

Distant Homes: Migrant Sensibilities and the Problems of Acculturation

Santosh Gupta¹
University of Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

Continued waves of diasporic movement over successive historical moments in South Asia make it difficult to homogenise all diaspora into one mould. The present paper explores the conflict between the process of acculturation and the longing for homeland experienced by three South Asian poets who belong to a specific period in modern diaspora. Contemporaries all, Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), Meena Alexander (1951-) and Imtiaz Dharker (1954-) express in their poetry their (c)overt sense of longing and attachment to the homeland even as they negotiate the different interstitial spaces they occupy. Their reinvention of their identity in the process of acculturation and their expanding political concerns lead them to look beyond the nation as home and develop a form of cosmopolitanism. Does this cosmopolitanism give them an assurance, a sense of belonging or an uneasy discomfort? I intend to discuss some of these issues as expressed in their poetry.

Keywords

Location, homeland, acculturation, identity, intertextuality, cosmopolitanism

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), Meena Alexander (1951-) and Imtiaz Dharker (1954-), three widely recognised South Asian poets who write in English, reflects their engagement with the dislocations and disruptions caused by diasporic movements. Diasporic experience is an important theme in fiction, poetry, memoirs, autobiography and other forms that deal with the multiple layers of the complex experience of migration from one's land of origin to another, adopted country. South Asian countries have witnessed in the last three centuries large-scale population movements, brought about by force and also self-will. The disturbance caused by the partition of India and later of Pakistan has escalated

¹ **Santosh Gupta**, formerly Professor of Literature in the Department of English, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur is an independent scholar. She was Chairperson of the Department and Dean, Faculty of Arts and Member of the Syndicate. She has published extensively on Postcolonial theory, Feminist writing and modern fiction. Amongst her books are *Contemporary Indian Literature* (2001), *Rethinking Modernity* (co-edited with Prafulla Kar et al., 2005), *Literary Constructs of the Self: Socio-Cultural Contexts* (co-edited with Mini Nanda, 2010) and *Contemporary Women's Writing in Canada* (co-edited with Bandana Chakrabarty, 2016). Email: santoshjpr26@yahoo.in.

these movements. In this paper I propose to focus on three South Asian poets, who belong to the same generation and are first generation migrants. Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander and Imtiaz Dharker have similar educational, financial and cultural backgrounds. They have grown up in multicultural milieus where several intellectual strands were woven together. Shahid Ali's claim that he has been the "beneficiary" of three strands at least, "the Hindu," "the Muslim" and the "Western," sharing their literary and mythic traditions as well ("Agha Shahid Ali in Conversation with Kamila Shamsie") can be applied with equal truth to Imtiaz Dharker and Meena Alexander. While Shahid Ali and Dharker have Muslim religious backgrounds, Alexander belongs to a Syrian Christian family from Kerala and acquired a deep insight into the Hindu culture as she spent part of her childhood in Allahabad.

Another important commonality between them is in the nature of their departure from their homeland. Their parents travelled abroad to secure better opportunities of education, work and a western lifestyle. It is the "uneven development within capitalism" (Singh 21) which had motivated a large number of middle class professionals to travel abroad and seek better opportunities for material advancement, to move out of narrow, parochial, orthodox lifestyles and also to belong to the western world. Such movements destabilised the settled epistemological certainties of the former world, and created a dual perception. Joining the "ethnoscapes" of migrants, of "people who move between nations, such as tourists, immigrants, exiles, guest workers and refugees" (Appadurai 26), these migrants have become a new presence in the world, situated between nations. They appear to affect the politics of nations to a degree that is unprecedented, as Appadurai further notes (32). Pushed by the migrant sensibility, these individual families constitute a vast portion of the modern world's population. The diaspora that moves on voluntary grounds does not always recall any history of coercion or oppression, unless their anchorages are in strife-ridden areas, yet there may be sufficient political reasons for their staying away from homeland. These diasporas require a new perspective for understanding their intellectual purposes and achievements.² One of the outcomes of the voluntary migration is their relatively distant and detached affiliation with their homeland. In defining their changed identity many such migrant persons have expressed a keen joy of arriving in the land they have moved to. In the writings of these three poets, I propose to explore their sense of attachment or otherwise to the homeland and hostland, the epistemological

² K. Satchidanandan speaks about the "tremendous quantitative and qualitative change in the phenomena of diaspora" that has emerged from India so that "a stage seems to have come when one should problematize the concept of diaspora... to qualify, complexify and interrogate it in order to understand it better" (15). Vijay Mishra in his study of the Indian diaspora also distinguishes between "two distinct moments" in Indian diaspora in "the history of capital," the early nineteenth century one which differs significantly from that appearing after 1960s (235-36).

and psychological pressures that have reshaped their artistic creation with all its shifts.

