

Pooja Rani

Research Scholar

CDLU, Sirsa (Haryana), India.

Email id: poojamehta5188@gmail.com

Contact No. 98962-63725

Mantle of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines: A
Memoir*

Abstract

Memory plays a key role in the unraveling of past experiences of Life Writings which are in themselves great literary documents. Generally deemed as the faculty of the mind, memory encodes, stores and retrieves the information. Memory by its very nature is in past tense and points towards absent things and this absence is turned into presence by making conscious attempts in memoirs. The present research paper will analyze the mantle of remembering and forgetting by taking into account both of the versions, 1993 version and revised version of 2003 of Fault Lines. This process of retention and forgetting doubly delineates Alexander and in the wake of it, fragments both her 'self' and 'writing'. It presents memory as a process of filtration itself and Alexander seems to make up memories by constantly inventing it as a means to keep her narrative flowing. How memory presents only a patchy version of past, how the memory of a traumatic event is repressed and how it surfaces again, are some of the key issues studied in this paper.

Keywords: Memory, Fragment, Trauma, Repression, Linear, Circular

Introduction

Memory is a remarkable system that encodes, stores and retains information. Generally deemed as an ability to recall past experiences to affect or influence our present, it helps us to learn a lesson from our past experiences and thus strengthening present and future relationships. Etymologically, word 'memory' traces its origin back

to Middle English *memorie*, which in turn is derived from the Anglo- French *memoire* or *memorie* and finally from the Latin *memoria* and *memor* means “mindful” or “remembering” (www.human-memory.net). Remembering and forgetting are the two important processes whereas remembering seems nothing but the number of repetitions of an event while forgetting is contrary to preservation that eliminates unsolicited information from memory so that the elasticity of the nervous system could be retained. The present paper takes into compass the mantle of memory in Meena Alexander’s memoir *Fault Lines*.

Meena Alexander hails from a list of 20th century South Asian diasporic writers who examines the disparate elements of dislocation and relocation in her works. She was born in Allahabad, India and spent the first five years of her childhood in her grandparents’ home in Kerala but due to her father’s transfer of job, the family moved to Khartoum, Sudan, though they continued to visit Kerala during summer vacations. Later, she went to UK to the University of Nottingham to pursue her further study. In her early twenties, she relocated India and taught here until she married a Jewish American who she met in Hyderabad and the couple migrated to New York City. As her own life is filled with multiple dislocations and relocations, same sounds true for her works which are expressions of home, exile, nostalgia, journeying back and forth in time.

Her *Fault lines: A Memoir* orbits around woes of dislocation and expectations of relocation in the midst of changes. Writing a memoir offers Alexander a model to disclose her past experiences, her patchy identity as well as to bring forth repressed traumatic events to consciousness with the device of memory. Alexander points out, while replying to Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva in an interview, how “the whole issue of self-discourse as it plays into postcolonial culture is a difficult one, but it may be more attractive to women because of possibilities it offers of inventing a space for oneself”(Bahri and Vasudeva 1996, 47). While the first edition of *Fault Lines* (1993) was written at the behest of her friend, Florence Howe, the revised version (2003) fills her memory gap by revealing dark and repressed memories of her sexual abuse described in the new section entitled ‘Book of Childhood’, which she forgot to remember during first edition and which made its way during 9/11 event. Within both the versions, she depicts the loss of memory as a heightened feature of migrant’s subjectivity which ultimately results into a fault. She defines meaning of ‘fault’ in the very starting pages of her memoir with the aid of Oxford English Dictionary: “Fault: Deficiency, lack, want of something...Default, failing, neglect. A defect, imperfection, blameable quality or feature: a.

in moral character, b. in physical or intellectual constitution, appearance, structure or workmanship” (*Fault Lines* 2003, 2). Title *Fault Lines* validates several linguistic, geographic and cultural fault lines in her identity. By conveying the meaning of ‘fault’, she seems to present the act of forgetting as a ‘deficiency’ in her memory and the very forgetting drives her to “make up memory”, to “make absent present.” As Salman Rushdie talks in his book *Imaginary Homelands*, “We remake the past to suit our present purpose using memory as tool” (23-24). In fact, when memory functions as a tool to remake past, then it results into a discursive logic based on the inconsistent nature of remembering and forgetting, making an ‘other’ to one’s self. Ngugi Wa Thingo who has prefaced the 2003 edition of *Fault Lines*, says, “It is difficult to find words with which to preface Meena Alexander’s personal memories. As brilliantly captured in this new edition of *Fault Lines*, the memories are their own preface and introduction to a mesmerizing text culled from a life lived in fragments and migrations...” (xi) The chapters of this memoir are intermingled with past and present circumstances, weaved around different time and geographical locations. Even within a single sentence, Alexander synthesizes present with past as she writes about the dinner with writers in Manhattan and in the same sentence she recalls a conversation with her father in India that took place a decade earlier. Dividing her book into 25 chapters, she boards on a journey of ‘self’ from the very first chapter ‘Dark Mirror.’ Her choice of subtitle *Memoir* “indicates a more intimate form of concatenation of the self” (Ponzanesi, 56).

