Exploring Liminal Images in
Meena Alexander's Poems

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Bhaba is of the view that the notion of a nation is not true or real, an ‘imagined community,’ a distinct body made to exist on its own to form a ‘new sense of identity,’ that lasts beyond our time line. This idea resonates the fact that people can be united because of their identical, common place they live in (160). Bhaba’s concern about the term, ‘nation’ throws light on different communities, different perspectives, distinct practices and beliefs, indigenous way of looking at things and giving it a try to find a common ground to resist the evil encountered and conquer the common enemy either in physical, political, moral, social or ideal form. The idea of nation deals with an important factor – geopolitical structure.

Talking about nation and identity leads us further to focus on Gloria Anzaldua’s concept of geographical or physical and geopolitical or ideal ‘Borderlands’. Mendoza states that “Ideological Borderlands can materialize and produce racism, discrimination, economic exploitation, exclusion, and the like” (5). Cadaval is of the view that “borders are artifacts of history and are subject to change over time. When borders shift, lands and peoples are subjected to different sets of rules; this creates opportunities for exploitation, conditions of hardship, and motivations for revolt (Cadaval DOI).

Mendoza again affirms that Anzaldua’s standpoint of Borderlands focuses on the self which is the recipient of ‘multiple, autonomous and transformational influences’ (14). These varied influences transform one’s perspective of traditional
idea and outlook of ‘class, race, gender and sexuality’ (Mendoza 14) and make them break open and step into a new knowledge-geopolitical and geo-emotional.

According to Anzaldua, the concept of borderland deals with competition in culture and racial identities that lead to a conflicted and dual identity. And she states this clearly:
Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the Borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos incessant clamoring so that we forget our language... Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for physiological conflict, a kind of dual identity we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness (63).

And also, Anzaldúa states:
Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A Borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residual of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. ... (7).

Mignolo refers to “‘border thinking,’ as a double consciousness.” Anzaldua deliberates the term “border thinking,” as a tool to create ‘a new mythos’—“a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” ("thoughtjam.wordpress.com").

As for the Postcolonial Identity, Tyson states in Postcolonial Criticism that the colonizers viewed themselves as a perfect body of human being whereas the native peoples were seen as “other,” and they were also considered inferior or “less than fully human” (420). Tyson through Homi Bhabha, talks about “unhomeliness” which refers to the feeling of “being caught between cultures and of belonging to neither” place. It leads a person to be confined in a ‘psychological limbo’ that occurs because of sheer ‘cultural displacement’ within which he or she lives (421). In fact, this state of unhomeliness makes you feel not at home in your own place and leaves you in identity crisis that gives an identity of a psychological refugee (Tyson 421).
Mullaney presents Bhabha’s interest of the constant and ongoing kind of ‘interactions and exchanges across the border/lines of cultures’ and the movements occurring in the ‘in-between’ (121). And also, in the in-between, ‘space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion’ (Bhabha 2). Moreover, Tyson, joining many postcolonial theorists, states that postcolonial identity is not static but process oriented and encounters an evolutionary hybrid move between native and colonial cultures and this state of hybridity is a dynamic and possibility force in a culturally mixed or hybrid world (422).

Pramod K. Nayar writes about “negotiation of new identities or the hybrid identities of diasporic or displaced individuals/communities” (197-198). Here Nayar throws light on “Double consciousness, multiple identities and solidarities and cultural fundamentalisms and ethnic assertion.” The entire “geo-emotional” attitude deals with two important areas of geopolitical and geographical phenomena and they are roots and routes. There’s a heavy presence of indescribable distance and incomprehensible, overpowering confusions between roots and routes. (Nayar 199). And to unravel this puzzled state of mind, Renee Green uses a metaphor of architectural space:

I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such as higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness (Green).

Rene Green’s picture of stairwell represents the liminal space and the in-between becomes a notion of identity. But the linking element that makes the difference so vibrant between ‘lower and upper, black and white’ (Bhabha 5). This difference leads to an unstable passage that prevents identities at either side. And no stance takes place here. You are neither following your indigenous culture nor trying to settle and follow the custom the place where you are standing now.

Derek Walcott in his ‘a Far Cry from Africa’ reveals liminality and hybridity or the hybrid state of mind when he demands:

Divided to the vein
How choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love? (17-18).
In these lines, Walcott clearly states his double consciousness of being African and English. He also focuses on his trapped identity between his native culture or “roots” and the dominant tongue, English language that he has as his prime tool to deal with the imperial world. On the whole, his constant move with varied speed between “roots” and “routes” helps the reader to understand the representation of liminal world.