Meena Alexander and Imtiaz Dharker have moved to different locations at different times and become “multi-locale diaspora” (Clifford 256), more so than Ali. They are “not necessarily defined by a specific geopolitical boundary” (Clifford 246). The writings and interactions of such migrants often reflect a detachment towards the homeland and “articulates or bends together, both roots and *routes* to construct forms of consciousness that distinguishes them from exiles and immigrants” (Clifford 251). In the new hostlands the migrants choose to adopt the social practices, interactions and languages of these societies, to gain acceptance in the new set up. These migrants also face contradictory pulls from the home and hostlands, accentuating their inner divisiveness. While Sudesh Mishra’s classification of the three stages of adjustment provides some help in positioning the migrants, these stages are not fully applicable in every case. The first stage, in Mishra’s view, is the diasporic experience of equal pulls of belonging to homeland and the desire to belong to the hostland; the second stage of “dual territoriality” is accompanied by a slow distancing from the home which allows for better, comfortable adjustment with the hostland and the third stage occurs when the diaspora relates to home “in forms of relationship other than the geopolitical or national” (Mishra 30). Poets like Agha Shahid Ali and Meena Alexander constantly shift between the first and third stages. They have distanced themselves from the nationalist discourse, but “home” becomes an emotional space for which strong ties remain. The process of distancing from the nation occurs at intellectual and emotional levels as they enter wider transnational/international/global cultural, political and social spheres. A stage comes, Salman Rushdie believes, when the arrival or departure from a spatial location does not matter as the writer begins to dwell in language, histories and identities which are constantly subject to mutations. Salman Rushdie, one of the most celebrated diasporic writers, finds that diaspora eventually “root themselves in ideas rather than places in memories as much as in material things” (125); he distinguishes between two ways of looking at “home,” one that claims “there is no place like home” and the other that “there is no longer any such place as home.” Such shifts from the initial attachment to a loosening of ties make for very important differences in the diasporic imagination (Rushdie qtd. in Mondal 180).

The diaspora inhabits the liminal “third space” which in Bhabha’s view contains perpetual tension and a meaningful pregnant chaos (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 164). Their tenuous relations with the two nations and locations makes them “hyphenated” beings, and the identity formed within the earlier nation comes into the interstices of displacement, borne with a sense of loss. The diasporic intellectual and writer often problematises the duality and the interstices of their cultural location, trying to use this space for creative insight into the

modern world's social and political conflicts. These eminent diasporic poets have charted out significant intellectual roles for themselves as they negotiate their relations with the homeland and the adopted hostlands. The geoscapes they have crossed and their success in the academic and literary worlds in the countries of their adoption, mainly the UK and the USA, have opened out for these writers various possibilities of relating to and taking responsible positions. The one major difference between an exile and diaspora lies in the availability of the freedom to return to one's homeland that diaspora always have access to. Once they exercise their choice to stay away in new lands, they invite a number of questions as well as expectations.

These writers enter into dialogic relations with their own nation and with other countries. Here Abdul Jan Mohammed's view of Edward Said as a modern "specular" border intellectual who has used his writing to put the case of his people, the Palestinians, before the world helps us to see how intellectuals can utilise their location on the border for political purposes. Such an intellectual "utilizes his or her interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from which to define implicitly or explicitly, other utopian possibilities of group formations" (Jan Mohammed 97). Jan Mohamed shows carefully how Edward Said crossed and recrossed the borders of nations, nationality and the various public spheres in the countries he was involved with, to use his position as a "specular intellectual." Ali, Alexander and Dharker are among the several modern writers who move beyond their personal experiences of exile and align themselves with the causes pertaining to groups of displaced and dispossessed people, even those eliminated as communities in the process of development and late capital market. Living as transnationals, they question the discourses of nationalism, the problems of belonging and the enigmas of departure that many diasporic people face. Such questions are being raised even as the diaspora writing has gained greater visibility. To scan the differences amongst these poets and the issues of their concern I now turn to their work. Despite their commonalities, the differences of gender, political pulls and religious leanings in the three have led to distinctly different visions, perceptions and concerns in their creative writings. Agha Shahid Ali's constant preoccupation with the loss of Kashmir and its political struggle dominates his poetry, Meena Alexander's greater awareness of her frequent migrations and travels into foreign lands and different homes within India is her major poetic subject, while Imtiaz Dharker began her poetic work with a feminist questioning of social and religious orthodoxies governing Muslim women's lives. Such questioning has continued in her later work where she also opens out some other restrictive boundaries in the social and political spheres.

