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# "A poet needs a tree": an ecocritical journey through Meena Alexander's *Atmospheric Embroidery*

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*A tutte le donne*
*dimenticate come fiori pressati*
*tra le pagine della storia.*

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# *Introduction*

During a lecture at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Amitav Ghosh stated that the field of environmental humanities is perhaps the only one among humanities that is increasing in activity and academic interest, rather than decreasing. Ecocriticism has given a new fervour to literary criticism and to humanistic studies in general, and it has provided a new way to analyse and interpret creative works of any kind and from any time period. This dissertation uses the lenses of ecocriticism to propose an analysis of selected poems from the collection of poetry *Atmospheric Embroidery*, by Indian author Meena Alexander. The first chapter will provide a brief biography of the author, recounting the numerous displacements that she has faced throughout her life and providing insight on Alexander's major literary works. The second part of the chapter will focus on ecocriticism, its development, and its main currents, as well as briefly outlining the development of ecopoetry.

The second chapter of this work will focus on the collection *Atmospheric Embroidery*. After a brief overview of the collection and its main themes and structural characteristics, this dissertation will propose an analysis of selected poems, with particular attention to nature-related imagery. Natural elements are present in almost every poem by Meena Alexander and represent a sort of 'fil rouge' in her literary production in general. This study will guide the reader on an ecocritical journey through a selection of poems from *Atmospheric Embroidery*, exploring the way in which the poet uses nature-related images in relation to three main thematic categories: the elaboration of trauma, the experience of dislocation, and the portrayal of violence. The analysis proposed in this dissertation is coherent with Meena Alexander's ideals and poetics and it is the result of an attentive study of the poet; however, it relies almost entirely on personal interpretations and observations. Conducting an ecocritical analysis based on previous academic studies has proved to be impossible. Despite the prominent presence of natural elements in Alexander's poetry and the importance that they seem to have in her life and work, there has not been much academic interest in analysing her poems from an ecocritical perspective. Perhaps the reason why there is a lack of ecocritical interpretation of Meena Alexander's poetry is that there seems to be a tendency of restricting her literary production under the postcolonial definition. Most of the academic research on Alexander is conducted with postcolonial theory as the main theoretical approach, therefore it focuses only on certain

aspects of her work. However, her literary production is so thematically variegated that restricting it under a singular 'label' could prove to be a mistake. Meena Alexander herself has always resisted the idea of being limited to a specific kind of poetry. When asked if she was a feminist writer during a conference, for example, she has answered: "I have learnt to think through feminism, I say. I am a feminist, yes. But am I a feminist writer? No. And the distinction is very important to me"[1]. Being a feminist and being part of the postcolonial experience are important aspects of her identity as a writer and as a person, but they are not her whole identity. Considering her 'only' a postcolonial writer, or a feminist writer, or a migrant writer would mean completely ignoring the complexity of her work. The goal of this dissertation is to explore an under researched aspect of Meena Alexander poetry – that is, the way in which she portrays and relates to natural elements in her poems –, conscious of the fact that it is only one of the several perspectives with which her work can be interpreted and appreciated.

[1] Meena Alexander, "Rights of Passage." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (October, 1998): 14.

# Chapter I

## *Meena Alexander and ecocriticism*

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### 1.1. Meena Alexander: life and work

Recounting Meena Alexander's life means narrating a life made of displacements and the consequent sense of loss of identity. When she is first presented with the idea of writing a memoir, Alexander starts to question her whole life experience and comes to consider herself a "woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing"[2]. Born in 1951 in Allahabad, she spends most of her early childhood between there and her ancestral home in Tiruvella, where her maternal grandfather Ilya[3] lives. At the age of five she has to face her first uprooting, when her whole family moves to Khartoum due to her father's job. By her own admission, this ocean crossing – the first of many throughout her life – becomes a sort of obsession and takes on a symbolic quality. Alexander goes so far as to describe it as a depiction of death and consider it her "trope of loss"[4]; the memory of this experience becomes a recurring element in her poetic production.

