Poetry as 'Passage': Symbolic Adaptation and Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Meena Alexander

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Abstract: The present paper looks at Meena Alexander's poetry as a powerful space where cultural memory, migration, and identity come together through adaptation. Rather than focusing on adaptation as just changing one text into another, it explores how Alexander's poems act as a passage; a way to navigate experiences of exile, trauma, and the search for belonging. In today's world of global movement and complex cultural stories, her poetry shows how tradition can be reshaped through innovation.

Focusing on poems from collections like *Atmospheric Embroidery*, and *Raw Silk*, the paper examines how Alexander blends multiple languages, memories, and political realities into her work. Her use of fragmentation, code-switching, and hybrid forms helps adapt deep-rooted histories and contemporary challenges into a rich, trans-cultural narrative. Here, adaptation isn't about sticking to an original source but about creatively reimagining identity and memory through poetry.

In the end, the present paper offers a fresh way to think about adaptation; as an ongoing process of negotiation between cultural inheritance and individual experience in a connected world.

Keywords: Diaspora, Symbolic Adaptation, Cultural Memory, Transcultural Poetics, Meena Alexander

Introduction

In the poetry of Meena Alexander, home is never a fixed geography but a crossing, a threshold, a passage. Born in India, raised in Sudan, educated in England, and long settled in the United States, Alexander lived and wrote at the intersections of displacement and belonging. Her poems are haunted by exile, shaped by cultural memory, and driven by the need to remake identity in unfamiliar terrains.

For her, poetry becomes not simply a site of expression but a passage; a way of carrying fragments of memory across time and space, a liminal threshold where inherited traditions encounter new landscapes, and a textual form through which the fractured self might be reassembled.

The present paper makes central claim that Alexander's poetry is best understood as an act of symbolic adaptation. Adaptation here is not the conventional reworking of one text into another but the reimagining of cultural memory, ancestral symbols, and emotional registers so that they may survive in new contexts. In her poetry collections such as *Raw Silk, Atmospheric Embroidery,* Alexander transforms loss into lyric, trauma into testimony, and scattered memories into hybrid forms. Her poems enact the struggle of a self in motion; shaped by departure and arrival, by rupture and reconstitution, and in doing so, they expand the very meaning of adaptation.

To frame this argument, it is useful to recall Arnold van Gennep's triangular structure of rites of passage; separation, transition and incorporation which, when read through the diasporic lens, aligns with the migrant's trajectory of dislocation, adaptation, and negotiation. Separation corresponds to the painful dislocation from homeland and cultural roots; transition resonates with the liminal stage of adaptation, a space of learning and unlearning; incorporation parallels negotiation, where identity is not simply assimilated but continually redefined through dialogue between past and present. Meena Alexander's poetry moves through these stages repeatedly, yet never resolves into a singular identity; instead, it makes visible the ongoing nature of passage itself.

The theoretical perspective draws on insights from adaptation studies, postcolonial theory, and memory studies. From Linda Hutcheon, I take the idea that adaptation is as much a process as a product, highlighting how Alexander reworks, images and affects across shifting contexts. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity clarifies the in-between zones where languages, idioms, and identities converge to produce new articulations. Stuart Hall reminds us that cultural identity is always in process, a matter of "being" and "becoming," which resonates with Alexander's fragmented yet fluid lyrical voice. Equally relevant are the frameworks of memory: Pierre Nora's "sites of memory" illuminate how Alexander's recurrent symbols: threads, rivers, shrines, cloth serve as vessels of

collective remembrance, while Marianne Hirsch's idea of post memory explains how inherited scenes and ancestral echoes shape her poetic imagination.

Methodology and Objectives

The paper is guided by the conviction that poetry must be approached as lived experience as much as literary text. The main methodological thrust adopted here combines close textual reading with insights from adaptation studies, memory studies, and postcolonial theory, while also remaining attentive to the affective and aesthetic qualities of poetry that resist strict theoretical codification. Adaptation studies, as theorised by Linda Hutcheon and others, shifts our attention from fidelity to the source to the processes of transformation, re-creation, and negotiation. In this paper, adaptation is not about tracing intertextual borrowings but about seeing how cultural memory is carried into new contexts; how images, idioms, and affective registers are reworked in diaspora.

The first objective is to trace how Alexander's poems adapt cultural memory into lyric form. This involves examining the way ancestral images, ritual gestures, and fragments of language are transplanted into new poetic landscapes, thereby sustaining cultural inheritance while simultaneously transforming it. The second objective is to analyse how formal strategies; fragmentation, hybridity, multilingual diction, and symbolic imagery serve as techniques of passage. The methodology, therefore, is not a rigid set of procedures but an adaptive framework that mirrors the very processes under study. symbolic adaptation operates in her work.

Theoretical Perspective

The idea of adaptation in literary studies has often been associated with processes of transposition, where one text is reimagined into another form, medium, or genre. However, in the context of Meena Alexander's poetry, adaptation must be understood as more than a mechanical transformation. It becomes a symbolic act, a passage through which cultural memory, migration, and identity are negotiated. Adaptation is both a product and a process which provides a useful starting point (Linda Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8) In Alexander's poetry, adaptation operates less as a product and more as a living process; an ongoing negotiation between her diasporic histories and her poetic craft. Adaptation

allows "texts to reverberate within new cultural and temporal frames" (Sanders, 2006, p. 19). Sanders' insight is significant for understanding how Alexander's poems, written from the space of exile, function as adaptive negotiations that carry the weight of inherited traditions while simultaneously opening them to transnational resonances.