Two strands of memory: Linear and Circular are widely exploited by Alexander in *Fault Lines*. She deft fully presents her life merely in one paragraph by flowing her memory in a linear fashion:

The first child of my parents, the eldest of three sisters, I was born in 1951 in Allahabad, in the north where my father was working, in a newly independent India. My sister Anna was born in 1956 and my sister Elsa in 1961. Amma returned to her home in Tiruvella each time to give birth....The other six months were spent in Khartoum. In 1969, when I was eighteen, I graduated from Khartoum University and went to Britain as a student. I lived there for four years while I was completing my studies. In 1973 I returned to India to Delhi and Hyderabad. In 1979, just married, I left for the United States and have lived in New York City ever since (*Fault Lines* 2003, 6).

This linear description presents her memories traveling back and forth in time. Though in her early childhood, she suffered the pangs of dislocation, she could not resist binding herself with the native ethos and soil of Kerala and her returns to Kerala from Khartoum revived and stirred again her buried roots. She captured the sweet memories of fragrance of new mango leaves and the warmth of sun in Tiruvella. According to Pascal her recollections create a ‘concrete homogeneity of subject and object, of past and present, of mental image and external event’ (Pascal, 85).

Unlike linear fashion, circular aspect of her memory spans throughout her life. No doubt, she tries to recompose the bits of her life in a chronological way but her repetitions, omissions and disruptions upset the order of her linear organization and displaces her, resultantly, she asks questions of her genealogy, “Where did I come from? How did I become what I am?” (*Fault Lines* 1993, 2). This line not only questions her ontological uprootedness but also a lack of clear vision which torments her throughout the first half of her memoir. She fails to put her past into some perspective until and unless she writes revised version of *Fault Lines*. ‘Writing’, for Meena, acts as a refuge where she tackles problems of her split self and it sheds her marginal existence. Gradually, she becomes aware of the fact that she has missed something very important and that realization prompts her to rewrite. This remembering of repressed past is presented through the metaphor of tearing down of Tiruvella’s ancestral home to construct a new residence compatible with modern tastes.

No doubt, the description of her sexual exploitation by her maternal grandfather Ilya comes as a shock to readers, but not as much an outcome of the awareness that indeed her grandfather abused her, but due to her overwhelming and sincere portrait of her grandfather as delineated in the previous version. In this previous version of 1993, she describes her Ilya as, “Almost seventy by the time I was born, he (Ilya) was well established as an intellectual and community leader...I learnt to accept his place in the world around him, his public power, I loved him more than I have ever loved anyone in my life” (*Fault Lines* 1993, 52). This description of Ilya is strongly in contrast with that of her revised version when she recalls the details of her sexual abuse, “The teak desk where I had to lie down as he touched my body. The white wall where I pressed myself back trying to escape” (*Fault Lines* 2003, 240). By narrating the story of her personal trauma, she is trying to attest her personal history to large global history. 9/11 terrorist attack on World Trade Center in America gave birth to national trauma which resulted in increase in racial prejudice and ethnic profiling in the U.S. Rise of national trauma triggered personal trauma to appear on surface. This can be better

understood in terms of neuroscience. Mind seems wider than sky when comes the task of storing memories in it. Cerebrum or forebrain, the largest part of our brain, is covered by cerebral cortex which envelops the part of our brain where memories are stored. When the brain encounters a traumatic event, it blocks that memory in a process called disassociation or detachment from reality in order to protect itself from pain.

According to a study by Northwestern University, Illinois, the brain registers a memory when it is in an intensified state of arousal but replays it only when it is brought into same state in which it was first formed. According to principal investigator Dr Jelena Radulovic, The Dunbar Professor in Bipolar Disease at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, “The brain functions in different states, much like a radio operates at AM and FM frequency bands, it’s as if the brain is normally tuned to FM stations to access memories, but needs to be tuned to AM stations to access subconscious memories. If a traumatic event occurs when these receptors are activated, the memory of this event cannot be accessed unless these receptors are activated once again, essentially tuning the brain into the AM stations” (*The Telegraph*). This theory was tested on mice in a box whose memory receptors were stimulated by a drug called gaboxadol. Then the mice were given an electric shock and the mice could retain its memory until the drug wore off. To resurface their repressed memory of that shock, another dose of gaboxadol was given and they experienced the same shock. Similarly, the traumatic experiences like childhood abuse are resurfaced when they meet same situation.

We find that the memory of Alexander’s abuse was felt more in her body. As she herself admits, “I learnt...that the body remembers when consciousness is numbed” (*Fault Lines* 2003, 242). Actually, body memory has long been researched by scholars of trauma theory who propose that “there is no memory without body memory” (Casey 1987, 172). In reference to personal trauma and public shame, some important questions have been fabricated around body memory in the sections “The Stone-Eating Girl” and the “Book of Childhood” in *Fault Lines*. Alexander identifies herself with the dark otherness of her alter-ego Susikali, the demoness, or with the stone-eating girl. This identification lets her shed the status of being abused rather she realizes that she is not a whole entity ‘I’, but a composition of selves weaved together.

