

Navigating Meena Alexander's Diasporic Blue Poetics: A Study of Selected Poems

Inas S. Abolfotoh*

enassami@du.edu.eg

Abstract:

Meena Alexander is a postcolonial poet from the Indian diaspora. Having experienced different migratory journeys from a very tender age, she composes verses centered on the waterscape. Moreover, numerous poems concentrate on her childhood days. These poems demonstrate how an early departure from her country affects her adult life which witnesses further dislocations and relocations. The oceans and seas crossed in her movements from one country to another are vital motifs. Furthermore, she shows a preoccupation with other water-related entities like ships, canoes, fish, fountains, waves, port cities, and others. Therefore, the focus of the current study is analyzing the literal, metaphorical, and symbolic dimensions of the waterscape in Alexander's poetics. In addition, its role in shaping the poet's personality during her childhood and adulthood in the diaspora is underlined. Identity loss, underestimation, and rootlessness were the price she paid when she left India. Thus, the development of her fragmentation, loneliness, and traumatizing memories due to coloniality is outlined in six blue poems published in four collections. The study contributes to the academic appreciation of the poet's oeuvre by reading through these unanalyzed poems. Likewise, it brings her interest in the waterscape to the spotlight since it drew no critic's attention.

Keywords: Meena Alexander, Indian diaspora, blue poetics, loneliness, traumatizing memories, coloniality

* Faculty of Arts, English Language Department, Damietta University.

Introduction:

Meena Alexander (1951-2018), the famous Indian-American memoirist, poet, novelist, and critic, was one of the original thinkers of Asian American aesthetics (Ouseph 95). She was a multilingual writer influenced by the 16th-century Hindu mystic poet, Mirabai, and the Romantic literary tradition (Alexander, “Literature”). She received awards from such institutions as the Guggenheim Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Arts Council of England, the South Asian Literary Association, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She was born in India four years after independence from Britain and was raised in India and Sudan. She received her education in Sudan and England. Then, she moved in 1979 to New York City where she worked at a number of universities.

Many authors have investigated Alexander’s inspiring writings. Examples include Qasim Serhan and Lamya’a Karam in “The Poetics of In-betweeness: A Study of Selected Poems for Meena Alexander,” John Perry in “Exiled by a Woman’s Body: Substantial Phenomena in Meena Alexander’s Poetry,” and Hessa Alghadeer in “Exploring Third Space: Place and Memory in Meena Alexander’s Memoir and Poems.” Nevertheless, a thorough reading of critical work tackling the poet reveals that the selected poems have not been discussed before nor her distinguished employment of the waterscape as a controlling motif and trope of her verses. Navigating varied cultural landscapes leads Alexander’s poetry to be dominated by a strong tradition of waterscape. This tradition is

evident in many titles of her collections including *River and Bridge* and *Quickly Changing River*. It is also clear in the titles and the thematic development of various poems like “Crossing the Indian Ocean” and “Indian Ocean Blues.”

Therefore, the author picks the following blue poems for study: “*Shook Silver*” and “The Journey” from *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018, italics emphasis of the poem’s title in origin), “Autobiography” and “Water Crossing” from *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013), “Acqua Alta” from *Quickly Changing River* (2008), and “Muse” from *Illiterate Heart* (2002). The discussion presents an engaging critical reading of these poems. Historical, cultural, critical, and literary studies are consulted to interpret the verses’ thematic and contextual structure. Hence, the qualitative research approach is properly employed. Moreover, the inductive and descriptive approaches are used in the literary analysis of the poems under consideration. These methodologies help uncover Alexander’s poetic techniques and common tropes. Additionally, they disclose a steady focus on the manipulative role of the waterscape in her migrant poetics.

The designated poems display key features of the poet such as her many departures, tantalizing diaspora, the loneliness of her fatigued soul, and the tormenting childhood memories of an unattainable home. All these aspects are the outcome of coloniality. The speaker in these poems is the poet in her early childhood, particularly during her first journey of departure to Sudan. Her clever choice of this phase in her life elucidates the catastrophic

repercussions of migration on children and its elongated impact on their personalities in adulthood. “That first ocean crossing,” writes the poet in her 2003 memoir, “obsesses me. I think of it as a figuration of death. Losing sense, being blotted out, thrown irretrievably across a border” (*Fault Lines* 65). She sits “mute, wordless” on the ship and realizes that she is “crossing into another life” (65, 68). Her words disclose how she badly needed to feel settled. Instead, the five-year-old Alexander was uprooted from India to seek new roots in Sudan. The newly planted roots were later uprooted and replanted in Britain then America, the poet’s final destination. Eventually, the Indian American migrant found herself with no certain roots anywhere.

Answering a question in an interview about her favorite poetic forms, Alexander says, “I have written in form very rarely. I tend to write in free verse. But free verse has an internal structure to me. It may not have an end rhyme, or an internal rhyme, but the shape of the poem is important, so that you craft your own shape” (“Literature”). Additionally, she can be placed “within a traditional lyric and confessional mode rather than... formal experimentation and avant-garde stylistics” (Hongsohn). The poems under analysis embody these characteristics of her poetry. Concerning form, all of them are composed in couplets except two pieces. “*Shook Silver*” appears in five quatrains; “*Muse*” consists of six sestets. Lines in these poems are mostly short and end-stopped. However, when short lines become insufficient for an extended idea, the poet utilizes enjambments. Enjambments among lines and/or stanzas create space

for writing without sacrificing the consistency of form. Ideas within ideas are placed between parentheses. Besides, the poet employs caesuras to create pauses within lines. To force silence and help the reader contemplate the meaning, she sometimes uses dashes. Her language is sensual and nostalgic drawing on landscapes as versatile as her dislocations among four continents. Consequently, the motif of geography is momentarily highlighted in many pieces. The tone of the child speaker is overwhelmed by despair and alienation with few sparks of hope here and there. In addition, the poet recurrently refers to her father, mother, the Red Sea, her departure from India, rainbows, and fish. These repetitions and more produce an organic unity among the poems and hold her entire oeuvre together.