Adaptation is marked by the dynamics of repetition and difference, of remembering and re-creating (Linda Hutcheon 8). This resonates strongly with Alexander's fragmented poetic structures, where lines often oscillate between remembrance of homelands and the estrangement of diasporic life. Adaptation is never neutral but is "frequently a deliberate act of appropriation" (Sanders 26). In this light, Alexander's poetry may be read as appropriating cultural memories and recasting them in a hybrid idiom that suits her position as a migrant writer. Adaptation here is not a derivative act but an act of survival and reimagination, enabling her to articulate a trans-cultural identity that bridges India, Sudan, and America.

Postcolonial theory deepens this understanding by offering conceptual frameworks for diasporic identity and cultural hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" is particularly relevant, for it emphasizes the creative potential of in-betweenness. It is in the emergence of the interstices; the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha 2).

Alexander's image of "everything… cut and coupled" imitates the very operation of the "third space" where cultural fragments intersect and adapt. Her embroidered cartography becomes a metaphor for the stitched, hybrid identities described by Bhabha.

Alexander's poetry often emerges from precise interstices, where memories of Kerala overlap with the violence of Sudan and the urban landscapes of New York. Her fragmented, multilingual lines enact this hybridity, revealing how adaptation is performed through language itself. Stuart Hall complements this view by insisting that cultural identity is not fixed but always in flux, "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' (Hall 225). In Alexander's poems, identity is not an essence to be

recovered but a narrative continually reworked through memory and migration. Her poetry dramatises this ongoing process of becoming, where adaptation functions as the very mode of existence for the migrant subject.

Paul Gilroy's theorization of diasporic identity in *The Black Atlantic* adds another dimension to this discussion. Diasporic cultures are characterized by movement, hybridity, and the circulation of memory across boundaries. He writes of a "counterculture of modernity" that emerges from the ruptures of displacement and slavery (Gilroy 36). While Alexander's context differs from Gilroy's focus on the *Black Atlantic,* his idea of cultural memory as transnationally mobile helps us understand how her work engages with histories of violence and migration. In collections such as 'Raw Silk', she situates her personal memories of exile alongside broader political events such as the 9/11 attacks, thereby adapting private trauma into a larger cultural register. This aligns with Hall's assertion that cultural identities are framed through "the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (Hall 225).

Closely tied to these postcolonial frameworks are theories of memory. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is illuminating here. She defines it as the relationship that the "generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (Hirsch 22). Although Alexander herself is a first-generation migrant, her poetry often engages with the post memorial condition, where inherited fragments of family stories, cultural traditions, and collective traumas are imaginatively reassembled. To simplify it further cultural memory is not static; it is a process of continuous transformation and re-shaping. Alexander's adaptive strategies; fragmentation, code-switching, and hybrid forms mirror this process of re-shaping, turning poetry into a medium where the past is not reproduced but dynamically reimagined in the present.

The fragmented structures in Alexander's work can also be understood as formal enactments of memory's discontinuities. As Hirsch notes, postmemory relies on "imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 22), and Alexander's poetics of dislocation performs precisely this imaginative reconstruction. By adapting fragments of memory across languages and cultural contexts, her poetry functions as a symbolic passage through which both personal and collective histories travel.

Feminist and autobiographical perspectives further enrich this theoretical framework. Alexander's work is deeply autobiographical, yet it transforms personal experience into collective resonance. She often foregrounds the body; the female, migrant, and racialized body—as a site of inscription. This resonates with the argument that feminist writing from postcolonial locations must attend to the intersections of gender, race, and displacement.

The act of writing becomes an adaptation of trauma into speech, a feminist reclaiming of voice from the silence imposed by displacement and violence. Alexander creates a resistant narrative that challenges dominant cultural discourses. Her poetry exemplifies how the self-adapts memory and identity into art, creating what might be termed a trans-cultural autobiography. The blending of Malayalam phrases with English, the juxtaposition of childhood memories with global political events, and the invocation of female ancestral figures all signal a feminist practice of adaptation that reshapes cultural inheritance in dialogue with the migrant woman's lived experience.

In short adaptation, in the case of Meena Alexander, cannot be reduced to the formal reworking of one text into another. It is instead a dynamic process of negotiating hybridity, memory, and identity. Hutcheon and Sanders help us reconceptualize adaptation as an ongoing cultural process. Bhabha, Hall, and Gilroy provide frameworks for understanding the diasporic condition in which Alexander writes.

Review and the Context

A central concern in existing studies has been the relationship between displacement and cultural memory. The critics describe her poetry as a map of exile, where recollections that might otherwise seem broken become a resource for survival. Alexander writes "out of fractured geographies," where memory functions not only as a reminder of loss but also as a creative act of reconstruction (Susheila Nasta). Similarly, reads her work as "a poetics of dislocation," suggesting that Alexander transforms absence into aesthetic expression (Lopamudra Basu).