Jeremy Hawthorn states that the term “liminal” refers to the ‘threshold or initial stage of a process’, and this term also means something “rare”(191). Liminality or liminal by all means talks about shuttling move in-between to try to show something unique and so far not identified as anything concrete or established. It is the initial move to settle with a rare identity. It has stepped out afresh; it has started but not attained its position or state. This position is shrouded by “geo-emotional” perspective in which a person is in search of identity. His emotions and feelings are travelling to and fro to find a shelter of recognition and new identity. The emotions are trapped between one’s old, indigenous outlook and settling notion. It’s ‘geo-emotional’.

All these postcolonial concepts or ideas deliver liminal images in Meena Alexander’s poetry. This paper tries to analyze social, economical and political concerns through liminal images captured in Alexander’s poetry. And to investigate the images, the terms ‘aesthetic’, and ‘intertextuality’ give the reader a clear picture about literature and aesthetic sense to understand the words and their meaning.

The word ‘aesthetic’ stands for giving pleasure. It’s appropriate to state like this: literature is in a way aesthetic because it touches our sensorial order. This aesthetic sense is linked with the senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and of touch. Any kind of art form such as a painting, a piece of classical note, a mouth watering butter mushroom fry demonstration, sweet aroma of earl grey black tea and the touch of cool breeze draws our five senses to indulge in pleasure and this condition is purely aesthetic. Kelly Griffith states that “Literature is “aesthetic”; that is, it gives pleasure (26). He further opines about an effective way of communicating one’s ideas and outlook through all literary conventions especially ‘tropes, plot, symbolism, irony …themes and poetic language’ (Griffith 26). In fact, an aesthetic approach or orientation in literature cuts a way into locating the
meaning that reflects some sort of defined order in a work of art. Nevertheless, use of pleasurable conventions as a means to communicate ideas is the author’s aesthetic approach in literature.

Meena Alexander uses varied literary conventions to communicate her ways and thoughts. The crux of the matter is that how Alexander handles tropes—metaphors, imagery, similes, personification and symbols to throw light on ‘liminal passage’, ‘liminality’ or ‘liminal presence’.

Intertextuality is another tool in literature to appreciate poetry without damaging the wholeness of it. Any individual work can be interpreted for structured meaning because of the intertextual approach in literature (Griffith 28). In fact, a few ideas and artistic devices of other works always give the reader meaning that goes with the work studied now. Here it’s noteworthy to put forth a question: How does intertextuality help the reader to understand Alexander’s poetry and the ‘liminal sense’ they evoke?

Alexander’s poem “River and Bridge” evokes the imagery of crossing the bridge from one edge to another, water flow underneath, people and floating things on the move and reaching a different and new destiny, things losing their primal shape because of crossing and people leaving certain things and of touching a new point to look for their identity. She clearly speaks her geo-emotional and liminal sense through ‘bloody birth’:

I have come to the Hudson’s edge to begin my life
to be born again, to seep as water might
in a landscape of mist, burnished trees,
a bridge that seizes crossing (Alexander 1).

Alexander’s concern about starting a new life in a new land in pursuit of a new identity from the speaker’s point of view is very evident. Taking a new birth reveals the fact that the person crossing the border or bridge cannot take all his beliefs, ideals, philosophy and he or she must give up certain old things instead to embark upon a new world. The following images like ‘Hudson’s edge’, ‘seeping water’ and a ‘bridge’ that is in control of crossing talk about one’s psychological shuttle between the tradition inherited and practiced so long and the settling mindset. In the same poem, Alexander uses the ‘black river’ as a metaphor to imply the loss of identity or losing oneself, letting something dear to you
go off and diasporic move from known to
unknown. The term ‘black river’ refers to
leaving something behind and going away
from where you came from with a sense of
loss. Alexander in her interview with May
Joseph says that “If you cross the ‘black
river’ that’s around India you lose caste; you
lose who you are if you cross the black
waters” (Alexander). Here, the very idea of
identity crisis or the loss of identity is
distinctly brought out. Moreover, she
connects two great epic writers, ‘Homer’
and ‘Vyasa’ with the ‘bloody birth’
(Alexander 1). It is not just two poets; it is
the place where tradition encounters radical,
new ways and thoughts resulting in pain,
loss, assimilation and resistance.

In her poem “Muse”, Alexander as a
speaker reminisces her indigenous or past
life at young age and the life completely
transported from the east to west, from
traditional life to western outlook and from
dependent nature to emotional
independence. She shows the state of
hybridity which literally transports migrants
to absorb something which is not part of
established, already experienced means:

Spreading fire in a tree maram.