The following discussion tackles the concept of diaspora which controls Alexander's poetry. Diaspora "has been widely adopted in academic discourses on forced dispersal, immigration, displacement, and the establishment of reconfigured transnational communities" (Agnew, "Diaspora" 19). A given symptom of diaspora is homesickness provoked by childhood memories. "Memories are the glue that holds the past and present together. They give shape and texture... to identities that are fragmented by immigration, displacement, and diasporic living" (19). Regrettably, the poet writes about the loss of her memories in several poems. Thus, she was seriously exposed to identity loss by having the tie that linked her past with her present severed. Another symptom of diaspora is the distress of loneliness and the fear of unsuccessful resettlement which haunted the poet from an early age.

Alexander refers in her diasporic poetics to the malevolent influences of coloniality. For example, she shows her concern with the migration of Indians from all social classes to escape the degraded social circumstances of post-colonial India. Furthermore, she draws the reader's attention and sympathy to the anguish of poor migrating laborers. Accordingly, her poetry touches on the "movement of millions of slave, forced, and free laborers [which] was the most important feature of transoceanic migration in the Indian Ocean world between 1500 and 1900" with the establishment of colonies in this region in the sixteenth century (Allen). The coming lines unfold the multiple and sometimes paradoxical implications of the waterscape in Alexander's verses. Crossing waters is said to be a source of poetic inspiration to the poet. Except for this one positive feature, the waterscape is persistently accused of being the cause of her disturbance. The sea occupies a fair share of the discussion and is an indispensable entry to six angles of Alexander's poetics. Other fundamental blue motifs are, further, integrated into the argument.

Discussion:

Poetry and the Sea:

Alexander is always keen on detecting her life development as a migrant and poet in her works. This attitude is obvious in her autobiographical book, *Fault Lines: A Memoir*, and in many poems. "Autobiography," for instance, highlights the value of the sea in her evolution as a poet. Little Alexander inspects the sea surrounding her on the journey to Sudan. She remarks how the sea "makes a

theater for poetry” because it has “no custom, no ceremony” (76). The sea is metaphorically likened to an open physical location where poetic performances occur. In this context, the sea symbolizes utter freedom, a fundamental tool for poetic composition. The sea imposes neither customs nor ceremonies on whatever roams the mind or is spilled into poetry on paper. In its embrace, words spontaneously fly out of the poet’s mind like “flying fish” (76). Similar to the open sea, the idea of flying reinforces the sense of freedom which is indispensable for poetic writing.

“Syllables,” writes Alexander, “lashed to their rainbow wings, / Tiny bodies twisting in heaps” (76). The concretization equals the syllables, the building blocks of words in poems, to flying tiny bodies with astonishingly colorful wings. The freedom the poet senses in the sea stimulates words to come out of her in large amounts. The idea is understood from the way words compile in heaps. The symbolic associations of flying continue in the preceding images of the winged syllables to indicate the poet’s persistent search for freedom. The two symbols of freedom, the sea and flying, tangle when the poet watches “[s]ea salt cling[ing] to” the flying syllables (76). Consequently, the mutual connectedness between poetry and the sea is proclaimed. The sea salt in the line is metaphorically depicted as sea creatures holding on tightly to the flying syllables that jump out of the sea. At this point, it sounds like the flying syllables are coming out of both the poet and the sea. The image implies the prolificacy of poetic inspirations and the oneness between the poet and her muse, the sea.

The following sections of the study display some of the sea's poetic gifts to Alexander despite their overall bleakness and bitterness. The poet's ability to translate her torn feelings and ethnic dispersion into poetry is an undeniable gift of relief. It is the gift that saves her from the explosion of psychological disorders that many migrants suffer from. Ultimately, poetry becomes a home for her dislocated self, creating a legible space for constructing her identity and sense of belonging. It connects the fragments of the cultural hybridity she was subjected to. In the poet's words, "it's the music of poetry that is closest to me, and most intense –a way of instilling order into a sometimes incomprehensible world" ("A Lonely"). "Poetry is such a lonely art," she continues, "that is also its glory. You get to listen to the voices in your head, which in a mysterious way connect you to the shared earth and your own body" ("A Lonely").

Departure and the Sea:

The poet's first and most influential movement outside her native lands was when the family moved to Khartoum in 1955 after her father accepted a post in the newly independent Sudan (Genzlinger). Alexander was only five; however, she managed to recollect almost all the details of the journey when she grew up. The moment of departing India deeply impacted the poet; therefore, it was often cited in her poetics. "Autobiography" revisits this old memory after the passage of sixty-two years. Consequently, the poet employs the third-person point of view to establish a sense of

remoteness. Moreover, she calls herself “a child” to imply little Alexander’s distance from her adult self.

The poem begins on board the ship heading for Sudan. “Out of a porthole a child pokes her head. / Rocks prance under water” (76). The lines depict the curiosity of childhood with Alexander poking her head to look downwards into the water. Her imagination depicts the rocks underwater as persons walking in the water current with a lofty proud gait to impress others. Looking upward, she watches the “[s]unlight burns a hole in air / Fit for a house to fall through” (76). India is one of the hottest countries in Asia known for its tropical climate and long-lasting summer conditions. Hence, the lines highlight the hot weather in this spot of the world at the moment of the ship’s departure. The metaphorical portrayal of the sunlight equals it to a burning fire devouring the air. To deepen the hyperbole, the poet remarks how the resultant hole is so big that a house may fall through it.