In these readings, memory itself is adapted into a kind of living archive, one that enables the migrant imagination to persist across shifting borders. Further Alexander "turns memory into a

migratory archive," a phrase that highlights the dynamic quality of her poetics (Debjani Ganguly). What emerges from this scholarship is the sense that Alexander does not merely preserve memory but reworks it, adapting fragments of cultural inheritance into imaginative spaces of belonging.

Another important strand of scholarship emphasizes Alexander's linguistic and formal strategies. Her use of code switching, fragmented syntax, and hybrid diction has been read as an act of resistance to the dominance of English. Alexander unsettles the literary authority of English through "interlingual memory," carrying traces of Malayalam and other cultural registers into her poetry (Vijay Mishra, 2008). Such formal strategies are often understood as acts of adaptation in themselves. These studies underline how Alexander's formal innovations exemplify adaptation as a mode of creativity and resistance.

Another critical strand situates Alexander within transnational feminist writing, emphasizing how her poetry connects displacement with questions of gender, body, and violence. Alexander's work articulates "a transnational feminist sensibility," foregrounding how exile and migration are not abstract conditions but lived realities inscribed on the female body (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, 2002). Her poetry transforms the body into "a palimpsest of memory and violence," especially in collections such as Raw Silk, which respond to traumatic events like 9/11 and the Gujarat riots (Anjali Nerlekar). These studies illustrate three major concerns: Alexander's negotiation of diasporic memory, her hybrid poetics of language and form, and her feminist articulation of trauma. What unites these critical strands is their recognition of adaptation as central to her work, even if the term is not always explicitly invoked.

Discussion and Analysis 'The Atmospheric Embroidery' :

Meena Alexander's title poem "Atmospheric Embroidery" emerges as a quintessential example of how her work stitches together fragments of memory, migration, and identity into a delicate yet resilient fabric. The very metaphor of "embroidery" implies a craft of piecing, layering, and embellishing; a fitting symbol for diasporic subjectivity where life is reassembled from scattered

histories. Here, Alexander portrays the turbulence of exile and the frailty of memory into an aesthetic that is intimate and also political.

The poem opens with an evocative image of air charged with trembling threads, hinting at how the atmosphere itself becomes inscribed with stories of displacement. This embroidery of the air illustrates how memory, culture, and belonging are not rooted in a fixed geography but exist in fragile, ephemeral tracings. Diaspora is not solid ground but shifting atmosphere. The use of "prayer" invokes the sacred, suggesting that cultural memory is preserved not merely in documents or artifacts but in whispered rituals, in fleeting gestures of devotion carried across borders.

This metaphor can be read through Homi Bhabha's lens of hybridity. The "weave" does not belong entirely to one cultural pattern but is a negotiation of multiple influences. Just as embroidery brings together disparate threads into a coherent form, Alexander adapts fragments of cultural memory into new, hybrid patterns of identity. The "atmospheric" quality underscores that such identity is not grounded but always in flux, much like what Stuart Hall describes as identity being "a matter of becoming as well as being."

Alexander invokes imagery of cities, landscapes, and bodies that bear witness to trauma and history. She writes, "in the wind a scar is lifted, / crimson against clouded blue." The scar here is not just individual but collective, evoking wounds of colonialism, migration, and violence that mark the diasporic psyche. Yet, placed against the "clouded blue," it is also a vision of survival: the wound becomes visible, remembered, and in that act of remembrance, it is inscribed into the sky, refusing erasure.

The craftsmanship of the poem lies in its oscillation between fragility and resilience. The embroidery is delicate, threatened by unravelling, yet it is precisely in the act of stitching; of creating patterns out of dispersal that the diasporic subject finds continuity. The poetic form, with its fragmented yet lyrical progression, mirrors this process. Lines drift and connect like threads; enjambments enact the movement across borders. This aesthetic of fragmentation aligns with

Alexander's broader poetics of adaptation, where cultural inheritance is not reproduced intact but transformed through creative reassembly.

What makes "Atmospheric Embroidery" particularly significant is that it encapsulates Alexander's vision of poetry as passage. The atmospheric threads become literal passages across air, across time, across languages. The act of embroidery gestures towards women's labour, domestic craft, and intimate care, refiguring these as powerful metaphors for diasporic survival. In this sense, the poem is both personal and political: it records Alexander's own negotiations with migration while speaking to larger histories of displacement.

In conclusion, it exemplifies how Alexander adapts fragments of memory and history into new cultural forms. Through imagery of stitched skies, rivers like the Nile, suffered trees, scars, and shifting winds, the poem dramatizes the tension between loss and resilience. The poem thus becomes not just a reflection of exile but an act of cultural survival, aligning with this study's theoretical framing of adaptation as negotiation between inheritance and lived experiences. The "Night Theatre" is a meditation on birth, trauma, and the inadequacy of language to represent unspeakable suffering. Night becomes a theatre where fragments of memory and history are enacted in shadow and silence. The poem begins with stark imagery; "Snails circle/A shed where a child was born." (AE p. 4)

The natural and the human intersect here, suggesting both fragility and persistence. Birth, often celebrated, is placed against poverty and vulnerability; a shed rather than a home, straw rather than safety. This inversion immediately unsettles expectations and hints at exile, precarity, and violence. The speaker confronts the limits of representation; "Who can write this?" The question acknowledges that poetry may falter when faced with raw suffering. Paul Celan's shadow looms in the poem, a Holocaust survivor-poet who wrestled with language's inability to hold atrocity. The line "Still language endures / Celan said" echoes his belief that poetry must persist even in the face of silence. Alexander thus positions her own diasporic voice in continuity with traditions of trauma writing. The night sky, far from being a place of transcendence, mirrors devastation. Stars themselves

are figured as rubble; light fractured like memory. This aligns with Alexander's larger poetics, where the personal is always entangled with the historical, and where exile leaves behind "rubble" that must still be carried into language.

