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POETRY AS ‘MUSIC OF SURVIVAL’: VOICING THE ‘THIRD SPACE’ IN MEENA ALEXANDER’S *BIRTHPLACE WITH BURIED STONES* AND IMTIAZ DHARKER’S *I SPEAK FOR THE DEVIL*

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Abstract: Dislocations and migrant memories, sense of belonging and otherness, crisscrossed cultural spaces and multiple identities are being voiced in academic corridors in a globalizing world. The cultural conflicts have acquired more poignancy in case of women writings and deliberations because the question of self-definition can hardly be isolated from the larger questions of gender. The reflections on shifting spaces and crossing borders in immigrant women writing speak volumes about the spatial re-configurations and cultural re-formulations in female psyche. The impossibility of fixity causes a constant self-refashioning for survival in the state of dislocations. The present paper attempts to explore the selected poems of eminent South Asian immigrant women writers, Meena Alexander and Imtiaz Dharker. A close reading of the poems in Alexander’s anthology *Birthplace with Buried Stones* and Dharker’s *I speak for the Devil* reveals, how they have handled the complexity of layered identity and the desirability of cultural reformulation? How their creative self has projected the cultural shifts and the progression from dislocations to dynamic displacements in the Third Space? Underscoring the fragmentation associated with their lives as migrants and their refusal to assign definite meaning to their poetry, the paper intends to analyze their poetry as ‘music of survival’

Keywords: Third Space, Cultural Translation, Identity, Dislocation, Belonging, Survival, Immigrant

The international movements of migration and settlement, as well as the existence of internal exiles, those who feel displaced as minorities within their own land, have created a pulsing, throbbing net of meanings within which the poet can exist, within which she tries to make sense. (Alexander, 2013)

Traveling bodies, migratory identities, missing memories, crisscrossed cultural spaces unfurl the poetics of dislocation which bears witness to the historical ruptures of indentureship and migration. Parallel to this, here is another narrative which takes shape i.e. the narrative of construction of a new fluid identity which negotiates cultural boundaries and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. To quote Prof. Jasbir Jain, “Cultures travel, take roots or get dislocated and individual internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia” (11). Cultures do not exist in isolation but rather interact and overlap within a hybrid space which Dr. Homi K. Bhabha calls, “the third space of enunciation”. This third space as “liminal space, in-between the designation of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower...” (Bhabha, 5). Bhabha further observes, “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). and consequently,

reshapes the definition of a new cultural identity as it is voiced in Imtiaz Dharker's poem "They'll say, She belongs to Some Other Country"

But from where we are
 it doesn't look like a country,
 it is more like the cracks
 that grow between borders
 behind their backs
 That's where I live. (31)

The margins 'more like the cracks that grow between borders' are no longer spaces marked by negativity, deprivation and powerlessness. They are the sites marked by in-betweenness and cultural hybridity. Multiple identities, sense of belonging and otherness, find expression in the works of the creative artists living on the margins of two or more societies. In times of trauma, chaos and confusion, all works of art whether of a pen or a brush appear as powerful medium for translating chaos into creation. The portrayal of shifting spaces and crossing borders in South Asian women poetry speak volumes about the spatial re-configurations and cultural re-formulations in female psyche. The impossibility of fixity causes a constant self-refashioning for survival in the state of dislocations. Apart from cultural, regional and historical differences, many South Asian women poets explicitly share migratory experiences, dislocations and displacements. Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Monika Verma, Imtiaz Dharker and Moniza Alvi are to name a few. In the present paper, I am to focus on a close reading of the poems in Alexander's anthology *Birthplace with Buried Stones* and Dharker's *I speak for the Devil* which reveals how they have handled the complexity of layered identity and the desirability of cultural reformulation? The cultural shifts and the progression from dislocations to dynamic displacements have been projected in the Third Space of the poetic oeuvre of Alexander and Dharker. In the works of Meena Alexander and Imtiaz Dharker, poetry emerges as a vital site of cultural translation, mediating between geographies, languages, and fragmented identities. This cultural translation in their poetry is not merely a linguistic act but a transformative practice of identity reconstruction. Through fragmented imagery, hybrid linguistic textures, and embodied metaphors, both these poets negotiate the liminal spaces between belonging and alienation. Underscoring the fragmentation associated with their lives as migrants and their refusal to assign definite meaning to their poetry, the paper intends to analyze their poetry as 'music of survival'. While talking about their poetry specifically, my contention is based on Meena Alexander's interpretation of poetry as an art form as a necessary translation in tough time of traumatic rootlessness. In her essay "What Use is Poetry?" in *World Literature Today*, Alexander emphasizes,