Alexander farewells her country’s hot weather and the “[p]alm trees” as they “dive into indigo / Where is Kochi now?” (76). The rhetorical question in the second line implies the poet’s sense of dislocation once the ship becomes offshore. She laments her departure from Kochi, a major port city along the Malabar Coast of India and where she grew up. Referring to it clarifies the area’s geography to the reader and helps interpret the former reference to palm trees. Kochi is located in Kerala State famous for its rich coconut plantations (Rangaswami 167). With the movement of the ship asea, coconut palm trees are seen diving into the blue waters of

the Arabian Sea. The visual imagery provokes delight through the overwhelming colors of green trees and indigo water. However, for the poet, this imagery evokes sorrow, deprivation, and loss due to her forced departure from the place that cradled her childhood.

Alexander's departure from Kochi opens the door to several migratory journeys. Mahmoud argues that the poet's "writing is defined by her transnational migrations, and a constant search for a homeland and a sense of belonging" (27). Consequently, in the final couplet of "Autobiography," the poet leaves little Alexander for a moment. She begins to ponder her adult life and the diverse displacements she goes through. She calls them the "[d]runken migrations of the soul" (76). The personification expresses her lack of control over her many journeys of dislocations and relocations. She likens them to a drunk person who has no control over his behavior owing to the effect of alcohol. To emphasize her inability to control her life, she declares, "No compass to the sea" (76). The compass symbolizes one's freedom to choose the course of his/her life. The absence of a compass suggests her feelings of loss in life. The poet's inability to control her life is ascribed in "The Journey" to her migration in the early years of childhood. "I was blindfolded and had only the mercy of the sea," she observes (32). This is total misery: a blind child having nothing but the nonexistent mercy of the sea with its breaking waves, storms, and ever-changeable nature. In spite of this frustrating picture, the poet delivers a more soothing statement about her departures six months before her death. She says, "Migration has always been part of my life, but India was

always the fixed point of the compass, even as the other point shifted with travels” (“A Lonely”).

Alexander’s departure from India was doomed, and the sea became a memory that dug its roots deep into her character. As a result, the poem ends with the assertion: “The sea is memory” (76). This piece was published about five years before her death. At this point in her life, the sea became a literal memory, and she ultimately settled down in a definite place. However, her past migrations have always haunted her. Therefore, this controlling theme is seen in other works besides those included in the study. Her 1996 book *The Shock of Arrivals* is a case in point. The book unleashes a fury of prose and poetry that investigates “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..., and the ‘imaginary home’ where she retreats from alienation and estrangement in her new home” (Mahnmoud 34).

Diaspora and the Sea:

Departure and migration lead to diaspora. The Indian Diaspora, argues Sharma and Pandey, is the largest diaspora in the world with its global presence and a history that dates back to the Indian civilization (47). They divide the Indian diaspora into “three phases: ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient Diaspora refers to laborers, craftsmen and traders who explored new lands for work, wealth and adventures. In medieval times, British imperialism [1757-1947] caused the movement of the indentured laborers. In modern times, skilled, educated and intelligent Indians moved to the

USA and other European countries for economic and professional reasons” (47). Alexander’s diasporic dilemma can be located in the third phase, the modern diaspora. Moreover, because she was born on one continent (Asia), educated on two other continents (Africa and Europe), and lived on a fourth (North America), Warren claims that the poet experiences “multiple dislocations” (48). The poet’s suffering due to diaspora and multiple dislocations becomes worse with the problems of ethnicity she goes through. In Khartoum, for example, she was the only non-white child in school. “My blackness,” she recollects, “stuck out like a stiff halo all around me. I was imprisoned there; I would not move beyond it. I felt myself grow ugly under their gaze” (Alexander, *Fault Lines* 113). Her misery because of her color reaches a climax in America. Therefore, she avoids attending public gatherings with her American husband because in their company, she “stuck out like a sore black thumb, a grotesque thing” (168).

“Acqua Alta” muses on the poet’s diaspora, multiple dislocations, and ethnicity using water imagery. “As a child, half a world away / I floated in a black canoe, it sank in high water,” the poem goes (80). The image of a solitary child in a canoe is an emblem of the poet’s marginalization and weakness because of her ethnicity. Giving the canoe a black color hides another level of meaning. The child inside the black canoe is a metaphor for her pure innocent soul imprisoned inside a dark skin. Nonetheless, many people judged her only by her different color. The high water that swamps the canoe symbolizes her multiple dislocations among

countries and the troubled life she has to endure. Although the canoe eventually sinks in high water, it becomes her sole means of survival for a while. In other words, holding on to her Indianness, tradition, and individuality was a means of subsistence in the diaspora even if it was for a short time.

The canoe's sinking in the preceding lines symbolizes defeat and the entire meaning is shaded by pessimism. The poet emphasizes this sense of defeat in the poem when she states, "monsoon time... floods the Ghetto" (80). The ghetto refers to a poor urban area occupied primarily by a minority group. For that reason, the ghetto is a symbol of the poet's segregated mode of living resulting from ethnic bias. Like the swamped canoe, the ghetto is flooded by alien cultures and foreign traditions. Moving from the reference to one child in a single canoe to a ghetto indicates the common suffering and displacement of the Indian diaspora community. The idea of collective suffering is reinforced in the line: "All the pepper of Muziris cannot buy their freedom or mine" (80). The poet suggests that living in exile leads Indian immigrants to feel they are in an open jail. Concerning Muziris, it is the name of a lost port city whose remains were excavated in Kerala (Perur). Around 2000 years ago, pepper was exchanged for gold, and the city kept even mighty Rome in debt (Perur). The employment of a lost city's name in the line is emblematic of the lost hope of reconciliation. Likewise, the hyperbole in which all the pepper of Muziris becomes insufficient to liberate the imprisoned souls of the poet and her fellows in the ghetto underlines their unresolved estrangement.