The final image; "As he stood in a torn / Green coat, / Shivering a little, / In a night theater, in Bremen" draws the poem into a haunting tableau. The city of Bremen, bombed in World War II, becomes symbolic of fractured Europe, collective displacement, and fragile survival. The green coat embodies the worn, vulnerable body against vast historical violence. The expressions like 'we have no words for what is happening' are the best instances of memory and trauma.

Through fragmented images and broken syntax, the poem enacts the struggle of testimony: words both fail and endure. In this tension, "Night Theatre" becomes an elegy for the unspoken and a reminder of poetry's ethical demand to speak, however inadequately, of suffering.

In *Shook Silver*, Alexander transforms personal and collective memory into a lyrical meditation on displacement and fragility. It evokes the shimmer of "shook silver" as a metaphor for fragments of memory, glimmering, yet unstable. This silvery residue suggests both beauty and erosion, much like diasporic identity itself. The fragmented imagery recalls the way migration unsettles continuity; memory does not remain whole but surfaces in glittering shards. Such a poetics resonates with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" where cultural identity is continually negotiated rather than fixed.

The silver metaphor also invokes historical residue: the colonial plunder of India, silver as currency, and the glitter of commodities that once mediated cross-cultural encounters. In this sense, the poem links the intimate texture of memory with the larger narratives of imperialism and diaspora. The form itself, restrained and elliptical, suggests a language stretched across borders, unable to stabilize into neat closure.

The poem embodies Edward Said's reflection on exile as "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place." The shimmering silver marks both beauty and loss, a sensuous trace of what cannot be fully retrieved. In the act of writing, however, Alexander transforms this loss

into aesthetic presence, showing how poetry itself becomes a vessel for adaptation which is an act of shaping fragments into meaning.

Thus, *Shook Silver* does not simply mourn loss but reconfigures it into a mode of survival. The titular image means something fragile, breakable, luminous becomes a metaphor for diasporic identity: fractured yet still shining. By adapting memory into poetry, Alexander grants new life to what might otherwise vanish, making literature itself a form of passage. In the expression "I must speak to the shadows" she relates her to the past. Thus *Shook Silver* exemplifies Alexander's capacity to adapt cultural memory into art, linking fragmented personal histories with broader diasporic and postcolonial realities, thereby embodying adaptation as passage. The next poem Udisthanam is anchored by the refrain like closing line; "Who will grant them passage?" This question crystallizes the central anxiety of the poem, the vulnerability of migrants and exiles who must depend on external powers for the right to move, settle, and survive. Positioned at the end, the question denies resolution; it leaves the reader suspended in the very uncertainty that defines displacement. Here, Alexander echoes Edward Said's insight that exile is marked by perpetual contingency, "an endless wait for permissions that may never come. "The titular significance further layers the meaning. Derived from Sanskrit (ud– "upward" and sthāna "place"), Udisthanam may be read as "a place of rising" or "an elevated place." Yet the aspirational quality of the word contrasts with the reality of the poem, where passage is not guaranteed but withheld.

By ending with a question, Alexander resists closure. The poem's structure enacts the very instability it describes: there is no answer, no authoritative voice to guarantee safety or belonging. Yet, paradoxically, the poem itself becomes a form of passage. In writing the unspeakable, Alexander transforms silence into presence, echoing the claim that memory and survival depend on retelling. Poetry becomes an alternative dwelling place when physical belonging is precarious or denied. Udisthanam embodies Alexander's poetics of exile by concluding with the unresolved question of passage. Its promise of elevation remains aspirational, yet through the act of writing, Alexander grants her displaced figures a symbolic home in language, affirming that poetry itself can rise where borders

constrain. In Tarawad, Alexander turns to her ancestral home in Kerala as both a material space and a metaphor for belonging, memory, and rupture. The term tarawad refers to the traditional matrilineal household of Kerala, central to kinship and inheritance. Alexander grounds her poem in cultural specificity, while also opening it to broader themes of diasporic memory and the fragility of home. The opening lines establish an intimate connection; “I am a creature of house and home/Bound by a cord of blood.” (AE p. 25)

The umbilical imagery conveys the idea that home is not merely a physical site but a living extension of the self. The natural details the “red tiled roof,” “mulberry bark,” “pond where koi crawled”evoke a lush domestic landscape infused with familial presence. This imagery aligns with Aleida Assmann’s concept of cultural memory, where lived environments embody collective identity and continuity.