After this first crossing of the Indian Ocean, her life is divided between Sudan and India, where she keeps spending long periods of time together with her mother and sisters. In fact, she spends the summer in Tiruvella even after moving to Khartoum; as scholar Kazim Ali observes, "in the view of her later migrations across the world, Ilya and the house at Tiruvella are Alexander's first real conceptions of 'home'"[5]. Her attachment to her grandfather is one of the reasons why his death is deeply traumatic. At just eleven years old, Alexander has to deal with a grief so profound that she is almost paralyzed by it:

> I think it was in those days too […] that I felt I must refuse life, become a stone, a hard unmoving thing, no motion to it, no force, neither hearing nor seeing. It seemed unbearable

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[2] Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 2.
[3] His real name was Kuruchiethu Kuruvilla; Ilya is the nickname with which Meena Alexander addresses him and which she uses throughout her memoir.
[4] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 63.
[5] Kazim Ali, "The Stone–Eating Girl: How a Text Keeps Its Secret" in *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander,* ed. Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 53.

> as the hot skies unfurled themselves, the morning after Ilya's death, that I should go on living, unbearable too, that we should all be creatures that are born into bodies and subject to death. It was a knowledge I could do nothing to alter. In dreams my whole body seemed to me, then, buried under a pile of rubble.[6]

This visceral reaction to Ilya's death is intertwined with something deeper. Her grief for this loss is also accompanied by some complicated feelings that Alexander will start to understand only much later in her life, when a repressed traumatic event starts to resurface in her memory: that of being sexually abused by her grandfather. This painful experience is so traumatic that Alexander represses it as a coping mechanism. In fact, she does not mention it in the first edition of her memoir *Fault Lines* because it is still a repressed memory for her – although there are signs of the traumatic experience throughout the whole memoir. Alexander only delves into this trauma in *Book of Childhood*, a coda that gets added to *Fault Lines* and published in 2003 in an expanded edition of the memoir. This addition offeres a reinterpretation of the events narrated in *Fault Lines*, with some chapters having the same title as the ones in the first edition. As Alexander explaines, *Book of Childhood* is not a denial of what has been written in *Fault Lines*, but rather an attempt to "deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created"[7], meaning her grandfather Ilya.

Alexander is educated in a heteroglossic context; she grows up surrounded by several languages – Malayalam as her mother tongue, Hindi, Arabic learned in her years in Sudan, French for her university studies, and English imposed by India's colonial history[8]. However, her knowledge of most of these languages – mainly Malayalam, Hindi and Arabic – is limited to the spoken language. Even the written form of her own mother tongue is unknown to her: "I can't really read or write Malayalam, though I speak it fluently. My mother tongue exists as orality for me"[9]. This impulse to avoid learning the textual aspects of those languages is a form of resistance against postcolonial dynamics of power. When she enrolls in the University of Khartoum at thirteen, some of her friends start to translate and publish her poems in Arabic, which she can neither write nor read. The impossibility of reading her own poems is seen by Alexander as a way to escape "the canonical burden of British English"[10], an imposed language.

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[6] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 89.
[7] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 229.
[8] Shaul Bassi, "In Memoriam: Meena Alexander (1951 – 2018)". *Il Tolomeo*, no 20 (December 2018): 371.
[9] Ruth Maxey, "An Interview with Meena Alexander." *The Kenyon Review* 28, no. 1 (January, 2006): 191.
[10] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 119.

