter,
they thought her white in twilight. (9-14)

The title of the poem "Arts of Pariahs" is skillfully chosen. Pariah is a word that has come from Alexander's mother tongue, Malayalam, into English. A pariah is an outcast, someone who is hated and rejected by other people. The choice of the word is significant as it highlights the predicament of an immigrant in the new world alien to him who, to use the words of Julia Kristeva, is "the other of the family, the clan, the tribe" (95).

In the poem, Alexander invents her individual version of myth about Draupadi, the heroine of the ancient Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. She imagines Draupadi as a young Indian woman, entering her kitchen in New York City. Thus the legendary Draupadi, who survived the deadly battle of Kurukshetra, is revived in Alexander's imagination. New Yorker Draupadi sings "in my head Beirut still burns." Alexander notes that this line "is something she saw written on a wall in the East village" (*Shock* 8). She adds:

Someone is knocking and knocking
but Draupadi will not let him in.
She squats by the stove and sings (15-17)

Alexander uses powerful female characters in history as allegorical figures to represent "the longing to be freed of the limitations of skin colour and race" ("An Intimate Violence"). The Queen of Nubia and Rani of Jhansi, have both joined in her journey to the new world, "We make up an art of pariahs".⁸ In India, tales of Rani, the warrior queen, remain "emblematic of the anti-colonial

⁸ The great African queen ruled Nubia in the first century B.C and defeated the Roman army after Emperor Augustus sent his troops to conquer Kush. Rani, the Queen of Jhansi led her army against the British in 1857. The death of the king had left the throne without a natural heir. The East India Company denied recognition to the Queen as his regent and annexed the kingdom. Undeterred, Rani took the reins of government, reorganized her forces and fought the colonialists. A figure of loss but not of defeat, the Rani lost her family, her kingdom and died in battle, but she also became a legendary figure in Indian history. Singh, Harleen. *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2014

struggle, which celebrates her as a harbinger of freedom” (Singh 2). The poem illustrates the predicament of an immigrant who lives in the new world with an ethnic identity. Alexander writes:

The Queen of Nubia, of God's Upper Kingdom
The Rani of Jhansi, transfigured, raising her sword
are players too. They have entered with me
into North America and share these walls. (4-7)

In her essay “Theater of Sense,” Alexander recounts an imaginary dialogue with a Kathakali dancer who jumps into the open window of her room in Manhattan. Kathakali dance is a beautiful, complicated form of storytelling art in India. It blends music, poetry, and dance to tell familiar stories in Indian culture. Traditionally, the actors were all males, but that has evolved so that both men and women can perform the dance. This male dancer plays the part of Draupadi. Alexander describes his physical appearance: “a man with long nails, glittering red. His eyes are rimmed with kohl. A parrot hops up and down on his shoulder” (193).⁹ He looks odd; only half of his face is gracefully painted and the other half is bare. Alexander comments “was this a deliberate act, a secret signal?” Each part of the face stands mocking the other, “a profane predicament” (193, 195). The half-painted face of the dancer here can be read as the epitome of the migrants' dilemma; what W.E.B. Dubois refers to as “double consciousness.” Alexander herself remarks that coming to America made her realize “what W.E.B. Dubois invoked: two souls, two thoughts in one dark body.”¹⁰ The man/woman, dark/white Draupadi starts to dance Kathakali. He asks Alexander about the reasons for her migration to America, she states: “I come here Draupadi to live and write. To face these mountains, the setting sun. To bristle with life as a porcupine might” (195). Alexander arrives to America as a porcupine, symbolic of a natural warrior. When threatened, a porcupine becomes fierce unleashing its quills on the attacker. In addition, a porcupine is a

⁹ The origins of Kathakali dance date back to the late 16th and early 17th century in India. These ancient folk dances were performed at religious festivals by actors wearing colorful headdresses, costumes, and elaborate, even ornate, headpieces. See Zarrilli, Phillip. *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹⁰ “Double consciousness” is a concept that Du Bois first explores in 1903 publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*. “Double consciousness” describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity. Du Bois spoke of this within the context of race relations in the United States. See Pittman, John P., “Double Consciousness”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

symbol of storytelling. The quills of a porcupine symbolize the wisdom of ancestors. A porcupine carries enormous meaning for connecting to ancestors and their way of life, and the knowledge of living in harmony with the land and other animals. The poem concludes: "Outcastes all let's conjure honey scraped from stones, / an underground railroad stacked with rainbow skin, / Manhattan's mixed rivers rising" (*Shock* 24-36). Alexander poignantly asks:

What might it mean for Manhattan's mixed rivers to rise? How shall we move into a truly shared world, reimagine ethnicities, even as we acknowledge violent edges, harsh borders? These children in Manhattan, the Muslim women raped in Surat, the Hindu women stoned in Jersey City, coexist in time. Cleft by space, they forge part of the fluid diasporic world in which I must live and move and have my being. (*Poetics of Dislocation* 93)

Conclusion

As a way of showing the experiences that have influenced her life and writing, Alexander has depicted the emotional and psychological problems that she has faced as she has moved from one home to another. While doing this, she brilliantly depicts the challenges faced by a migrant. In *The Shock of Arrival*, she painstakingly exposes the migrant's dilemma in the new homeland. Reading of her poems reveals the fragmented experience of the migrant, for whom home is both nowhere and everywhere. Her poems lay bare a strong sense of nostalgia towards her ancestral homeland. Alexander delineates the different levels of "home" which are both geographical and psychological and which are located on thresholds between memory and nostalgia for the past, everyday life in the present and future dreams and fears. She creates an "imaginary homeland" of her own. She has reconstructed the image of her original homeland and returns to her ancestors as a source of inspiration from which she draws both the lines of ancestry and poetry. For Alexander, the function of poetry is to build imaginary homes for the migrant composed of bricks of memories and values. Writing has granted her the power to return to her ancestral home. Though encountering many difficulties and challenges in America being a South Asian American woman, Alexander has faced them, and poetry has become her weapon and her shelter.

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