Yet even as the poem celebrates rootedness, loss intrudes. The refrain “Going, going, gone!” echoes the voice of an auctioneer, reducing ancestral heritage to a transaction. This intrusion of market logic into intimate memory dramatizes the commodification of cultural spaces. The lines; “Someone banged the gavel/Hearing the house was sold” (p. 25) capture the violent rupture of modernity, where law and commerce sever ties that blood and memory sustain. The figure of the woman who “lay down in the mango grove / and stopped her eyes with stones” becomes a symbolic mourner perhaps an ancestor or guardian spirit who embodies the grief of cultural erasure. The poem intensifies the sense of dispossession. Alexander’s voice turns elegiac, lamenting the destruction of landscape; “Casurinas flashed green needles into flints/Jamun and jacaranda trees chopped.”(p. 26)

The violent verbs “flints” and “chopped” depict how environments of memory are stripped, their sacred value disregarded. The intrusion of the Christian priest “in white robes” into the burial scene hints at the overlay of colonial and religious histories that further complicate belonging. The closing stanzas move from external loss to interior fragmentation; “What becomes of houses torn down?/ In the room where she slept/Milk trickles/Syllables swarm, lacking a scrip (p. 26). Here the destruction of the house is mirrored in the collapse of language. The inability to find a script

underscores Homi Bhabha's idea of the "unhomely"a space where personal identity is disrupted by broader historical forces. Language falters just as memory falters, leaving only fragments. The final lines"Door jamb stuck to emptiness/Threshold split from walls" offer a powerful architectural metaphor for dislocation. What once signified passage and belonging is now broken, symbolizing the impossibility of return. Through Tarawad, Alexander adapts personal memory into a wider meditation on diaspora and cultural rupture. The ancestral home, once a site of continuity, is transformed into a ruin, its presence reconstituted only through poetry. Edward Said's notion of exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" resonates here: the house cannot be recovered, but it can be reimagined through lyric.

In *Human Geography,* Meena Alexander condenses the weight of exile and belonging into a few charged lines. The title itself signals her concern with how human histories and emotions inscribe themselves onto landscapes.The opening, "Out of the belly of stone / India pours," evokes both permanence and rupture. Stone suggests endurance, yet what pours out is fluid, unstable. Immediately after, "Wild grass is torn/from its roots" captures the migrant condition, the violence of being uprooted from home, echoing Edward Said's claim that exile is marked by "an unhealable rift" between self and place.

The imagery shifts from the collective to the intimate: "On broken rock/Your face is etched in shadow." Here memory becomes a fragile engraving, lasting yet spectral, more absence than presence. This resonates with Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory, where what is inherited from the past is both indelible and ghostly.

The closing question; "Is this what love does/Sempiternal marking?" links displacement to desire. Love here is not purely consoling; it leaves permanent scars, like exile itself. The choice of "sempiternal," meaning eternal yet shadowed, underscores Alexander's vision of identity: enduring but transformed by rupture. Therefore, the idea of sempiternal is more appealing and relatable.

Through its brevity, the poem enacts what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomely" the meeting of the personal and political. Landscapes become maps of memory, while love itself becomes an act of

survival inscribed onto broken ground. Human Geography demonstrates Alexander's gift for compressing the vastness of cultural memory and exile into resonant images, showing how adaptation is both wound and endurance, scar and passage

Meena Alexander's *Hyderabad Notebook* is both diary and palimpsest, a layered text where memory, history, and cityscape intersect. As the title suggests, the poem adopts the form of a notebook: fragmentary, observational, provisional. This form mirrors the diasporic condition itself, where coherence is always partial and identity is shaped by scattered impressions stitched together across time and place. The poem begins in recollection: "I used to sit in the New Mysore Café, at a cracked marble table top/A cup of foaming coffee in front of me." (AE. 61)

The concrete detail of "cracked marble" situates memory in tactile space, while the everyday act of drinking coffee evokes intimacy. Yet almost immediately, erasure enters: "The café is gone, in its place a Reebok store." Here global consumer capitalism overwrites memory, replacing local community with homogenized corporate presence. The nostalgic image of the café becomes emblematic of cultural displacement within one's own city, resonating with Edward Said's description of exile as not only geographical but also existential: "to live in many places at once and in none completely". Alexander juxtaposes the secular, commercial city with gestures of devotion. The figure of the man "slowly going blind" who "runs his fingers over a page/Spelling out the names of God" embodies endurance through ritual. His physical blindness contrasts with spiritual vision; his act of tracing divine names inscribes permanence against urban flux.

The poem layers nationalist history into this personal geography. Reference to *The Golden Threshold* evokes Sarojini Naidu, the "Nightingale of India," situating Hyderabad in anti-colonial memory. The transformation of her residence into "a hospital, then a university" dramatizes how spaces are repurposed, re-coded, and adapted across generations. This aligns with Aleida Assmann's concept of cultural memory, where monuments, institutions, and stories serve as carriers of collective identity, even as their meanings shift.

The notebook structure permits sharp juxtapositions: “Another shop has plastic dolls with glued on hair/SIM cards, dark glasses, cellphones in tints of the rainbow.” Here Alexander catalogues commodities of globalization, contrasting them with older rhythms of the city: sugarcane carts, spiced tea, handwritten calligraphy. These fragments enact the dissonant temporality of modernity, where tradition and modern consumer culture coexist uneasily.