You murmured the word, sliding it
on your tongue,

Trying to get how a girl could turn
Into a molten thing and not burn.

Centuries later worn out from travel…

This is pure transport (Alexander 1).

It is not that you change in form and feature,
but you get transformed in reason and
emotion. Alexander presents a young girl
melting out of high temperature from solid
state to liquid state. This picture reveals the
fact that you lose your native touch or
indigenous way of looking at things
including your tongue and get transformed
in taste, views and points but not completely
burned or lost. There’s ‘liminal space’
created out of two different worlds- the
known and the lost and the unknown but
occupied now. The term ‘transport’ speaks
volume about Bhabha’s notion of
‘dislocation’, ‘unhomliness’- and being so
desperate for the native land left behind long
ago.

Even in the poem “Illiterate Heart”,
Alexander speaks of ‘split-consciousness or
double consciousness.’ She is literally torn
between two different worlds, languages and
cultures:

Donkeys dragged weights through
tiny streets.

Like our buffaloes, he laughed.
I had to perform my *Jana Gana Mana* for him

And Wordsworth’s daffodil poem (Alexander 5)--

Alexander is referring to her split state consciousness or living through the animals used for transport in Jerusalem and India and the national identity through Indian national anthem and the English poet’s nature poem especially the geographical element of a nation. Both the nations are geopolitically and geographically vary in every aspect but Alexander is geoemotionally split between these two nations with double consciousness. Her split consciousness is very evident in her dreams:

> In dreams I was a child babbling
> At the gate splitting into two,
> Three to make herself safe.
> Grown women combing black hair…
> Stuck forever at the accidental edge (Alexander 7).

Though grown up in reason, Alexander clearly states that she is trapped between once-upon-a-time memories of childhood or revisited life and newly acquired lifestyle.

In the poem “Cosmopolitan,” Alexander is speaking of the identity crisis, and the unforgettable past haunting her split consciousness. She asks three questions loaded with questionable investigation:

> Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?
> If I could would I return to Kashi?
> And might the queen of trumps intercede for me? (Alexander 2)

The first question tells about the potential search for identity and the loss of ‘self’. The second question is structurally improbable. It is not just a doubt but wishful longing but not of realistic move toward ‘Kashi’ to know the original color. The picture of ‘Kashi’ means the heaven in the east, the last refuge for those who want to reach ‘moksha’ and a place of regaining one’s old belief, faith and perspective. And the third question makes it clear that the person dislocated, living in the state of in-betweenness with double consciousness seeks an intercessor to rescue her from the peril of loss of identity.

The images—‘an island,’ ‘a high room,’ ‘a kitchen table,’ and ‘a chopping board’ (Alexander 2) make the reader notice the foreign or alien life style contrasted to one’s starting point at birth. It is very crystal clear that an immigrant is torn between the choice made at will and an unchangeable, indelible mark of permanent color, skin and innate nature of one’s geopolitical and geographical time and space. Moreover,
Alexander paints the picture of the sea that is changing constantly. She marks the constant change in self down:

I have seen the sea changed three times

Into a mulberry field and back again

into the sea (Alexander 2).

It is the ‘self’ that reflects on continuous, disturbing change in personal life. The metaphor of ‘a mulberry field’ takes you to your raw or first nature and state of being before losing your ‘self’ because of crossing the sea. It also explores the sense of insurmountable disturbance, a troubled person in the world of geo-emotional space split life undergoes and exposes a person with dual identity faces through the tunnel of conflict, change, loss of self and everlasting try to resist the ongoing battle of answering the primal question- who am I?

If poetry is a vehicle to express one’s inmost being, Meena Alexander has used this vehicle as a flying machine to fly from the starting point to different destinations, to try to comeback and perch on an age old tree that served as a nest building place for many ancestors, to cross the border again, and to get hold of something to stay on in the raft streaming according the current of water now. Her way of evoking ‘the hybrid atmosphere’ shows her world and the influence of the range of ideologies from the Bible, Mirabai, and Kabir to Maurice, Toni Morrison and Ryszard (Alexander 1).

Alexander’s expression of her steadfast convictions through poems reveals the geo-emotional element of life in an atmosphere that encounters a tremendous change. All these changes have gone through varied steps in life to post a strong note that ‘losing self in the new territory, living in geo-emotional state of mind, striving for identity, and retaining the old memories in an earthen urn of deep seated values hold a person who is ever on the move. This force of change is felt through her poems and the images she has used everywhere especially the ‘water’ imagery to project the liminal space or the liminal sense.

Works Cited


Green, Rene. Personal Interview. N.d.