The work of art must use the frame of the real, translating a script almost illegible, a code of traumatic recovery. It seems to me that in its rhythms the poem, the artwork, can incorporate scansion of the actual, the broken steps, the pauses, the blunt silences, the brutal explosions. So that what is pieced together is a work that exists as an object in the world but also, in its fearful consonance and its shimmering stretch, allows the world entry. (Alexander, 2011)

Both Alexander and Dharker are essentially writers who have gone through the trauma of cultural alienation and invoked the unsettledness of their cultural experiences as the foundation of their art. Both are also the part of the brigade of migrant post-colonial writers in English Language who have expanded the scope and parameters of what we can call home, each creating a new landscape for their art. Both born in South Asia, that seems to be the coincidental connection that seems to unite Alexander and Dharker. If we explore a bit further and there seems to be more than just the birth in the same continent that is common between them. Alexander's birth in India, bringing up in Sudan, education in England her teaching career extending from Delhi to Hyderabad and finally to New York is mirrored in her poems as a series of continental crossings. On the other hand, Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore to Pakistani parents, grew up in Wales and now divides her time between Wales, London and Mumbai. They are both united by their narratives of displacements, clashing social milieus and the yearning to make sense, in a society oscillating with endless possibilities of creation and destruction, of what Foucault opines,

“We are in the epoch of simultaneity, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side by side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment I believe when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time, then that of a network that connects points and intersects with its skein.” (22)

In keeping with past jagged between changes and restless moves, their poetry revolves around myriad experiences colored with agonies of displacement and hopes of relocation. But there is a marked difference in their outlook, in their treatment, in their approach to handle the association between place and memory with reference to these displacements. For Dharker, her poetry is a means to make a geographical space, a place for assimilation to celebrate her in-betweenness. As Dharker asserts in an interview with Gulf News, “...It is not just geographical boundaries, we are crossing and re-crossing cultural and social lines in the sand, moving between Indian films and Italian Opera.....and all of this gives texture to our voices I think we all have a million possibilities under the skin and the mistake is to define ourselves too narrowly.....I am happy to say that I am a cultural mongrel. Anyway, poetry makes its own geography”. On the other hand, Meena Alexander seems to be at loggerheads with her identity. She uses her poetry as a space, as a defense mechanism to live with her cravings for a place to be associated with. According to Alexander, “In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world. ----not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives”. Straddling between cultures and countries, from India, through Sudan, England and America, is a poignant experience initiating multiplicity and dislocation in Alexander’s past and present. In the lyric, “Mother, Windblown”, she struggles to find an answer:

Why Such Wanderings—
 What has happened to home?
 The ruinous every day,
 How to cope with that?
 To have given birth once, twice,
 And before that, to have borne witness
 To a clot of blood
 Drained into china bowl. (41)

The same question prevails in several other lyrics, as in “Landscape With Kurinji Flowers”:

Feverish imaginings surely, trying to figure out where on earth we are
 Here in the only place we have.

Years from now. Where will we be?
 Sitting in the sunlight on warm stones at the edge of a wall? (28)

Against a backdrop of dissimilar geographical territories, Alexander not only negotiates the fractures of her selfhood, but also engages into endless scenarios of identity formation. She never isolates herself within the margins of her Indian identity, but rather employs other locales, cultures and in acute narratives of a third space where self-exploration is at the fore front. She appropriates the theoretical perspectives inherent in the definition of identity as indicated by Bhabha. Bhabha opines that we are no longer confronted with an ontological problem of being but with the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which the demand for identification becomes primarily a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics. In so doing, she stitches together the fragments associated with the migrant lives, searches for a more definite integrated identity and sets through distinct poetic voices to signify an authentic identity.

A wide range of Alexander’s poems explores the South Asian American experience and exemplifies how hybridity and difference converge into discourses focusing on moments ‘in-between’. Her poems pattern the crucial role of the fluid identities of their woman subjects within different geographical and socio-cultural milieus while at the same time embrace the complexity of their hybrid spaces. Many lyrics therefore portray and merge sunlight of Allahabad, Tiruvella, the golden fields of rice, the Pamba river, the mango trees. The scent of pepper, graveyards, churches and the monsoon sky with the rough bricks of the walls on Broadway Street in Manhattan, Turtle Island and Hudson river alternatively. Alexander’s poems recall myriad memories which are significant in terms of how the sense of loss of home becomes nurturing to mediate upon her alienated identity as a migrant women writer.