She believes that the orality of Arabic – and Malayalam – provides a freedom that the written text could never achieve:

> And so a curious species of linguistic decolonization took place for me, in which my own, often unspoken sense of femaleness played a great part. I set the hierarchies, the scripts aside, and let the treasured orality flow over me. After all, that was how Malayalam had first come to me: in chants, in spoken voices that held a community together. Perhaps deep within me was a fear that learning the script would force me to face to face up the hierarchies of a traditional society, the exclusionary nature of its canonical language.[11]

After graduating in English and French, Alexander moves to England in order to further her education by pursuing a PhD in British Romantic literature at the University of Nottingham. It proves to be a difficult period for Alexander, who goes through a mental breakdown that prevents her from reading and writing. It is a real identity crisis triggered by the realization that she actually has sensual desires, despite her attempts to deny them for a whole year after her initial arrival in England. The separation between mind and body that Alexander tries to achieve is impossible, and the realization of this impossibility sends her into a spiral of crisis: "the intensity of sexual passion forced me back into my bodily self, made me turn against the 'reason' of the world. […] I felt I had nothing to hold onto and was falling and falling through empty air. […] The whole world had caved into the apocalypse of the mind"[12].

Another element that contributes to this identity crisis is the awareness of the fact that, as a woman of colour from a former British colony, she is a minority in more than one aspect and is therefore completely excluded from the object of her research: "no way could be found within it to acknowledge anything of what I was. My study of Romantic identity was predicated on the erasure of my own"[13]. Alexander spends three months in the countryside as an attempt to recover from her mental breakdown. During those months, she works in the garden of her guests and take walks in the woods; this allows her to finally regain her peace until she is able to read and write again.

Despite these struggles with her mental health, Meena Alexander manages to complete her PhD with a thesis on the construction of self–identity in Romantic poetry. She then decides to go back to India and start working as a lecturer in the English department of Miranda House

[11] *Ibid*.
[12] *Ibid.,*139.
[13] *Ibid.,* 141–142.

University in Delhi. During this period, she meets some of the people that proved to be fundamental in the development of her political and literary awareness. Among them, there are personalities like the philosopher and professor Ramchandra Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, who acts as a sort of 'guide' for Alexander and opens her eyes about some problematic aspects of India:

> It is hard for me to conceive of what I would have been in my thinking, feeling, being, had we never met. Through him I learnt to see India for myself, started to glimpse the deep troubling truths about the land of my origins. Through our conversations, I sensed afresh something of the pain and pity of what it meant to feel one's self spiritually cast out. […] And knowing how new I was in Delhi, indeed in India, at least where adult life was concerned, he pointed out all sorts of people to me: the poor children picking rags by the truck stops, the beggar squatting by the pile of garbage outside Saint Stephen's College, the mother with three naked infants clinging to her back.[14]

After spending two years in Delhi, in 1975 she moves to Hyderabad and take up a teaching position at the Central Institute of English[15]. In Hyderabad she meets the historian of modern India David Lelyveld, who becomes her husband after just three weeks. Alexander, newlywed and pregnant, decides to follow her husband back to America and face another migration that she inevitably compares to her previous one: "in September 1979, ten years after I left Khartoum never to return again, I made another continental crossing: from Hyderabad to New York"[16].

Her life in America is not easy in the beginning. The novelty of her new situation makes her question her own identity again: "I felt my whole life was blanked out by this newness I had been thrown into, I felt I would never get to write the real stuff of my life"[17]. While in the United States, Alexander encounters a different conception of ethnicity. It is not the first time that she is made aware of the fact that she is a minority, but her ethnicity becomes a prominent factor of her life in America. In her first months there, she is so conscious of her diversity that she refuses to move to Minneapolis – where her husband works – because she is convinced that she would "stuck out like a sore black thumb, a grotesque thing"[18] due to the colour of her skin. The experience of being a woman of colour in a country with a complex relationship with

[14] *Ibid*., 144.
[15] Souradeep Roy, "A Poet at the Crossroad: Tribute to Meena Alexander", *The Wire* (December 9): 2018. [https://thewire.in/books/a-poet-at-the-crossroad-tribute-to-meena-alexander
[16] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 157.
[17] *Ibid*., 163.
[18] *Ibid.*, 168.