Agha Shahid Ali experienced a series of exiles as he travelled away from Srinagar, the original "home," first to Delhi as a student then to the US for his PhD work. The move to Delhi gave him a cultural shock as the bustling urban life of the capital was quite different from the idyllic pastoral tranquillity of

Kashmir. Once he moved to the USA the exilic alienation was converted into an advantage, for Ali began to value the freedom and new exposure he gained there. Re-locating himself in the new land he considered himself to be an “exile” for all the “resonances” the term carried. He remained voluntarily exiled all his life, refusing to merge into American society. He agreed to become an American citizen only shortly before his death in 2001 (Hall 16). He considered that the exile’s position carries with it an independence from national affiliations and best describes the sense of belonging to a home to which he cannot return. Writing about the intellectual advantages of such a detached position in an essay, he has traced his own roots in the Hindu, Muslim and Western traditions, which enable him to use their mythology, literary tradition and histories to create a new kind of English poetry in the “South Asian subcontinent’s English” (Ali, “A Privileged Site: Live Like the Banyan Tree” 55).

Notwithstanding these claims, the pain of loss of the homeland is woven throughout Ali’s poetry, belying the common belief that a willed departure can only bring happiness. The deep love for Kashmir, and the city, Srinagar, the loss of these loved spaces, led him to repeatedly recreate the lost land in his poems. He refers to the Russian revolutionary poet Osip Mandelstam, who died in exile, saying that “He reinvents Petersburg, (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it” (“The Blessed Word: A Prologue” 172) – using the prose form in this piece to express a host of emotions about the land he had left, the distressed people and the youth who were being killed in an unrestrained manner. Ali observes the gloominess around the land. Even on Id-ul-Zuha, the festival that celebrates God “melting in mercy” to save Ishmael, the army personnel continue to interrogate and kill the youth. He writes:

Srinagar was under curfew. The identity pass may or may not have/helped in the crackdown. Son after son – never to return from the/night of torture – was taken away. (“The Blessed Word...” 172)

In several poems he dreams of or visualises Srinagar, its Zero Bridge, monuments, streets and the river Jhelum and other places which have now witnessed new histories of violence, destroying its former tranquillity, serenity and cordial relations between the different communities. His name “Shahid,” he says, means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic (“Ghazal” 226). He becomes a loving, but sad “witness” to the destruction of the “Paradise” on earth, that is, Kashmir (“Ghazal” 226).

Shahid Ali’s poetry is permeated with a sense of deep melancholy, which is not born out of any “romantic” sense of separation. The sorrow that is reflected in his poems is caused by the agony he shares with the people of Kashmir whether at home or in exile, and the suffering caused by the violence of various agencies – insurgency and the Army. He is pained by the stories of those who are dead,

and those who have disappeared, those killed during interrogations, with their bodies lying unclaimed or unburied. Ali's poetry constantly expands the Kashmiri people's struggle to take in other struggles in Bosnia, Chechnya, Armenia, Sarajevo and Albania ("The Correspondent" 209) for he wants to speak about the struggles for freedom of the minorities and weave them into a bond.

The poet's self is split into the witness, the sufferer and the singer of the collective suffering. There is an "unhealable rift" forced between him and the "native place, between a self and its true home" as Said says in "The Winter of Mind: Reflections on Exile" (138). Said's insight into this rift comes from his own exilic position, the awareness of the powerful nations' abuse of their position to impose their unjust demands on the weak nations and communities. Ali can understand the pain of such victims around the world. But the "unhealable rift" between Ali and homeland does not lie in a lack of means to physically return home or in any political imposition. Ali has spoken about the easy availability of flights, the means of communication in the modern age.³ It was rather his own consciousness that the Kashmir he had grown up in, had known, had now disappeared and a return would not help him reverse it. Instead he used his diasporic location in the hostland, in between the two lands, to write about the conditions of home and wrote feverishly between 1987 and 2001, and joined those writers who broke the international silence, even ignorance and indifference towards the contested land as he paralleled it with other small regions caught between two bigger nations.

Though Kashmir remained his passionate concern, it did not limit his vision of freedom to his own community's struggle. He looks beyond at other victims of injustice and draws attention to their destruction by market forces, political ambitions and the ruthless drive of industrial competition. Assuming responsibility as a poet of such groups he asks for social equality and freedom for them, and thereby he builds his connections with poets who have sung of revolution and given their lives to such quests. His poem "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz" shows Ali's insight into the passionate struggle of the senior poet, Faiz, whom he calls "a rebel face of hope." As he translated this rebel's poetry, Ali expresses his own ambition to be able to write about "revolution" with as much passion as he found in Faiz. Faiz had endured the exile's loneliness yet he remained dedicated to freedom, equality and justice. Ali writes:

... I
had gone from poem to poem and found
you once, terribly alone, speaking,
to yourself: "Bolt your door, sad heart
put out the candles, break all cups of wine. No one
now no one will ever return ("Homage to Faiz" 59)

³ See "Agha Shahid Ali in Conversation with Kamila Shamsie."