Later, imagery of students, booksellers, and traffic evokes Hyderabad as a city of thresholds between past and present, sacred and secular, memory and erasure. The speaker sees “tyres scuff the asphalt, cut free and leap,” an image that suggests restless, cyclical motion. Cut from “the bowels of courtly houses,” the modern city emerges from older histories of feudalism and colonialism, its traces barely visible in the marketplace of modern life. The poem closes on a reflective cadence; “Returning us to a dream of love, /And what we did not know we were.” (p. 64)

Despite fragmentation and loss, memory points to continuity. The “dream of love” here is not romantic but cultural and collective: the persistence of belonging carried in fragments of ritual, history, and imagination. The final line emphasizes discovery identity revealed retroactively, through memory’s adaptation of past into present.

Thematically, *Hyderabad Notebook* functions as Alexander’s meditation on adaptation itself. The city she records is transformed by time, erasure, and globalization, but in capturing these changes, she adapts its fragments into lyric survival. In this sense, the notebook becomes not merely a record but a creative reinscription. The poem dramatizes Bhabha’s notion of hybridity: an identity that emerges in between the fragments, where global and local, memory and forgetting, coexist. The last poem selected for analysis from this collection is ‘*The Journey. The Journey* compresses a childhood of displacement into a few stark, sensory images, turning personal memory into a miniature history of exile. The poem opens with that unforgettable pair “I was blindfolded and had only the mercy of the sea / (And sprigs of jasmine in my arms)” which immediately sets the tone: vulnerability (blindfold), movement (sea), and memory as fragrant cargo (jasmine). Alexander makes migration

bodily and sensory; the jasmine recurs later as a bruised, crushed scent that returns the speaker to what she "cannot bear to remember," so memory is at once intimate and traumatic.

Formally the poem enacts disruption: lines such as "The journey was awkward: lines blown inward, syllables askew. / Gulls nestled in torn pages" make language itself feel displaced. Linguistic fracture becomes a metaphor for identity in motion, languages "flowing in the fountain" but also producing confusion. The child's perspective (the speaker was five) intensifies the sense of bewilderment: "My soul ran away with me." War intrudes into the personal scene "When we got to that country, a war was going on" tying private loss to political violence.

The poem does two things at once: it documents the wound of exile (resonant with Said's and Hirsch's accounts of displacement/postmemory) and it models adaptation the speaker decides "not to stay thirsty" amid linguistic and cultural confusion, an act of survival and adjustment. In short; *The Journey* makes memory mobile, showing how trauma, language, and sensory detail are reworked into lyric passage.

The poems selected from *Atmospheric Embroidery* (including the title poem, N*ight Theatre, Shook Silver, Udisthanam, Tarawad, Human Geography, The Journey,* and *Hyderabad Notebook* together stage a consistent poetics of adaptation. Across these pieces Alexander does three interrelated moves: materializes memory as movable stuff. Whether it's jasmine, silver, the tarawad house, or a city café, memory is presented as something that can be carried, crushed, stitched, sold or re-inscribed. Fragmented syntax, enjambment, musical syncopation and elliptical lines enact dislocation on the page; the poem's shape becomes a model of the migrant's "passage." She turns private into political while creating symbolic passage. Poems like Tarawad or The Journey show individual grief alongside auctions, war, and urban erasure; yet by bearing witness in language the poems themselves create a kind of passage Bhabha's "third space" where hybrid identities can be imagined and sustained.

'The Raw Silk' like 'Atmospheric Embroidery' is another remarkable collection. The title poem "Raw Silk" stages silk as a carrier of generational memory and transmissible trauma. The

opening domestic call; “Open the door or I’ll faint hearing amma’s voice Where is the silk from your grandmother’s sari?” (Raw Silk p. 34) already sets up the wardrobe as a family archive and a site of contested value. Alexander ties everyday material culture (a wedding sari) to histories of political upheaval: brocade “saved from the bonfire Gandhi had ordained” becomes both reliquary and survivor-object; the thread of cloth is at once literal commodity and symbolic lineage.

The poem’s three part structure moves from embodied memory (the silkworms, mulberries, courtyard) to the disorienting geography of exile “It was Khartoum and it was not” and finally to a ritualized maternal cosmology where “silkworms dancing in the firmament” crown the speaker. The silkworm image is crucial: silk is made through a violent, transformatory process, and Alexander uses that biology as metaphor for adaptation the painful extrusion and re-forming of identity into something both precious and raw. This resonates with Hutcheon’s insistence that adaptation is repetition with difference; the sari is repeated across generations, but its meaning is altered by history.

Formally, the poem compresses languages (French Verlaine is quoted), geographies (Varanasi, Khartoum), and registers (domestic lyric / historical reportage). That multilingual collage enacts Bhabha’s “third space”: identity is produced in between these references, not recovered intact. The ash/smoke imagery in the central section raw silk “turned to smoke in the night’s throat” signals loss but also survivorship: memory is consumed and remade into language.