Loneliness and the Sea:

The monster that grows in the womb of the diaspora is loneliness. “Amma was with me but I was all alone,” moans little Alexander while passing “the Red Sea with its blunt sandstone cliffs” in “Water Crossing” (77-78). The word *amma* is derived from the ancient Indian language and means *mother*. “The mother-daughter trope [is] so prominent to Asian American literature” (Hongsohn). As a result, the figure of the poet’s mother surfaces now and then in her poems. In “*Shook Silver*,” for example, “Amma peers out of the porthole” warning little Alexander, “Watch out for flying fish” (11). In “Muse,” she depicts her mother as the muse that influenced her lifetime’s artistic work. “I was young when you came to me,” writes Alexander to her mother at the outset of the poem, “You set a book to my ribs. / Night after night I unclasp it... // alphabets flicker and soar” (23-24). Thanks to her mother, poems fly at night out of this book fastened near her heart. The poet “initially wrote in French, later switching to English, while her first poems in print were in Arabic due to a local Khartoum newspaper translating them” (Alagappan). This multilingualism is the outcome of her mother’s advice by the end of “Muse”: “*Write in the light / of all the languages / you know*” (24, italics emphasis in origin).

In “Water Crossing,” little Alexander had her mother with her on the way to Sudan; nevertheless, she was all alone. One of the agonizing degrees of loneliness is the one experienced while being surrounded by your caring family. Her sense of traumatizing solitude in contrast to being in the company of loved ones creates a paradox.

The paradox is resolved by considering the fact that she left a privileged childhood in India to an unsettled life in a foreign land. In other words, she lost the company of acquaintances as well as her homeland's landscape and skyscape which are constantly grieved over in her poems. This was a hard phase of the poet's life marking a transition from familiarity to unfamiliarity. Consequently, on the sea journey, her eyes catch the blunt sandstone cliffs of the Red Sea. Cliffs symbolize this tough turn in her life, and the word *blunt* indicates this turn's abruptness. Nevertheless, Alexander was just a helpless child. Her helplessness is perceived in the general tone of the lines and the quiet alliteration in (sea-sandstone).

Alexander's loneliness is mainly ascribed to the loss of her pre-migration life. This notion is voiced in the line: "We had each other but our life was lost" (78). The poet and her mother are gathered by a shared destiny of diaspora and fragmentation. Therefore, the poet uses the collective pronoun *our* and the singular noun *life*. They lost their normal life and had to bear "the weight of loneliness" (78). Loneliness is concretized to an intolerable burden in the hearts of the innocent child and her mother. This disturbing feeling is shaped by the "curved" waves of "[s]alt water" and their deep "sonorous" sound that forcibly distances them from the lands of India (78). The visual and aural imageries implemented in these portrayals imply the monstrosity of the sea in the child's eyes. Overwhelmed by despair, little Alexander wonders, "Was this what it was to live in the world?" (78). The rhetorical question is loaded with bitterness and dispersed hopes.

The poet's loneliness in the sea intensifies when the ship reaches its final destination. Her feet tread on a foreign land, her eyes catch unacquainted scenes, and her ears hear an alien language. "We set foot on sand, I held tight to her hand," writes Alexander (78). *Sand* and *hand* are grouped by assonance to illustrate the mother's vital role in the poet's life in Sudan. The poet seeks reassurance in holding her hand tightly to fight loneliness. She reminds herself that her mother is sharing these moments of estrangement with her. They start to inspect the Sudanese landscape; "Amma and I saw dry trees heave" (78). The dry trees refer to the arid climate as well as the desert and semi-desert conditions that exist across most of the country's land. These are the new conditions they need to adapt themselves to. In "*Shook Silver*," the child and mother attempt to draw similarities between India and Sudan to appease their anxieties: "They have goats and cows just like us" (11). However, this technique fails them, and they are overwhelmed by expatriation. Their worries in "Water Crossing" are strong evidence.

In addition to the unacquainted landscape, Alexander in "Water Crossing" finds herself surrounded by a different language, Arabic. Therefore, feelings of dislocation increase because "[i]t was a tongue we had not heard before" (78). Language is central to the poet's identity crisis because of the many linguistic influences she was introduced to. Pointing to these linguistic influences, she says, "Malayalam, my mother tongue, the language of first speech, Hindi which I learned as a child, Arabic from my years in the Sudan –odd

shards survive; French; English?” (Alexander, *Fault Lines* 2). Referring to her multilingualism in “The Journey,” the poet remarks, “There were many languages flowing in the fountain. / In spite of certain confusion, I decided not to stay thirsty” (32). By means of concretization, the various languages she was exposed to are likened to water. The poet drinks to quench her thirst despite her confusion. To explain, her acceptance of multilingualism was not a matter of choice. Commenting on the mentioned lines, Bugan observes the poet’s remarkable gift in this multifaceted image of combining language and experience to emphasize the complexity of her character formation as an immigrant in varied countries. When little Alexander in “Water Crossing” looks back at the sea in search of lost India, she sees waves sealing the doors of her exile. “Waves clustered, rose into a fountain,” she sighs (78). Her loneliness becomes inescapable in the face of a firm wall of successive waves. These waves are as high as a fountain insisting that there is no returning back.

Memories and the Sea:

At the moments of loneliness, one is flooded by home memories. In “Autobiography,” the poet proclaims that “[t]he sea is memory” (76). In “Water Crossing,” she states, “When I turned five, high wind and water / Swallowed what I could remember” (78). She blames the sea for being the memory that eradicated all memories before it. The eradication of memories is a serious matter to any immigrant because memories “establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and

history). The past... defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves” (Agnew, “Introduction” 3). As a result, divorcing memories from one’s present may lead to a partial or whole loss of identity. In the preceding lines, high tide and wind are a metonymy of Alexander’s migrant journey to Sudan. They are accused of erasing her memories in India and making her vulnerable to identity loss. The metaphor, further, compares them to a ferocious monster that swallows all that she can remember. The image is mitigated by the alliterative /w/ sound’s hushed tune that generates nostalgia for her past life.