The younger poet seeks to identify with Faiz, as both await a revolution that can transform the social system.

Uprooted and displaced, Ali underwent a series of shifts in his identity. As a poet Ali's inclusion of myths and ideas from multiple cultural traditions defines his syncretic style. Into these multiple strands were also woven the "transnational cultures to counter the totalizing forces of territorial politics" (Sullivan 87). Shahid Ali uses the Hindu myths associated with the origin of Kashmir, in which it is considered to be the resting place of Lord Siva and Parvati ("A History of Paisleys"); he refers to the Mughal history of the 16th-17th centuries and also Muslim beliefs, sacred places, rituals and festivals in different poems. In some of the poems included in the collection *Rooms are Never Finished*, he views Kashmir as Karbala, the sacred site of holy battle and martyrdom in the Islamic Shi'ite tradition, and talks about the Kashmiris killed in 1992. He refers to the well-known Kashmiri poetesses Lal Ded and Habba Khatun who boldly moved about in the countryside singing songs of divine mystic truth. These various cultural strands that he finds in Kashmir's unique culture are set against its ugly destruction in the present age.

In present day Kashmir, Ali finds signs of a devastation that has transformed the land into hell. In the poem "Summers of Translation," tracing the changes in Kashmir he writes "PARADISE ON EARTH BECOMES HELL" (257). His anger takes on a bitter tone when he speaks of the "thin bureaucrat from New Delhi" ("Muharram in Srinagar"):

Death flies in, this bureaucrat from the plains -
a one way passenger, again...
'Break their hands.' Will ours return with guns, or a bouquet? (234)

As his orders are carried out, the streets become empty of children, "He's driven/through streets bereft of children: they are dead, not asleep" (234).

Further in the poem he uses contrasting colours to describe the conflict between arrogant power and its victims: "The Mansion is white, lit up with roses. He is driven/through streets in which blood flows like Hussain's" (235). He moans at the plight of the whole country where he finds: "the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers" and says "Kashmir is burning" ("I See Kashmir..." 179).

Besides the blood on the streets the poet uses the images of dark cells, silent empty minarets and deserted houses to build up a spectral world, where the spirits of young men killed in the struggle return and talk to him. The young boy Rizvan – who comes to talk to the poet in "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" – represents uncounted numbers of youth whose deaths were not reported, recognised or recorded. Ghosts appear in some of the poems, who tell the poet of their miserable fate; these images fill the poems with an extreme despair and

grim darkness. Ali's images evoke such a bleak view of the desolation that they continue to reverberate in the reader's imagination. In this world "silence" spreads messages as dead post offices deliver news. In the poem "The Country without a Post Office" he comments, "Everything is finished, nothing remains/I must force silence to be a mirror to see his voice again for directions" (204). He wanders through deserted cities, homes, post office, looking for old acquaintances, only to find "so many have fled, ... ran away, and become refugees there, in the plains..." (202). Through condensed complex images evoking phantom figures he creates a surrealistic atmosphere. Ali's poetry become increasingly dense with meaning suggested through abstract metaphors and quick moves through time and space. Such poems do not open out easily and need re-readings, to be fully comprehended.

As an "exile" Ali kept his emotional closeness to Kashmir and its people's suffering at the centre of his creative life, and taking advantage of the exile's freedom, he broke out of the claims of Indian nationalistic discourse as he began to call himself "Kashmiri-American" rather than "Indian-American." In the political significance of the "semantics of the hyphen" (as Vijay Mishra puts it) Ali asserted his freedom to be rid of all those demands of his identity which he could not belong to. R. Radhakrishnan's description of the various stages, or modes of the diaspora's assertion of their ethnicity, and the transformation of the hyphen to a dialogic and non-hierarchic status (121), catches some of these nuances which we find in Ali. As Ali redefined his humanistic concerns beyond borders of the nation-state he also attempted a merger of literary forms that remained bound with languages from different nations and communities. The literary forms used in medieval Italian poetry, Urdu and modern English poetry were brought together in some of his later poetry which can be seen as assertion of the "fertility of dispersion" (Braziel and Mannur 4). Culturally, aesthetically and politically Ali tried to gain a cosmopolitan vision relocating himself in world literature.⁴

The two other poets, Imtiaz Dharker and Meena Alexander, have both travelled across the borders of many nations, cultures and religious beliefs. In their poetry experiences of the destabilising impact of such dislocations are in evidence. These two poets question the politics of seclusion of women in restrictive social norms and religious taboo over their bodily functions. They also speak about women's experiences of mothering, child-birth and their relations within the domestic space in different contexts. A different kind of world opens up in the poetry of these two, as their imagery and idiom also show greater awareness of the homely implements, tasks and duties usually ascribed to women.