Rumors for an Immigrant turns public urban space into an arena where identity is fashioned by hearsay and translation. The poem’s vignettes (*Fifth Avenue Plaza, Central Park, a foreign notebook)* dramatize how rumour circulates in diasporic life: “Rumors clip the air, spread their wings / and swarm through the plaza.” The verbal image rumour as insectile, airborne thing recalls the precariousness of reputation and the ease with which meaning is remade in a new city.

Alexander repeatedly evokes multilingual disorientation. This linguistic straddling is not merely confusion; it is a survival tactic the immigrant making sense through a polyglot bricolage. The poem’s notebook sections suggest that writing itself is a refuge against rumour; the speaker attempts to live on language when homeland is denied. Stuart Hall’s notion of identity as ongoing “becoming”

is immediately useful here; rumour destabilizes fixed identity, while writing and small acts of naming attempt reconstitution.

Politically, the poem gestures to a world without refuge “She has heard the rumour no one will have a homeland” a dystopian image that refracts the anxieties of post national migration and the precariousness of asylum. Yet the voice resists pure victimhood by seizing myth, history, and even humour (Allen Ginsberg pops up in Central Park) to reweave belonging. Formally the stanza shifts, repeated refrains and vignette-logic mirror the swarm of rumour itself: fragment as method.

“Petroglyph” begins with ancient marks and ends by placing those marks inside contemporary catastrophe. The glyph (an elk pierced with a lifeline; a human figure sworn to four points) signals an archival memory that precedes writing: human inscription as the first device of cultural memory. Alexander’s speaker insists on the earth’s “thingness” while refusing teleologies that turn the past into a simple origin story. The poem moves from northern rock glyphs to the poet’s own childhood memory of “the sea burn(ing)” linking deep time inscription to immediate disaster.

The effect is palimpsestic; petroglyphs and Kantian geography, Muriel Rukeyser’s phrasing, and references to post9 /11 cities overlap. Alexander explicitly folds critical theory (Kant) and contemporary geopolitics (cities on fire) into the poem’s fabric, thus showing how cultural memory is always mediated by intellectual frames and historical ruptures.

The poem’s formal shifts sudden dream-flash, child’s vision, the adult’s reflective return enacts the recursive movement of memory: inscription, forgetting, retrieval. In the end Alexander positions herself by the river, watching a bright house afloat under moonlight; the child in the house, face covered with a wool hat, becomes an emblem of return and vulnerability. The final confession “Home is where when I go, they let me in” reframes petroglyph as a plea for recognition, not only for the ancient sign-maker but for contemporary refugees. Petroglyph therefore dramatizes both permanence and fragility: stone preserves, but only language can plead to be admitted into present belonging. The poem turns prehistoric inscription into a method for thinking about contemporary survivals of violence memory as rock and rhetoric.

The poem “Triptych in a Time of War” uses the art historical form of the triptych to structure a moral and aesthetic response to war and cultural loss. Each panel stanza summons different poetic ancestors (Forugh Farrokhzad, Enheduanna) and art objects (Frank Stella’s *Dove of Tanna*), creating a temporal layering that insists on the continuity between ancient witness and modern atrocity. The assertion “O the bomb is fear’s flower” turns destruction into a paradoxical aesthetic object, an image of how violence blooms and then becomes the subject of art and testimony.

The poem’s ethical backbone is its insistence on language that can hold love and atrocity simultaneously. Alexander invokes female poets across eras to insist that women’s lyric can be a site of resistance and bearing witness. The middle panel’s images like ziggurats, doves, children touching blood to their lips, juxtapose ritual, myth and modern terror to insist that atrocity becomes part of cultural memory unless actively mourned and narrated. This is precisely what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory; secondary generations inherit trauma and give it form through creative acts.

Formally, the triptych’s three part structure lets Alexander compress myth, reportage and liturgical lament into a single gesture. She resists reductive reportage by making the poem a palimpsest of voices; that polyphony is itself a strategy of adaptation and the poet borrows other tongues and texts to hold what singular speech cannot. The closing insistence that “syllables of raw silk, this poem” ties Triptych back to the collection’s central metaphor: poetry as material that gathers, resists, and carries pain.

Blue Lotus mobilizes a rich set of Indian symbols (lotus, mulberry, tribal rites) to imagine cultural renewal in the face of devastation. The blue lotus appearing in the grandmother’s garden functions as emblem of survival and spiritual regeneration: petals that “whirl in moonlight” become the lyric threads pulling the speaker homeward. The lotus simultaneously evokes rebirth and rootedness; Alexander’s images (wrist stumps set with lotus stalks, mountain-clearing) conflate bodily loss and communal remaking.

A key moment is discovery of the “gammadion” a four cornered sign “which stands for migration, for the scattering of the people.” Alexander’s reading of the symbol turns a conventional

emblem into a diasporic emblem: migration is not merely loss but also the condition by which new cultural forms arise. The poem's turn to language "I am learning the language again, / a new speech for a new tribe" makes adaptation explicit: the speaker must remake idiom to belong to new communal rhythms. In Bhabha's terms, this is hybrid identity being performed; in Assmann's terms, it is cultural memory being actively transmitted in transformed form. Formally, the poem's incantatory voice (tribe, tribute, tribulation) reads like ritual. Alexander's lyric becomes a cleansing rehearsal. The closing lines, an invocation of modern and canonical poets ("William, Rabindranath, Czeslaw, Mirabai, Anna, Adrienne") stage a cosmopolitan genealogy that claims the lotus as transnational symbol. Blue Lotus thus refuses to let the symbol be merely nostalgic; instead, it refashions it as a vehicle of collective adaptation.