The notion of her lost memories resonates in other poems like “Acqua Alta.” “A fish with rainbow fins,” observes the poet, “is swimming in a fountain, / It has swallowed the ring of remembrance” (80). The poem is set in the floating city of Venice which has many historical ornamental fountains testifying to the history of the place. The poet has been wearing the magical ring of remembrance there. However, it falls off her finger into a fountain, and a fish swallows it. The well-crafted and interrelated metaphors in the lines imply the loss of the poet’s memories and the impossibility of restoring them due to the ring’s loss. Moreover, the fish symbolizes the transnational movements that detached her from her country and memories. These movements can be as appealing as the colorful fins of the fish from the outside. However, they hide inconsolable estrangement and fragmentation inside.

In the lines following accusing the sea of erasing her memories in “Water Crossing,” the poet strangely starts to list these

forgotten memories in the same poem! She refers to “A mango grove where beetles danced” (78). Mango, the King of Fruits, is India’s national fruit, and its cultivation is believed to have originated in Southeast Asia for nearly six thousand years (Das 54). The appealing music created by assonance in *mango grove* along with the symbolic dancing of beetles illustrate the little child’s happiness during these days. Indian flora is a prominent motif in Alexander’s poetry. Consequently, lavender is brought on stage beside mangoes: “Then came the scents of wild lavender / Flung from the other side of the globe” (Alexander, *Birthplace* 77). This is Indian lavender, an aromatic essential oil plant introduced to India in 1912 (Somappa and Uppin 850). On her way to Sudan, Alexander smells wild lavender and gets drawn to the scents of her country. “[A]s far as it would go,” notices the poet, lavender’s serene and floral scent is “[a] violet sound no one could have missed, / Even at sunset as far west as we were going” (77). The lines introduce a multilayered metaphor where the fragrance of lavender is likened to a sound. Then, this sound is granted the unique violet color which distinguishes this plant. The relaxing effect of lavender’s scent promotes calmness and peace. At the same time, its color brings about feelings of harmony and stability. All these positive implications sink into the sea with the setting sun, and Alexander is left with anxiety and discomfort from the unknown. It is worth noting that despite the pleasant visual and olfactory imageries linked with both mangoes and lavender, they evoke sorrow in the poet’s

psyche. Indian lands are no longer accessible; they are on *the other side of the globe*.

The poet also recollects “[s]ymmetries of silk, saris of mild cotton” (78). One of the oldest domestic industries in present-day India is the sericulture industry, i.e. cultivating silkworms and extracting silk from them (Roy and Mandal 76). Furthermore, “India is the second-largest producer of raw silk in the world silk market,” and it “is the only country in the world that produces all four varieties of silk” (76). The harmonious symphony of the symmetrical silk production is consistent with the repeated /s/ sound in the line. The internal rhyme shows the poet’s celebration of and pride in the Indian national industry. In addition to silk, the poet refers to saris, the national costume for women in India and the keepers of their tradition and identity. Saris demonstrate how the “ancestors managed to preserve the rich tapestry of Indian clothing despite the strong influence of the British colonial era” (Dhayalan and Sofia 77). According to the poem, these saris are made of mild cotton. “Cotton is considered one of the most important fiber and cash crops and plays a dominant role in the industrial and agricultural economy of India” (Singh and De). Therefore, placing cotton among the poet’s memories commemorates her motherland’s agricultural heritage. Moreover, cotton is one of India’s oldest and finest fabrics, so it is the most used fabric in producing elegant comfortable saris. Pointing to silk, cotton, and cotton saris in the poem renders them distinctive trademarks of Indian legacy and

culture. Sticking to this legacy was a vital strategy for protecting the poet's Indian identity from the foreign cultures she lived in.

The poem proceeds, and Alexander continues recalling more memories: "Grandmother's blackened pearls and so much more" (78). The reference to her grandmother instigates a connection to her past life in India and preserves a strong bond to her family roots. Likewise, grandmothers symbolize wisdom with their long life experiences. Accordingly, holding on to her native roots and arming herself with wisdom are fundamental implements. They undoubtedly supported the poet in navigating cultural challenges in host societies. Concerning pearls, they have an ancient history in India, and they are a sign of knowledge, power, purity, and love (Alexander et al. 97). The grandmother's pearls are blackened, namely dyed black with silver nitrate to look like Tahitian pearls. Tahitian pearls are natural, rare, and expensive symbolizing mystery, independence, and strength. The multiple levels of symbolic meanings the grandmother's blackened pearls represent are supposed to aid Alexander in her life journey. It was a tough journey marked by identity crisis, racism, language loss, and dislocation (Mahmoud 27). These dilemmas peaked during her stay in the United States where she delineated "her experience as a racial minority, being a South Asian American woman" (28).

One remarks a perplexing paradox between the poet's earlier claim of losing her childhood memories and then listing them in sensual detail. Perhaps the journey to Sudan led to the loss of these memories; then, she struggled to regain them in her adulthood. This

reading of the situation is in accord with ending the memories list with the phrase *and so much more*. The phrase implies the diversity of these memories and her restless effort to restore them. Restoring them was a vital step to gaining inner stability and building up her character on Indian origins. Consequently, she could fight feelings of alienation even if she was thousands of miles away from her homeland.

“The Journey” establishes a different interpretation of this paradox. Little Alexander at the beginning of the poem is seen on the ship holding “sprigs of jasmine in... [her] arms” (32). In its finale, she states, “Rock and ruin, pathways of salt, scents of crushed jasmine, / Returning me to what I cannot bear to remember” (33). According to the lines, the poet’s memories are kept in a black box in the deepest stratum of her unconscious. She attempts, by all means, to keep them locked because she is incapable of bearing the psychological anguish of living in them. Nevertheless, now and then, some of these memories escape the box and start tormenting her with the whip of nostalgia. When asked about the things she loves the most about Hyderabad, an Indian city, she replies, “Oh my goodness... I love *the rocks*. I love the coffee houses, my old friends” (“Literature,” *italics emphasis mine*). Rocks, ruins, sea journeys, and the scents of crushed jasmine are instances of her memories in the poem. Jasmine is native to India; nonetheless, its description of being crushed envelops her despair in returning home. The poet’s irritation and frustration are emphasized in the alliterative /r/ sound repeated in both lines.

