

The Double Consciousness: A Psycho-Cultural Study of Identity Formation in Meena Alexander's Poetry

S. Sivaranjani

Project Associate, Department and Centre for Women's Studies
Mother Teresa Women's University, Research and Extension Centre, Madurai
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Abstract

This paper studies the poetry of Meena Alexander within the context of diasporic discourse on the displaced self. In this essay, I trace how Meena Alexander constructs the fragmented self through the notion of the double consciousness-first described by W.E.B. Du Bois and subsequently applied by post colonialists and psychoanalysts. The texts I examine are exemplary of the constant interplay between memory and migration, homeland and exile, and self and the Other. Through the explication of literary examples alongside psychoanalytic concepts and post colonialist perspectives, I illustrate the traversal through trauma, memory, and desire, that characterizes Alexander's poetry and ultimately manifests in a shattered yet enduring diasporic identity. I conclude by discussing how her poetry serves as testimony to a resilient struggle, for the painful experience of trauma becomes translated into an enduring technique for rebuilding the intact and permanent self within the diaspora.

Keywords: Double Consciousness, Diaspora, Exile and Memory, Identity Formation, Meena Alexander's Poetry



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Introduction

Double consciousness was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois to define the experience of black American, whose account "of the chasm in one's being... Describes the antagonism and hatred between two souls. A black, and African man, having the double consciousness of being American and yet being African..." possessed only "two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged Vigor alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1903:8-9). Double consciousness has been identified by Itzigsohn & Brown (2015) as an essential sociological concept since it addresses the limitations of classical theories of self-creation by connecting macro-level questions of racialization with the micro-level experience of the racialized subject. As described by Brannon et al. (2015), "double consciousness may be understood as two separate self-schemas (mainstream American and African American), and greater Black cultural immersion in the classroom seems associated with academic persistence". Walker (2019) continues the idea in relation to Contemporary Black-white relations by focusing on the example of an Oreo to describe the seemingly paradoxical situation of being both Black and white, or a Negro passing for black. Shrestha (2021) examines it in the context of South Asian immigrants and their experiences of self-fragmentation, inferior complexes and general in betweenness within the white hegemonic order.

In diasporic writing, identity formation is indissolubly linked to fragmentation, hybridity and cultural negotiation. Migrated writers use memories of their homelands to forge identities among the new realities of migration and displacement. Meena Alexander, a renowned Indian-American poet, powerfully addresses this

diasporic predicament through lyrical and highly personal verses. Her poems, which continuously analyse the experiences of exile, memory, gender and belonging, heavily draw on W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness in that Alexander feels her identity is constructed from both her native cultural background and from the hostile examination of the dominant other.

Her poetic consciousness is permeated by an endless struggle between psychological torment and necessary survival strategies in a foreign land. The peripatetic nature of her life-she has resided in India, Sudan, England and the U.S.-points to her immersion in the diasporic condition of intermingled cultural realities. Her poems such as those in *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004), represent powerfully the broken yet resilient identities composed from remembering, wanting and having lost.

Her poems have been characterized as both sites of grieving and resistance (Rao 2008; Nasta 2012). Thus, it is argued that through double consciousness analysis, it is possible to explore both the coexistence of the homeland and the Newland, as well as the interaction between the self and the outside, surveillant eyes of the other. With psychoanalytic and postcolonial readings, it seeks to describe the formation of the psychocultural unified-but-fractured self.

Related Studies

In Chaudhuri's *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (2003), the issue of diasporic poets like Meena Alexander dealing with fragmented memories of the homeland and the need to negotiate writing in new languages and new cultures are explored. Chaudhuri suggests that Alexander's poetry is characterized by an attempt to find consistency and wholeness in the

midst of alienation and that identity in exile is reconfigured through constant act of remembrance.

Mishra explores the pain in recalling the homeland and the fragmentation of identity among diasporic subjects in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007). His term 'diasporic imaginary' is highly relevant to Alexander's project on loss, trauma, nostalgia etc.

In her autobiography, *Fault Lines* (1993), Alexander deals with the psycho-social dimensions of her diasporic identity and shows exile not only as a site of trauma but as one capable of initiating creativity and new perceptions. In an analysis of Alexander's writings on the theme of double consciousness and cultural displacement in her poetry, this autobiography is a necessary point of reference.

Rao argues in her interpretation of Alexander's poetry that Alexander utilizes her exilic and memory-based concerns and transmutes the trauma into writings on survival, which shows alignment with psychoanalytic perspectives of diasporic literature.

Nasta describes fractured and hybridized identity as representative of the diasporic literary tradition and categorizes Alexander in the context of postcolonial women writers who write poetry to deal with the psychological suffering caused by their displacement.

Objectives

This paper will investigate how double consciousness as both a psychoanalytic and postcolonial construct defines the creation of the migrant's subject in Meena Alexander's work.