⁴ Xiwen Mai discusses the development of a cosmopolitan human awareness in Ali's later poems, especially in the collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America*.

Born in 1954, in Lahore, Pakistan, Intiaz Dharker was taken to Glasgow at an early age when her parents relocated there. Her first published collection of poems, *Purdah I, II* (1989) interrogates the Muslim social customs which, even in diaspora, denied women freedom of movement and dress. She boldly depicts how religious practices impose misogynist patriarchal code of dress with the use of purdah which become a means of pushing women into silence and invisibility leading to total lack of power. Her subsequent collections explore the themes of migrancy and the acculturation process of diasporic people, along with continued questioning of political and social boundaries that deny freedoms and justice to different social groups. She is widely recognised for her poetry, sketches and drawings used as illustrations in her poetry collections, and film making, and has been awarded for her various talents.

One of the closed epistemological circles that she tries to break open is with regard to the human interpretation of God and the divine presence and the various rituals that are imposed rigidly on different societies. In *Postcards from God* (1994) she subverts the practice of creating authoritative versions of God's messages to human beings, a practice common to almost every religion, and seen in the scriptures and mythologies of different religions. This practice is used in the poems where God speaks directly, expressing concern with modern day human beings, society and their religious practices. Several poems show God's sense of distress at the riots and killings being done in his name. The theological and metaphysical existential questions that human beings have asked throughout history, are considered here from God's perspective, in poems such as "Whim" (*Postcards from God* 10) and "Signals" (*Postcards from God* 11). The short poem "Question 2" brings out how in a playful tone the poet presents serious doubts:

Did I create you
in my image
or did you create me
in yours? (32)

Through an intelligent use of satire and humour the poet deconstructs dogmas, rigid taboos and images to smash human vanities, hypocrisies and the anger between different social groups. She writes about the human world, not restricted into any one national, religious or cultural space. She herself has lived in freedom from such boundaries and she cherishes the status of a multi-locale diaspora. She divides her time between Glasgow, Dublin, Bombay and Birmingham, and continues to relate to the different places with equal zest – the beauty of the sugarcane fields in Punjab and the scent of the forests in Southern France (Subramaniam, "A Poet's Voice"). She feels "unapologetic" about such a freedom, for not trying to belong to anyone place. When asked about "home," she says, "I may never be able to define my home, but the question is, do I want

to? Where is home anyway?” (Subramaniam, “A Poet’s Voice”). She speaks about the diasporic position and her fondness for travelling. In the poem “First Gift” she would like to gift to a newborn child, not a customary silver spoon, but a love of travelling (13). Travelling around the world she gets to know different cultures, systems and the politics of her time outside her limited space. She foregrounds this position as an “outsider” to most cultures she visits in these lines:

I was born a foreigner,
I carried from there
to become a foreigner, everywhere. (“Minority” 10)

The diaspora who do not seek “roots but are engaged with diverse ‘routes’ are not,” James Clifford says “necessarily defined by a specific geo-political boundary,” and he finds in such “multi-locale diaspora” a “principled ambivalence about return and attachment to land” (Clifford 251-52). Such ambivalences may operate in different modes, for in several of Dharker’s poems the longing to return “home,” the pain at the impossibility of such a return and the emotional conflicts of a displaced person, “dispersed like a seed” are seen. She sensitively recreates such moments, isolated and suppressed by the consciousness of other desires, which gives the impression that she herself has been touched by the awareness of such pains and loss in her personal life. A conscious decision to remain a transnational becomes a historical and ontological choice, which calls for the suppression of such longings for home. The lack of attachment to a specific geospace does not render the process free of tensions. Dharker has dealt with the emotional complications of travel, the displacement caused by such international migrations, using images and objects that bring together memories of attachment, absences of loved people and objects that belonged to those places. Distant spaces become invested with dense emotional webs, creating vibrant mentalscapes. The process of acculturation leads to formation of hybrid new identities, and one’s journey continues, as new situations bring with them new set of challenges for the migrated groups.

Dharker has described the South Asian migrants’ efforts to settle down in their new homes in several of her poems, the occasional moments of slippage into regrets, pain of alienation and a gnawing pain. In “Campsie Fells” where some migrated families, perhaps relatives, attend a picnic, share their food together and try to enjoy the outing, Dharker shows the great cultural value of food because it becomes a means of asserting their different cuisine as a sign of their individual cultural heritage. In this scene the group has brought the unadulterated “desi” cuisine – “kebabs and tikkas with chutney” (“Campsie Fells” 30). While sitting together, a popular form of entertainment is to sing old Hindi songs. Someone or the other is usually brought to tears, leading to a question from someone else: “Why don’t you go back” (“Campsie Fells” 30). The scene at