Jha and Singh write about the significance of international migrations and their dynamics in the making of Indian society. They view “migrants as active agents with their own determinations of selfhood and location” based on memory and belonging (12). To clarify, memory “that has migrated from its familiar local habitation to an unfamiliar location” forms a critical constituent in the social life of a migrant (16). In Alexander’s poetics, memories from her native country mended her wounds. Moreover, these memories furnished her sense of belonging and home with the varied “leaving and living” experiences she withstood (13).

Coloniality and the Sea:

Departure, diaspora, loneliness, and the trauma of remembrance are all the byproducts of colonialism and coloniality in India. British imperialism forced Indians overseas away from their homeland because it resulted in the “stagnation of India’s agriculture and industries, exploitation of its peasants and workers... and the spread of poverty, disease and semi-starvation” (Roy). Similar to the era of colonialism, the sea continued to be an outlet for Indian citizens after independence. They attempted to escape the local “weak institutional capacity leading to ad hoc policymaking, violence and the repurposing of colonial institutions” (Tsourapas and Sadiq 906). Hence, when Alexander was five, her country merely transformed “from a postcolonial state to a postcolonial migration state” (906). Put another way, the end of the British colonial administration in India did not mean the end of coloniality. Coloniality is defined as the attitudes, values, and ways of knowing

set by Western colonizing countries in the societies they settled in (“Coloniality”). The migration of the poet’s family and many other Indians in “Autobiography” is reminiscent of coloniality. Coloniality is also traced in the physical depiction of the ship’s passengers and their behavior. To clarify, the poem sheds light on social inequality in India at that time mainly shaped by British colonialism and the caste system. The caste system is a closed system of social division where a person’s social rank is defined by their birth caste (Singh 1). Its history is intertwined with Hinduism and has been influenced by Buddhist philosophy and British control (1). This system has been generally accepted for about 3000 years where people are classified into four hierarchically ranked castes (Deshpande 3). Individuals who perform unclean and polluting occupations are called “the untouchables” and “are considered outcastes. They are not considered to be included in the ranked castes” (3).

Observing the other passengers on the ship, the poet remarks, “Out on deck men raise glasses of cognac / Women in chiffon saris” (76). The luxurious depictions of those men and women imply their belonging to the upper castes of Indian society. Cognac is an emblem and legacy of the British rule of India. During the time of writing the poem, India was just beginning to recover from the evils of colonialism. One of these evils is related to liquor because the “[c]olonial commodification of alcohol altered the alcohol production, distribution, and consumption in India. It created a new class of drinkers including British Indian civil servants, Army officers, rulers of princely states, and educated Indians who were

emulating the British in tastes and manner” (Jolad and Ravi 96-97). In other words, alcohol was consumed by the elite class causing further distances in the stratification of the society. The referred-to men in the lines are mostly educated Indians. Concerning women, they are dressed up in chiffon saris. With their elegance, delicacy, and charm, chiffon saris are usually worn on formal occasions, weddings, and parties. As a result, they symbolize the high social status of the women wearing them.

Little Alexander watches those men and women on deck as they “[g]iggle at the atrocious accents of the poor” (76). The onomatopoeia in *giggle* allows the reader to hear the satirical response of the rich to the brutal accents of the uneducated poor. The poor are “[t]rapped in the holds with their tiny cooking stoves // And hunks of burlap to sleep in” (76). The lines draw a contrast between the high castes of the Indians versus the untouchables. The two groups’ locations on board the ship establish the paradox. The former enjoy their stay on deck while the latter are trapped like rats in the space for storing cargo. Describing the cooking stoves as tiny and pointing to the coarse jute fabric they sleep in underline their impoverished conditions. To emphasize their poverty, the poet plays with words as she refers to their “polished toes” (76). The phrase sounds like *polished shoes* to indicate that they are barefooted with nothing to protect their feet. The poet was haunted by their misery; therefore, they appeared in other poems like “*Shook Silver*.” “I was a child on the Indian Ocean,” recounts Alexander in this poem, “Under burlap someone weeps” (11). The image of a coarse thick

cloth under which an anonymous person is weeping with nobody caring for his/her sadness denotes his/her degradation. Both poems suggest that the Indians' departure from their native land and the degradation of a large sector of society have developed over the years under the impact of coloniality.

Conclusion:

The study argues that there is a strong connection between Alexander and the waterscape. Tracing its impact on the poet in the selected blue poems has proved this claim. According to "Autobiography," the sea is the Indian poet's muse; it gives shape and meaning to her poetics. In the same poem and "The Journey," the poet laments departing the Indian landscape, seascape, and skyscape with profound agony. She sets forth on her journey of rootlessness in life. The poet's modern diaspora, characterized by multiple dislocations, is deeply explored in "Acqua Alta." The poem embodies her distress in the countries she lived in because of her color. Subsequently, she was struck by defeat and a distorted self-image. The symbolic and metaphorical readings of many images in the poem emphasize the collective pain of the Indian diaspora community.