Methodology

Through closely reading texts, with the use of a psycho-cultural approach in merging

psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory, Alexander's poems reveal the space in which memory, trauma, exile, and displacement intersect, and in which the author articulates the multi-dimensional diasporic self.

Findings

The work clearly reflects the stains of a dual identity, fractured between belonging and alienation, the past and the present. The poems are archetypal of exilic consciousness, where psychic wounds created by nostalgia, trauma and memories which refuse to fade become a mode of existence; in turn, the contrast of double consciousness constructs an image of the diasporic self that is both resilient and tender.

1. Belonging and Alienation

It is a constant battle for Alexander in writing poems to reunite both the alienating and belonging elements. Though her remembrance of homeland is affectionate and intense, it is nevertheless unobtainable. In a poem from *Illiterate Heart*, she writes: The heart always remembers / Even what the mind forgets. This memory itself is the sole element which relates to the homeland; and yet it also emphasizes the fact that it cannot overcome the distance between her current environment and where it used to be, a dichotomous element that resembles Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, the reconciliation of desire with alienation.

2. Memory and Trauma

Alexander considers memories both a treasure and a suffering, the traces of trauma and forced displacement are constantly evident in her work. Her memories are infused with India's partition in *Raw Silk* (2004): Blood on the street, shadows where children played, those moments

which cause collectively shared trauma, which add further to her feeling of individual disorientation and psychologically fragmentize her world. Nevertheless, Alexander channels her pain into creative art, thus proving how psychic wounds may become a basis for artistic survival and can heal trauma through creative process (psychoanalytic theory), for instance, as in *Raw Silk* where the poems are both cathartic and restorative.

3. Gendered Exile and Identity

Alexander represents a self which is dual: a migrant woman confined by patriarchy and trapped between two cultures, evidenced in, *I enter the house not through the door / but through the silence of women from House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), in which she expresses female subjectivity with no voice and invisible presence during the period of exile. Gender, therefore, functions as the inscription for psychic baggage imposed by cultural experiences, yet it also provides potential for uprising. She therefore articulates double consciousness as gendered: the integration of diasporic subject with gender-constraints.

4. Language and Fragmented Expression

Language serves both the purpose of survival and sign of fragmentation in her poems. Due to her experience with multiple languages in diverse locations, she often represents herself in terms of a system of translation; in *Fault Lines* (1993): Words come at me / cracked, split by the journey. Her adoption of English interwoven with Malayalam and Arabic, exemplifies how migration may cause language to fracture; on the other hand, the use of fragmented expression creates power and indicates the concept of double consciousness: in this sense, language is both a tool of the colonizer, as it represents a

Western language that represents her country of colonization, and a method of resistance in this context.

5. Creativity as Survival

She believes that despite the trauma of exile, psychological wounds may become strategies for survival. As she says in *Illiterate Heart*: What I write is a shoring up / of the broken earth, poetry serves to fix her fragmented self and culture, it is a symbol of personal autonomy and an act against alienation. Therefore, her writing of such poetry communicates an ideology that exile, although difficult, gives birth to a poetics that resists suffering (Mishra, 2007) in terms of negotiating loss and survival in a creative framework. The combination of these sub-themes allows us to gain an understanding of the diasporic consciousness portrayed in Alexander's poetry, where the identity is between belonging and not-belonging, memory and trauma, and gendered in exile through fragmented languages which are ultimately overcome by creativity.

Major Findings

Alexander's poetry explores an on-going negotiation of identity caused by memory, displacement and migration. Her poems keep on reflecting on the paradox between inclusion and exclusion where the past homeland is an inescapable and agonizing reality. Memory and trauma are recurrent motifs which maintain a cultural heritage and illustrate the violence of dislocation. It is noted that the writer's identity is binary – one is the identity of a migrant and the other is that of a woman. The identity is interlaced with the personal as well as cultural battle. The fragmentary nature of poem shows the diasporic consciousness; at the same time, it serves as the driving force. The writer is found

to be constructing strategies of survival on her psychological pains of exile and the poem is the declaration of her identity and re-creation.

Conclusion

This poem offers a great picture of the psychological and cultural plight of diaspora. It gives a deep glimpse into the struggles for belonging as well as pain for exclusion through the notion of double consciousness. The poet's continuous fluctuation between the homeland and the host country, the forgotten and the remembered past, and self and other is an evidence of the breaking-up state of diaspora. But it also stands out as an example of the tenacious human spirit of translating traumatic memories, dislocations and linguistically fractured identities into artistic expressions. Her female experience of exile is not limited by gender in the writing, and her identity is deeply intertwined with psychological and cultural influences. In conclusion, Alexander's poems record the plight of detachment and translate it into a space of reconstructing fragmented identities and add to the knowledge of postcolonial identity, displacement and affirmative potency of creativity.

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