The Letters to Gandhi cluster are a sustained epistolary interrogation of moral memory. Alexander writes to Gandhi not to celebrate but to interrogate; "Dear Mr. Gandhi/please say something/about the carnage in your home state." (78) The opening plea(in Slow Dancing) places the poet in direct dialogue with an ethical icon, asking whether the principle of ahimsa (nonviolence) has resources adequate for modern communal carnage. This is not reverent address but a rhetorical provocation that turns national memory into an object of scrutiny.

Each short letter blends personal witness, historical reference, and moral urgency. "Slow Dancing" stages grief as choreography; "Bengali Market" localizes catastrophe in marketplaces and everyday life; "Gandhi's Bicycle" mixes anecdote and myth to show how Gandhi's image circulates in diasporic imagination. Alexander's strategy is to force the reader to confront the distance between Gandhi's ideals and the brutal realities of pogrom and mass violence (9/11 and Gujarat). The letters refuse a simplistic invocation; they demand conversation, accountability, and the reckoning of political memory.

Formally, the epistolary mode allows Alexander to mix voices, private lament, civic demand, mockery and tenderness producing a rhetorical hybrid that mirrors the collection's larger poetics. The letters become acts of adaptation: the national myth (Gandhi) is reworked, interrogated, and made to

respond to present atrocity. This is also a political poetics of testimony: by addressing Gandhi the poet both reclaims and re-situates national legacy within the transnational ethics of diaspora.

Across these six poems Alexander repeatedly performs the same artistic operation: she treats cultural materials (cloth, symbols, glyphs, urban rumour, canonical names) as malleable objects to be re-scripted into lyric survival. In Raw Silk and Blue Lotus household objects and religious symbols are not relics but working media: silk and lotus become carriers for transformed memory. Rumours for an Immigrant and Petroglyph dramatize how urban rumour and prehistoric inscription, respectively, function as alternative archives,ways communities remember, forget, and reconstitute themselves. Triptych and Letters to Gandhi demonstrate the poet's ethical vocation: to gather fragmented testimonies into forms that can witness but also teach, ask, and refuse simple closure. In short, Raw Silk the collection and the poem practice what the paper's title "poetry as passage": Alexander continually negotiates between inheritance and reinvention, turning what is broken into new. These poems show adaptation as a creative, often painful process that produces hybrid identities and alternative archives of survival.

Concluding Remarks

The paper attempted to trace Meena Alexander's poetry across two major collections Raw Silk, and Atmospheric Embroidery to argue that her work embodies a poetics of adaptation, where memory, identity, and history are continually restitched in the lyric mode. The metaphor of passage has structured this reading: passage as migration, as trauma, as translation, and ultimately as survival.

Across these collections, Alexander presents exile as both shattering and reconstituting. In Raw Silk, the sari, rumour, petroglyph, lotus, and letters to Gandhi all become cultural objects that carry memory across ruptures. The poems are not nostalgic returns but creative reinscriptions: silk survives the bonfire, rumours swarm into lyric, ancient glyphs speak to modern catastrophe, Gandhi is re-addressed to demand accountability. Here adaptation is not about recovering a lost origin but about reworking fragments into new imaginative wholes.

In *Atmospheric Embroidery,* the very sky is stitched into patterns of memory, scars inscribed into air, and the city of Hyderabad layered into a notebook of survival. Poems like Tarawad dramatize the commodification of heritage, while *Night Theatre* and *The Journey* testify to trauma and migration through fractured imagery. Together they show how poetry functions as a symbolic embroidery, fragile, ephemeral, yet enduring. Memory is preserved not by intact continuity but by adaptation: fragments rearranged into new passageways of belonging.

The theoretical frameworks employed, Linda Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as repetition with difference, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space, Edward Said's reflections on exile, Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory, and Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory all converge to illuminate Alexander's poetic strategies. Her work shows that adaptation is not confined to intertextual rewriting; it is a lived process of cultural negotiation, where memory is re-imagined in lyric form. Ultimately, Meena Alexander's poetry offers a model for thinking about literature as both archive and passage. Archive, because it gathers fragments of cultural memory, inscribing them into forms that resist erasure. Passage, because it refuses stasis, insisting on movement, translation, and renewal. In her hands, poetry becomes a vessel that carries the silkworms of memory, the rumours of exile, the scars of violence, the notebooks of disappearing cities, and the torn maps of the heart across geographies and generations. In a world marked by displacement, migration, and fractured belonging, Alexander's work speaks with renewed urgency. It demonstrates that poetry is not merely an art of beauty but an ethical practice, a form of adaptation that transforms exile into resilience, silence into utterance, and trauma into shared cultural memory. To read her poems is to witness how fragments of the past, however scarred, can be woven into new patterns of belonging. In this sense, Meena Alexander's oeuvre exemplifies poetry as passage: a ceaseless act of restitching identity across borders, times, and languages, offering us fragile yet enduring threads of connection.

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