In "Water Crossing" and "*Shook Silver*," the figure of Alexander's mother appears in the journey to Sudan. Nevertheless, her mother offers her neither reassurance nor security, and the little girl is overwhelmed by loneliness. Loneliness creeps into her psyche in the absence of her country and the acquainted faces she used to live with. Her mother in "Muse" is praised for being a source of

inspiration and support. Still, she could not erase the poet's loneliness. The mother herself was engulfed by alienation and isolation after leaving India just like her daughter. The mother and her daughter attempt to calm themselves in "*Shook Silver*" by drawing similarities between India and Sudan. Nonetheless, these similarities dissolve because of the Sudanese unacquainted landscape and foreign language. As for the poet, she finds herself obliged to accept her broken life and acculturation during which she assimilated many languages. This distress is articulated in "The Journey."

The sea conjures in the poet a persistent thread of loss by invoking her home memories. "Water Crossing" and "Acqua Alta" employ the imagery of swallowing to demonstrate the loss of these memories. Later in "Water Crossing," the poet begins to weave a net of memories from her days in India. Mangoes, lavender, silk, cotton saris, and her grandmother's blackened pearls are all emblematic memories reinforcing the poet's nostalgia for her country. They disclose her dislocation along with a genuine need to cling to her origins. There is a puzzling contradiction between the total eradication of her memories and enumerating them later in the poem. This contrast stems from her wish to bury them because of the unbearable pains she undergoes once she gets overwhelmed by memories in the diaspora.

Had it not been for British colonialism, Alexander would not have been exposed to any of the bitter experiences she endured all over her life. After around eighty-nine years, the British left the

Indians in poor economic, social, and political conditions. Therefore, the poet hints at the effects of coloniality on Indian society in “Autobiography” and “*Shook Silver*” by pointing to intensive migrations and social injustices. The poet tries to amend these fractured areas in her personal and communal consciousness by writing on them in her verses. Hence, the argument emphasizes the poet’s effective employment of the waterscape, particularly the sea, to create a passage for releasing her diasporic misery through the medium of poetry.

The study contributes to the critical body devoted to Alexander’s poetic production by examining the unappreciated poems above. A major finding in analyzing these pieces is the centrality of the waterscape to the poet. The waterscape is not a mere background to her representations of diaspora and its repercussions on her personal and poetic life. On the contrary, seas, oceans, and water-related bodies and creatures draw a controlling metaphor for her work. This preoccupation is traced in the discussion from collections published as early as 2002 until 2018, the year the poet departed life. This long duration proves the essentiality of the waterscape in her poetry and the necessity of conducting future readings of this motif and trope in other poems.

In the course of the argument, other findings appear. For instance, there is a consistent vein of repeated motifs in her verses including family members and geographical spaces. It turns out that these repetitions serve as a container of her suffering as an Indian migrant throughout her oeuvre. It is remarked that she places an

exceptional focus on geography which requires further study as another governing trope of her poetry. The former poems show the dramatic effect of cliffs, rocks, seas, and other geographical bodies on her identity formation. In addition, the discussed verses ascertain that Alexander is Indian to the bone. She adores the Indian climate, landscape, flora, cities, and ports. She takes advantage of every chance to celebrate her country's history, traditions, national industries, and ancient agriculture. This obsession with everything Indian kept her close to her country in the diaspora.

Works Cited

- Agnew, Vijay. "Diaspora and Memory." *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home*, edited by Agnew, University of Toronto Press, 2005, pp. 19-21.
- . Introduction. *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home*, edited by Agnew, University of Toronto Press, 2005, pp. 3-16.
- Alagappan, Serena. "The Migratory Memory of Meena Alexander." *The Juggernaut*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.thejuggernaut.com/meena-alexander-poems-indian-american-poet>.
- Alexander, Kamin, et al. "Pearl Cultivation in India." *High-Tech and Beneficial Agriculture*, edited by Amit Kumar Patel, S P Publishing, 2023, pp. 97-105.
- Alexander, Meena. *Atmospheric Embroidery*. TriQuarterly, 2018.
- . *Birthplace with Buried Stones: Poems*. TriQuarterly, 2013.
- . *Fault Lines: A Memoir*. Feminist Press, 2003.
- . *Illiterate Heart*. TriQuarterly, 2002.
- . "Literature is a Mansion with Many Rooms?: An Interview with Indian Poet Meena Alexander." Conducted by Jhilam Chattaraj, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, no. 31, March 2016, <https://www.asiancha.com/content/view/2298/547/>.
- . "A Lonely, Glorious Art: Q & A with Meena Alexander." Interview by Shoba Viswanathan, *Bloom*, 22 May 2018, <https://bloomsite.wordpress.com/2018/05/22/a-lonely-glorious-art-q-a-with-meena-alexander/>.
- . *Quickly Changing River*. TriQuarterly, 2008.
- Allen, Richard. "Indian Ocean Transoceanic Migration, 16th-19th Century." *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, Wiley, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm294>.
- Bugan, Carmen. Review of *Atmospheric Embroidery*, by Meena Alexander. *Harvard Review Online*, 2019, <https://www.harvardreview.org/book-review/atmospheric-embroidery/>.

- “Coloniality.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com LLC, 2024, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/coloniality>.
- Das, S., et al. “Mango (*Mangifera indica*) Cultivation in North-Eastern Region of India.” *Advanced Agricultural Research & Technology Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2019, pp. 54-66, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361439192_Mango_Mangifera_indica_Cultivation_in_North-Eastern_Region_of_India.
- Deshpande, Manali. “History of India’s Caste System and Its Impact on India Today.” *Digital Commons@Cal Poly*, vol. 44, 2010, pp. 1-35, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/socssp/44/>.
- Genzlinger, Neil. “Meena Alexander, Poet Who Wrote of Dislocation, Dies at 67.” *The New York Times*, 26 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/obituaries/meena-alexander-dead.html>.
- Hongsohn, Stephen. “Asian American Writer’s Spotlight: Meena Alexander.” *Livejournal*, 7 Sep. 2011, <https://asianamlitfans.livejournal.com/107710.html>.
- Jha, Sadan, and Pushpendra Singh. “Locating Subjectivities and Belonging in Migration.” *Home, Belonging and Memory in Migration: Leaving and Living*, edited by Jha and Singh, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-25.
- Jolad, Shivakumar, and Chaitanya Ravi. “Caste, Conservative, Colonial, and State Paternalism in India’s Alcohol Policies.” *Indian Public Policy Review*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2022, pp. 87-106, <https://ippr.in/index.php/ippr/article/view/141>.
- Mahmoud, Radwa. “The Migrant’s Dilemma in Meena Alexander’s *The Shock of Arrival*.” *The International Journal of Childhood and Women’s Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2022, pp. 26-42, https://journals.ekb.eg/article_290220.html.
- Ouseph, Shaju. “Meena Alexander’s Autobiography: A Postcolonial Migrant Narrative.” *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2018, pp. 95-103.