Campsie Fells does not seem to be a single unique episode. It seems to be a commonly re-enacted one, for the entire combination has been witnessed in diasporic writings, films and real life accounts. The answer that is given admits the truth: “Our families are scattered.../... The village has changed/.../ I’m not sure if anyone knows us anymore” (31). Nostalgia is in fact another kind of emotion – the acceptance that they cannot ever return, even if they want to. Time has not stood still for anyone, and their return to “home” would create several problems; for everyone, it becomes a kind of farewell “to home rather than a ‘celebration’ of it” (Paranjape 167).⁵

Defining home becomes a problem in this sense, for the home that is remembered perhaps is alive only in the memory. But that virtual mental space is very vibrant; for diaspora relate to their memories of home and relive their past even as they are conscious of its changed social political conditions, that they would not want to return to what exists now. Dharker uses different items of food, such as fruits, and also the different activities associated with the preparation or consumption of food, to show the memories of home rekindled in the hearts of the diasporic people. For those away from homeland culture, the shared memories of fruits and food become a means of revisiting the culture. Entwined with a host of associations, simple items like “Anar” in the poem “Alif, Anar,” or the dishes that the speaker was missing in “I need,” the poet constructs the many layers of emotions linked with them. The “anar” that the Asian couple living in Glasgow creates produce such ripples of excitement, pleasure and awakening of associations that their child at home looks at them in wonder. That they suspended for a while their habits of frugality and self-denial and “squandered a shilling” strikes her as most unusual. Slowly, dramatically the woman brings the anar out of the paper bag, creating a whole scene of pleasurable anticipation. The child understands their joy at once, again holding in hand something that was so integral to their earlier life:

It was a whole idea of life,
concentrated in one thing. (65)

The very next poem in the collection *The Terrorist at My Table*, “How to Cut a Pomegranate” (66), takes the scene further. By now the father has begun to demonstrate the process of cutting open a pomegranate, regaining a self confidence that it was he alone who could best perform that action, an insider to the world of “anar.” The pedagogic position of the father is bypassed by the child

⁵ Makarand Paranjape notes that several Indian diasporic writers, such as Rohinton Mistry, critique rather than “celebrate” their homeland. He says that “what they enact is a farewell to India not a passage to it.” Such texts are “elegiac” not “nostalgic in tone” (167). In many of Dharker’s poems such a finality of departure causing a sense of loss and mourning is evident. See Paranjape’s “One Foot in Canada and a couple of Toes in India.”

who is thinking of the space and accompanying other fruit trees, even the birds in the garden.

Different kinds of food, the processes associated with preparing those dishes, or the places and persons with whom that food is associated in memory reflect the desperate homesickness and alienation from the adopted land, with an acute sense of loneliness. The poems "I Need" (103) and "The Women" (71) both from *The Terrorist at My Table* construct such lonely figures, of women caught in the maelstrom of diasporic dislocation and loneliness. Dharker has also written about several other groups of men and women who find their whole identity and emotional being under great stress due to their migration. *The Terrorist at My Table* has two sections that deal with migrant/diasporic groups. In the section titled "These are the times we live in," the newly risen suspicion towards immigrants from Asia, Middle East and Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, and anyone looking different due to dress or other physical markers is portrayed in short scenes at the Immigration desks at airports and other such public places. She shows the negative, hostile and paranoid outlook that has taken grip of the American officials and white population since 9/11 and 7/7.⁶ Poems like "Open," "The Password," "Still here" recreate such scenes. She depicts the person being reduced to the size of the photo in the passport (in "These are the times we live in I"): "You shrink to the size/of the book in his hands" (47). An entire community is subjected to a massive stereotyping, which pushes diasporic people further into the margins of the nation.

There is also another section titled "Lascar Johnnie 1930" in which seven short poems bring out the loneliness of the Asian seamen who were employed by the western shipowners, traders, who often found themselves living on foreign land, staying on without any real desire to do so. Circumstances often forced these migrations. Dharker voices their muted longings for their fields, rivers and homes in Punjab while living in new houses, and with new women these men dreamt of their "charpoy" and "wife with jasmine in her hair" in their native homes ("Close" 59). The pulls of one's native food, language, forms of sharing food and such cultural practices are seen to lurk constantly in these lascars' hearts whose lives are almost forgotten by all, their own people included. They live with the kind of "plurality of vision" that Said speaks of when he says that the exiles are aware of the "simultaneous dimensions," which he calls "contrapuntal" ("Winter" 148). Dharker's observation and recreation of these men reveals her insight into history and local legends. These poems evoke the complex fate of the migrated groups, even if the decisions to stay on were their own.

