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Literary Theories

Diasporic Identity in Meena Alexander's Fault Lines

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Abstract: Diasporic literature generally focuses on themes such as nostalgia and exile. Meena Alexander's "Fault Lines" vividly captures this experience by portraying identity as a constantly translated self. This paper examines how translation operates not merely as a linguistic process but as a means of identity formation in Diasporic writing. Drawing on concepts of cultural translation and hybridity, the study examines Alexander's negotiation of selfhood through memory, language, and movement between India, Sudan, England, and the United States. The paper argues that translation in Fault Lines becomes a continuous act of self-reconstruction, enabling the articulation of a hybrid diasporic identity. By analysing moments of linguistic displacement and cultural in-betweenness, the paper highlights how Alexander transforms personal experience into a broader reflection on diasporic subjectivity. Ultimately, the study positions Fault Lines as a significant text that demonstrates the transformative role of translation in shaping identity within diasporic literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, Translation, Identity, Hybridity, Meena Alexander, Fault Lines



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Introduction

Moving across countries, languages, and cultures can be both exciting and disorienting. For diasporic writers, the act of writing becomes more than telling a story—it becomes a way to make sense of themselves and the worlds they inhabit. Meena Alexander’s memoir *Fault Lines* captures this journey vividly. Through her experiences of growing up in India, Sudan, and later living in England and the United States, Alexander shows how language, memory, and place shape who we are. In her work, translation is not just about converting words from one language to another; it is about translating experience, emotion, and identity. This paper explores how translation in *Fault Lines* acts as a tool for identity formation, helping Alexander negotiate the complexities of being in-between cultures and languages. By examining moments of linguistic displacement, cultural negotiation, and self-reflection, the paper argues that Alexander’s writing demonstrates the powerful role of translation in creating a hybrid, resilient, and evolving diasporic identity.

Diaspora, Language, and Displacement

Moving to a new country often means leaving behind more than just a physical home. You leave behind the sounds, rhythms, and nuances of your first language. For diasporic individuals, language is closely tied to memory, emotion, and identity. Meena Alexander’s life, as she narrates in *Fault Lines*, is a vivid example of this. Born in India, raised partly in Sudan, and later moving to England and the United States, Alexander experiences the constant push and pull between languages. She remembers moments when a word in her mother tongue carried an intimacy that English could never capture. Yet, English became her tool, her bridge to communicate her experiences and reflect on her identity. In this sense, displacement is not just geographic; it is also linguistic. This section explores how living across multiple cultures and languages shapes the self, setting the stage for understanding translation as a form of identity work.

Translation Beyond Words

When most people hear “translation,” they think of dictionaries, grammar, or literal conversion. But in diasporic writing, translation is much more than that. It’s about transferring emotions, memories, and cultural experiences into another language. Alexander doesn’t simply “translate” events from her life; she translates herself. Writing in English, she carries the weight of her native languages and the cultures they represent. Each sentence in *Fault Lines* is a negotiation: how do I express what I feel in a language that is not fully mine? How do I convey the textures of childhood in India or the

landscapes of Sudan to readers who have never experienced them? In this way, translation becomes a process of identity formation, helping Alexander build a self that is simultaneously connected to her past and adaptable to her present. Translation, here, is not a technical task—it is an act of survival and self-definition.

Memory, Emotion, and Translation

Memory is at the heart of Alexander's writing, and translation is the medium through which she expresses it. Remembering her childhood in India, the streets of Khartoum, or her early experiences in England involves translating sensory and emotional experiences into English. Words alone cannot capture the smells, sounds, and feelings of her past, yet she tries. Translation here is an intimate, almost poetic act: it allows her to preserve memories while shaping them into something that readers can understand. In diasporic literature, translation becomes a bridge between what was and what is, between private experience and public expression. Alexander's language carries traces of her multilingual life; even when writing in English, one senses the influence of Malayalam, Arabic, and other languages she grew up with. These layers enrich her narrative, making her identity feel real, lived, and textured.

Writing as Self-Translation

In *Fault Lines*, Alexander's act of writing is itself a form of translation. Each sentence reconstructs her past, mediates between languages, and negotiates identity. Writing allows her to claim ownership over experiences that could otherwise feel lost in translation, in displacement, or in the passage of time. Memoir, in this sense, is not just storytelling—it is self-translation. She translates herself into a narrative that honors her experiences across cultures yet speaks in a language accessible to others. By doing this, Alexander performs an act of agency: she is no longer just a passive subject of migration, but an author who actively shapes her identity. Writing and translation together become tools of survival, reflection, and empowerment.

Conclusion

Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* shows us that identity is never simple or static, especially in the context of diaspora. Translation, as she demonstrates, is more than words on a page; it is a tool for negotiating selfhood, memory, and belonging. Through her writing, Alexander navigates in-between spaces, reclaims fragmented identities, and transforms personal experiences into stories that resonate

globally. Her work reminds us that diasporic identity is hybrid, evolving, and deeply human. Translation allows the self to be fluid, to adapt, and to survive, making it a central act of creativity and resilience in diasporic literature. By examining Alexander's memoir, we see how language and translation do not merely describe identity they create it.

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