Whether inspiring or poignant, memory plays pivotal role and enables Alexander to endure the agonies of displacement and to restructure her layers of identity. In her poems, the memory is present as a contact space where Alexander confronts the self she actually no longer is, the self which accentuates history, nation and national culture. She uses memory to weave a multifaceted tapestry of the peculiar and uncanny space which her hybrid identity inhabits. The poems in the collection *Birthplace with Buried Stones* are deeply rooted in memory. The words in the title 'Buried Stones' somehow signal at the unforgettable and unavoidable hard realities of her life. Her memories make a home for her in literary creations. All the pictures reflected in her mind appear in her poetic renderings, as it is voiced in the poem "Birthplace with Buried Stones":

All this flow into me as mottled memory,
Mixed with syllables of sweat, gashed syntax. (88)

In her poem, "Migrant Memory", her poetic-self moves towards the days she spent in India:

I try to remember a desert town,
Mirages at noon, at dusk a dusty lawn. (81)

She seems to be in search of compensation for loss when she remembers her grandparents:

A life time ago grandmother Eli wore gold
Stepped off a boat into a paddy field and vanished.

Fear humps in me----- a pregnancy
Who will do the embroidery on my little one's skirt?

Where is grandmother now?
I need a golden ratio for loss. (82)

She keeps her grandmother into the box of her memory, which she always bears with her:

"Can Fibonacci's theorem ease the hazard of memory?
Under cloud cover I enter Combray. (82)

Alexander's poetic journeys down the memory lanes present memory as a third space to celebrate dislocation as dynamic displacement. As far as Imtiaz Dharker's poems are concerned, her poetry has also travelled a space of "liminality"- from the trauma of cultural exile and alienation to a celebration of unsettlement as settlement in her own way. She defines herself as Scottish-Muslim- Calvinist adopted by India, married into Wales. The hyphens signify a threshold space of continuous negotiations between in there and out there. In her poems, Glasgow meets Lahore and Mumbai meets Birmingham with a playful ease. The fevered search for sanctuary, "tell me/ How can I come home?" is replaced by a realization that anchor is sometimes to be found in journey rather than in destination. "High on the rush of daily displacements", her poetic voice locates home between countries, between borders, proudly flaunting her allegiance to "another country, one that refuses to be circumscribed by race, nationality or gender. The titles such as "Here", "There". "Announcing the Departure" and "Announcing the Arrival" indicate that the collection is planned in the form of a journey. Metaphorically, this journey is presented both as a journey towards self-discovery and self-refashioning and at the same time also as migratory journey to another country. These poems are marked by shifting perspectives and changing positionings and often show the concomitant sense of bewilderment. In the poem, "Here", expresses her regret:

Whether I stand on this side
of the borderline or that,
the colour keeps Sliding
off my face. (8)

The poem entitled "Stitched" emphasizes her lack of belonging and lack of being accepted in an unspecified place that could just as well described her country of origin after her return as the country she emigrated to:

Someone stitched on my head and hands
But they used some foreign stuff
That pointed out the parts
Where I'd been mended. (11)

She is alienated and unable to fit in where ever she is. She sets out to remake, reshape herself:

And so my mouth spoke Punjabi
 While my brain heard Scots
 My ears follow the German
 And my tongue did French.
 It seems they were about to put me out
 In a garbage bag, I look so odd
 But I survived
 And they got used to the I was. (11)

In the similar tunes, her poem “Announcing the Departure” marks another attempt to find a place to fit in the way she is. The search proves frustrating as she is left in a state of complete uncertainty:

Glasgow, Baroda, Sialkot, Rome
 The names are roads of possibilities
 That turn into lanes
 With the undertow of home. (12)

She has become disillusioned with her constant in-betweenness. Still not emotionally separated from past, she dreams of the possibility of a return, at the same realizing that it is impossible she could only return if she managed to be blind to all the problematic aspects that sent her questioning and searching for new answers in the first places. This change begins with “Crab-Apples” which describes how her mother used Glasgow crab-apples “to change

Her homesickness
 Into green chutney. (17)

This action in itself may not seem to be of great importance, but its positioning in the sequence is crucial. It marks the beginning of a new and somewhat pragmatic approach to the unsettlement and also introduces gender as a central aspect of the sequence. The presence of the mother in “Crab-Apples” is therefore not coincidental: she functions as a role model for the speaker who attempts to put her feelings of alienation to an equally productive use by creating something new out of them. She seems to have found a sense of home in a space she has created for herself in which questions of nationality, gender or religion no longer seem to matter as I “At Lahore Karahai”, The culture she left can be remembered in a shared meal with her friends. She feels securely positioned in-between and rejected the possibility of ever belonging to just one culture or nation again.

Alexander and Dharker no longer celebrate national boundaries, but rather the ‘third space’ which becomes evocative space of renewal, going far beyond the hierarchy of center and periphery. The reflections on shifting spaces and crossing borders in their poems speak volumes about the spatial re-configurations and cultural re-formulations in female psyche. The impossibility of fixity causes a constant self-refashioning for survival in the state of dislocations. Both Alexander and Dharker celebrate this in-betweenness through the poetry which is called ‘music of Survival’ by Meena Alexander. They move with the unbidden power of poem as P.B. Shelley asserts in his seminal essay “In a Defence of Poetry”: “It creates for us a being within our being. It makes us inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being.” (18)

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