By writing, Alexander reclaims her forgotten past as she writes, “How could I not have known what happened to me” (*Fault lines* 2003, 242). Then she replies, “The short answer is, of course I knew, I simply could not bear to remember...As I remembered Ilya, as

I wrote him into being, I saw the child that I was, the child who set herself the harsh task of forgetting. To learn to forget is as hard as to learn to remember” (*Fault lines* 203, 242). In this context it can be said that whatever she remembers, she puts it into writing and what she forgets gets ‘enfolded.’ In her essay “Embodied Memory, Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self”, Roberta Culbertson draws her idea of ‘memory knowledge’ as “perhaps not something that is even remembered, but only felt as a presence, as perhaps [shaping] current events according to its template, itself unrecognized” (Culbertson, 170).

Alexander very courageously defies her family honor and even gives space to her mother’s advice who prompts her to forget some things. It was Meena’s mother who had taught her to value family’s traditions as described by Meena in 2003 version, “My mother, it seemed to me, as I read my book again, was constantly averting her eyes, looking elsewhere, not being able to see” (*Fault Lines*, 241). She recalls her mother’s words, “the first thing a girl should learn is when to keep her silence” (*Fault Lines*, 191). To Meena, it was her mother who taught her the tradition of silence and restricting the fear of shame to herself.

Meena admits that her aim of rewriting was not to cross out what she wrote earlier, rather to deepen that writing. Though, this rewriting of the forgotten past by inventing it raises eyebrows on the limits of memory. As Meena herself admits, “But the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind’s space” (*Fault Lines* 3). She even tries to compose characters that she had never met but only heard like Kunju, her maternal grandmother. Foucault calls this arbitrary, fragmentary process of recalling and retelling of past as an outcome of counter- memory. The counter-memory is created in the vacuum, where no words have made their way till now. It challenges the official version of history as we notice in *Fault Lines*, where by counter-memory Meena writes about her sexual abuse and recalls the violence met to her by her maternal grandfather, Ilya. Thus, she disrupts the official version of her family as cherished by the Tiruvella and Kozencheri members.

Creating a counter-memory is to make one an ‘other’ to oneself. Here, Alexander finds parallels to Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves*. In lieu of theorizing the separation between foreigner and stranger marked by national boundaries, she remaps the concept of ‘other’. She defines the foreigner as, “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in understanding and affinity founder” (1a). In this way the ‘other’ is hidden somewhere in ourselves. For Kristeva, to comprehend the concept of ‘other’ means to become familiar with the incoherence and memory gaps of the subject itself.

Apart from this, deep memory and external memory also find mention in *Fault Lines*. Making distinction between external and deep memory, Charlotte Delbo opines that while external memory is socially constructed, verbal account of a past event that is intellectual, deep memory refers to emotional and non-linguistic form of memory, memory which is marked by irrationality and felt in the body. Culbertson describes deep memory as, “the persistence of the past in its own perpetual present” (569). In *Fault Lines*, Tiruvella is the site where Alexander’s deep memory lingers and she craves for this land. Not only she recalls this land but also the memories of her Ilya loom here. Moreover, it is socially constructed external memory of Ilya that portrays him as a figure of nurturing and loving grandfather while the deep memory protects his reputed image by concealing his heinous act of sexual abuse. Alexander admits that she had told herself it was natural to hide from pain and this dreamy state led her to hide that heinous act for long. It was she who had made herself not to remember this. Though when her traumatic memory comes to surface again, she is filled with guilt and anger and asks, “Why did he expose me to the violence in his head? Sometimes when he touched me a strange light came into his eyes. Why did he use my flesh, my soul instead of canvas or paper?” (*Fault lines* 2003, 272). During this time she becomes a victim of double trauma, the first as a nowhere creature and then as a sexually abused entity

When Alexander writes, rewrites, she invents and reinvents. She is guided by the presence of multiple voices and in turn produces multiple voices. The multiple voices inside as well outside self are produced no doubt through language but memory’s role in it cannot be avoided. In terms of Bakhtin, this multiplicity of opposing voices is called dialogism. In dialogism, authoritarian discourses are decentered so that the idea of difference, plurality of perspectives could take place. This writing and rewriting provides prospects of restoration, renewal and offer multiple meanings. In addition to this, many metaphoric images have been employed by Alexander like the ‘barbed wire’ to show the displacement within the self, memory and language. Sometimes the barbed wire awakes the memory of a fence that divided the back of the Tiruvella compound. Another time, metaphor of barbed wire reminds her ‘forked power’ of English language. Another memory evoked by barbed wire is the memory of Tiruvella’s house left empty after her grandfather’s demise which strikes in mind as she notices the barbed wire at the corner of Fifth Avenue in New York.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that *Fault Lines* is nothing but a collage of memories where present and past jumble and presents a faulty fragmented version of reality. It presents when a childhood is fractured by multiple dislocations and sexual abuse, it makes a child of a different sort, where he/she is continuously haunted by memories of her homeland and struggling to find 'self'. In terms of Bakhtin, *Fault Lines* points to "internal hybridization" by bringing both versions together, but with no possibility of any final resolution and leaves the choice solely on readers to pick the one they find more appealing.

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