Freedom from injustice remains one of Dharker's important themes which she transfers to transnational levels. Her poem "When they walled her in" uses

⁶ Sanjay Malik examines the poet's response to such racism in his essay "Imtiaz Dharker's Responses to 9/11 and 7/7."

the story of Anarkali being walled in, as a punishment for her love for the Mughal Prince. Dharker uses the dying girl's song to become part of the songs that revolutionaries and social rebels have sung against tyranny and oppression, poets like "Faiz, Faraz, Darwish, Shahid Ali" (55). All those who have been exiles in their times have sung such songs, asking for love and freedom, to be enjoyed by all – masses and elite. The poem shows Dharker's evocation of the dream of freedom to be and to love, and the need for justice at the international/global scale. In the last lines she links this wall (where Anarkali is buried) to that built, in the twentieth century, in Berlin – a symbol of modern political injustice practiced on a larger scale. She speaks against the acts of powerful nations when they divide lands arbitrarily, destroy and mutilate existing countries like Palestine, Gaza and Germany ("The Terrorist at My Table" 23). Though she does not mention India's partition the silence itself becomes meaningful.

Meena Alexander is a poet defined as belonging to a group of "wandering people" whose repeated migrations and displacements disturb the boundaries of nations and their monologic discourse (Satchidanand 34). Referring to the destabilising impact of such unsettledness, Alexander says, "Am I a creature with no home, no nation? And if so, what kind of new genus could I possibly be?" ("No Nation Woman" 143). In her poetry and prose writings, she reviews her diasporic transplanted self and its various emotional impacts. Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, in 1951, but the family was soon travelling across different parts of India with her father's official postings. When he decided to take up a new position in Sudan the family's travels outside the country began. Alexander's childhood and youth are marked by sojourns in several homes, cities and countries, leading the girl to feel completely homeless. Presently she is a Professor in a college in New York. Alexander's own travels and struggles with herself have surfaced in her work over and over again. Her diasporic sensibility is reflected abundantly in her work with all its shifts. Often she uses the terms "fractured" and "fragmented" self, identifying herself as such. She persists in evaluating the impact of these travels on her. In her memoir *Faultlines* (1993) she calls herself "a woman cracked by my multiple migrations" and laments the fact that in her state of mind, she can "connect nothing with nothing" (20). She evokes the "theatre of memory" where she lists the several cities she has lived in, since her childhood. She says in the poem "Gold Horizon":

Places names splinter
 On my tongue and flee:
 Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri
 Khartoum, Nottingham, New Delhi,
 Hyderabad, New York,
 The piecework of sanity. (49)

As she stitches together these geographical locations, she recalls those persons whose love shaped her into a protected Indian girl as they provided her education and an identity. Alexander recognises that the colonial education that she received as a child instilled the elements of alienation and contradictions in her understanding of her past. Contradictory influences and epistemologies were juxtaposed as, for example, when the school's *English Reader* was put by her mother by the side of Gandhi's *Autobiography* ("Illiterate Heart" 65). Gurbhagat Singh comments that the diasporic movement has produced a new person whose mind works at least with two epistemologies: "He/she has lost the center that used to in fact unify" (Singh 21). Such decentring in fact began with colonisation in the case of the South Asians and other diaspora from the former colonies of western empires. The hybrid selves that the colonial education system produced learnt to put together disparate epistemologies and cultures creating odd juxtapositions.

In the several stages of her growth as an individual, Alexander records the efforts she made to fit into her various hostlands, especially the US where she migrated as a mature adult. Speaking of the experiences common to most migrants (including diaspora and exiles) who want to fit into the new land's public spaces, Alexander's poems in the collection titled *River and Bridge* (1995) refer to her efforts to physically reinvent her appearance, by trying new hair styles, dresses and shoes. Lacking a firm sense of the value of her initial identity, missing a centre for herself, she says, in "Brown Skin, What Mask?":

I fix my heels at Paul's Shoe Palace for a dollar fifty
Get a free make-over at Macy's eyes smart, lips shine... (11)

Her attempts, she realises, are a continuation of the colonial legacy. She says further, "Shall I be a hyphenated thing, Macaulay's Minutes and Melting Pot theories notwithstanding?" (11). Mimicry began much earlier, as she looked at the USA as the centre of the world, and disempowered herself in imitating those people. The title "Brown Skin, What Mask?" adapts Fanon's insightful study of the mimicry and hybrid split selves of colonised people. Applying that analysis of the split selves to the divisiveness that migrated persons realise in themselves, Alexander shows their self-contradictions.