- Perur, Srinath. "Lost Cities #3 – Muziris: Did Black Pepper Cause the Demise of India's Ancient Port?" *The Guardian*, 10 Aug. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/10/lost-cities-3-muziris-india-kerala-ancient-port-black-pepper>.
- Poojaa, Dhayalan, and Hadi Sofia. "Saree as an Identity of Indian Women." *Humanities and Social Science Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2023, pp. 73-78, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375952458_SAREE_AS_AN_IDENTITY_OF_INDIAN_WOMEN.
- Rangaswami, G. "Palm Tree Crops in India." *Outlook on Agriculture*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1977, pp. 167-73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003072707700900404>.
- Roy, Monica. "Economic Impact of the British Rule in India." *History Discussion.net*, <https://www.historydiscussion.net/british-india/economic-impact-of-the-british-rule-in-india-indian-history/6317>. Accessed 17 July 2024.
- Roy, Santanu, and Jyoti Mandal. "The Trend of Silk Production in India During the Five-year Plan Period." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2021, pp. 76-79, [https://s3-ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/ijmer/pdf/volume10/volume10-issue5\(1\)/78.pdf](https://s3-ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/ijmer/pdf/volume10/volume10-issue5(1)/78.pdf). PDF download.
- Sharma, Shiva, and A. Pandey. "Diasporic Experience in the Poetry of Meena Alexander." *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp. 46-48, <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijhcs/v2-i1/5.pdf>. PDF download.
- Singh, Agni. "History of India's Caste System and Its Impact on India Today." *Ascent International Journal for Research Analysis*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-7, <https://ijcms2015.co/file/vol-ii-issue-3/AIJRA-VOL-II-ISSUE-3-72.pdf>. PDF download.

- Singh, Isha, and Oindrila De. "Efficiency of Cotton Production in India: Stochastic Frontier Analysis." *Institute of Economic Growth*, 2022, pp. 1-24, <https://www.ies.gov.in/pdfs/Isha-Efficiency-of-cotton-production-in-India-Stochastic-Frontier-Analysis.pdf>. PDF download.
- Somappa, K., and S. Uppin. "Indian Lavender [*Bursera penicillata* (D.C.) Engl.] – a Review." *The Indian Forester*, vol. 105, no. 12, 1979, pp. 850-63.
- Tsourapas, Gerasimos, and Kamal Sadiq. "The Postcolonial Migration State." *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2021, pp. 884-912, <https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/240739/2/240739.pdf>. PDF download.
- Warren, Anjana. "Fault Lines: A Journey Through Meena Alexander's Life, Conflicts and Adjustments with the Host Society as a Result of Multiple Dislocations." *Proceedings of the Asian Conference on Literature and Librarianship*, Osaka, 3-6 April 2014, pp. 48-57, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276266289_FAULTLINES-A_journey_through_Meena_Alexander's_life_conflicts_and_adjustments_with_the_host_society_as_a_result_of_Multiple_Dislocations.

الإبحار في شعر الشتات الأزرق لمينا ألكساندر:

دراسة لقصائد مختارة

ملخص

مينا ألكساندر هي شاعرة من جيل ما بعد الاستعمار وتمثل الشتات الهندي. بعد أن شهدت رحلات هجرة مختلفة منذ نعومة أظافرها، أصبحت المياه محوراً رئيساً في شعرها. علاوة على ذلك، تُركز قصائد متنوعة على أيام طفولتها وكيف أثر الرحيل المبكر عن بلدها على حياتها كامرأة بالغة، والتي عانت فيها مزيداً من الاضطرابات والانتقالات. وهكذا صارت المحيطات والبحار التي عبرتها عند انتقالها من بلد إلى آخر موضوعاً جوهرياً في قصائدها. وقد أظهرت الشاعرة انشغالاً بالغاً بالكيانات الأخرى المتعلقة بالمياه مثل السفن، والزوارق، والأسماك، والنوافير، والأمواج، والمدن الساحلية، وغيرها. ولذلك، تركز الدراسة الحالية على تحليل الأبعاد الحرفية، والمجازية، والرمزية للمشاهد المائية في شعرية ألكساندر. كما تؤكد على الدور الذي لعبته المياه في تشكيل شخصية الشاعرة خلال مرحلتها الطفولة والبلوغ في المهجر. فقد كان فقدان هويتها، وانقاص قدرها، وضياع جذورها هو الثمن الذي دفعته عندما غادرت الهند. وهكذا، تتبّع الدراسة تطور نشرذم الشاعرة، ووحدتها، وذكرياتها المؤلمة بسبب آثار ما بعد الاستعمار في ست قصائد زرقاء نُشرت في أربعة مجلدات. تُساهم الدراسة في التقدير الأكاديمي لأعمال الشاعرة من خلال قراءة هذه القصائد التي لم تلقَ تحليلاً نقدياً لائقاً. وكذلك تُسلط الضوء على اهتمامها بمظاهر المياه التي لم تلفت انتباه النقاد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مينا ألكساندر، الشتات الهندي، الشعرية الزرقاء، الوحدة،
الذكريات المؤلمة، آثار ما بعد الاستعمار