The poem titled "River and Bridge" in the collection with this title takes further this adaptation and reinvention of physical and emotional aspects of the persons; the poet looks upon the process as a rebirth:

I have come to the Hudson's edge to begin my life
To be born again. ("River and Bridge" 57)

Learning new strategies for survival in a new world leads to radical transformations sometimes. Alexander has spoken about her own efforts to retain her Indian

sarees to wear to her lectures also as she goes to Hunter College in New York and to other universities for academic work. After the 9/11 event new waves of racist antagonism towards ethnic wear have appeared in the USA and UK. There has been a shift in her as well; she says, she began wearing western outfits for the purpose of commuting after several instances of racial intolerance in the public sphere, which she also experienced (Sarkar 223). Such expressions of their difference are not mere token gestures to assert one's different identity and ethnicity. These actions reflect an assertion of one's right to maintain the difference and not submit to cultural erasure that the hostland society demands. She defines her acculturation to the hostland through a freedom of selfhood, and the claims of home and one's ethnic identity become important in the "dialogic" of the hyphen. Her negotiation with the two, the home and host countries, lead to a foregrounding of the earlier identity which, as Radhakrishnan argues, is one of the stages of the immigrants' treatment of their ethnicity, when "the hyphenated integration of ethnic with national comes under conditions that do not privilege the 'national' at the expense of the 'ethnic'" (121). Reborn as an ethnic minority, as an American citizen, the ethnic element of her identity is balanced against the national, leading to a dialogue between the two components.

Meena Alexander's continued exploration of her past helps her to review the formative influences of her culture, her parents and the bonds of love she shared with them. New experiences, especially the distance, create new perspectives. While some of the poems in *River and Bridge*, like "Bloodline" and "Passion" in the section titled "Bloodline," highlight the female line of descent, a matrilineage that connects her to the mother, several poems in *Illiterate Heart* express the poet's strong sense of her filial bond with her father, whom she called "my sweet father," ("Port Sudan" 10) and "a man for all climates" ("Elegy For My Father" 13). Poems like "Elegy For My Father" and "Reading Rumi: When the Phone Rings" recognise the value of the sternness and even awe inspiring discipline of the man who took her out of the mother's protective but enclosing care and thrust her into the sea of experience. In "An Honest Sentence" she re-interprets the Greek myth of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, his daughter, for the well-being of his army. Identifying herself with this daughter, Meena feels gratitude for her father's farsightedness in exposing her to the challenges of the vast sea of experience in the unknown world, to the world of language, knowledge and experience and how she felt that "*someone has cut her cords.../ someone will swim farther and faster from what she feels is the shore*" ("An Honest Sentence" 53). Alexander's recognition of the father's cultural role adds a new insight into her own growth as an intellectual.

Although travelling in mental and physical spaces has been tough, through all her journeys she reads this writing on the wall: "THIS JOURNEY IS A NARRATIVE OF LOSS" ("Man in a Red Shirt" 44). Yet she values the experience. Her journey continues in the diasporic non-belonging state, the

traveller who is reborn continually. Like the “phoenix” she rises over the ashes and continues to take flight (“Man in a Red Shirt” 44).

Alexander has, like Ali and Dharker, used intertextual devices and frequently refers to many European and Asian writers as a way of building up intellectual connections with the revolutionary and exiled poets. She uses the famous lines from Faiz’s gazal in Urdu, “*Mujh-Se-Pahli-Si-Mohabbat*” in the poem “Estrangement becomes the Mark of the Eagle” as homage to the poet and to express shared ideas. Similar efforts to reach out to the Chinese youth are seen in the poem titled “The Young of Tiananmen,” while “Prison Cell” describes the loneliness and anguish of prisoners like Nelson Mandela who with thousands of others were kept in prison for extremely long durations as they struggled for freedom for their country.

These three poets have travelled away from the moorings of a single nation and one home as they began to feel that home is “nowhere and everywhere” (Alexander, “Dialogue with Leon Russell”). The shift in geographical space brought about a shift in the enunciative space as they also built up a wider intellectual network of similar ideas and concerns with writers, poets and thinkers with a desire for social change. These poets enter into a form of cosmopolitanism which comes close to the approach Bhabha has called “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha, “Unsatisfied” 48). Taking a poet like Adrienne Rich who speaks about groups of displaced, migrant marginalised people in different parts of the world, the victims of political and economic injustices, Bhabha distinguishes the universalism focussed on the common people from the view that emerges from an elitist, abstract idealism. Such transnationalism is not a nation bound affiliation or sympathy, and Brennan, like Mondal, warns against the transnationalism that may be a disguised form of a nationalism.⁷ These poets discussed here have tried to enter into global cultural and humanistic sympathies, seeking to relate to larger humanity. Such a quest then redefines their identity.

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⁷ Timothy Brennan sounds a cautionary note in his study *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* when he expresses the fear of this concept of cosmopolitanism becoming a disguised form of the patriotic sentiments of any one nation, especially of the US. He feels that there is all the risk of American patriotism “writ large on a global scale” as the idea is being discussed in the US (26). Anshuman Mondal shares this feeling while discussing Salman Rushdie’s suggested cosmopolitanism (Mondal 180-81).

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