ethnicity leads Alexander to ponder over the several facets of her identity: "everything that comes to me is hyphenated. A woman poet, a poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a postcolonial language, as she waits for the red light to change on Broadway"[19]. She reflects on her experience as a migrant woman of colour in America, and on the experience of all the people with a similar background:

> O confusion of the heart! O thickness of the soul, the borders we cross tattooing us all over! Is there any here beyond this skinflicking thing where we can breathe and sing? Yet our song must also be a politics, a perilous thing, crying out for a world where the head is held high in sunlight. So that one is not a walking wound merely, a demilitarized zone, a raw sodden trench marked out with barbed wire. […] In America the barbed wire is taken into the heart, and the art of an Asian American grapples with a disorder in society, a violence. In our writing we need to evoke a chaos, a power co-equal to the injustices that surround us. A new baptism. Else even without knowing that we are buying in, we are bought in, brought in, our images magnified, bartered in the high places of capitalist chic. […] It is our bodies that press against the actual of America, against the barbed wires and internment camps and quotas and stereotypes of silent women with long black hair sticking flowers in neat vases. […] we need a speech that acknowledges rage, a postcolonial utterance that will voice this great land.[20]

The question of identity and ethnicity will become one of the recurring themes in Alexander's works. She lives in the United States for the rest of her life, where she raises her two children together with her husband David Lelyveld. Alexander keeps being extremely active in both her academic career and her writing one: among many other roles in several universities, she becomes distinguished professor of English at the City University of New York and keeps writing poetry, but also novels and critical works. She sadly passes away in 2018 after a long battle with cancer.

In *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander often references the poet Walt Whitman; author Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes that this frequent allusions are fitting considering the fact that both Alexander and Whitman 'contain multitudes'[21]. Alexander's complex life experience is reflected in her variegated literary production. She first starts to feel the impulse to write when she moves to Khartoum. The contrast between the opulence of the hotel where she and her family are staying and the poverty that she witnesses around the city makes her feel the urge to write, an activity that she starts to practice as a child while hiding in the toilet[22]. She publishes her first collections

[19] *Ibid.*, 193.
[20] *Ibid.*, 195-196.
[21] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Looking for Nadu" in *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), xi.
[22] Erika Duncan, "A Portrait of Meena Alexander." *World Literature Today* 73, no. 1 (January, 1999): 26.

of poetry while she is still a lecturer in India, and keeps writing and publishing for the rest of her life – not only poetry, but also the aforementioned memoir *Fault Lines*; two novels (*Nampally Road*, published in 1991 but started much earlier, during her honeymoon with David Lelyveld[23], and *Manhattan Music*, published in 1997); two hybrid collections of essays and poetry, both focused on the postcolonial experience of migration, exile and dislocation (*The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, published in 1996, and *Poetics of Dislocation*, published in 2009); a book of literary criticism on women authors during Romanticism (*Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*, published in 1989); these are only the most important works among a prolific production that also includes edited books, chapbooks, prefaces and articles.

This variegated collection of works shares some common themes. The political questions that initially prompts Alexander to start writing as a child have never left her literary production. Her poetry in particular is politically charged and most of her collections deal with political issues. In her collection *Raw Silk* (published in 2004), for example, Alexander deals with the aftermath of 9/11 from a global perspective, but she also uses poetry to denounce violence against the Muslim minority in India – particularly in the state of Gujarat – at the hands of Hindu extremists. She writes a series of poems to address the situation; these poems become a record of the historical organized violence against Muslims, but also an attempt to recreate an historical record when history itself has been manipulated by Hindu extremists[24].

Although less politically charged compared to *Raw Silk*, another collection that deals with similar themes is her latest one, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, published in 2018. In this collection, Alexander dedicates an inner 'cycle' of poems – titled *Darfur Poems* - to the war in Darfur. She bases the poems of this cycle on some drawings made by children in the war zone and, through poetry, she manages to evoke the "earth shuttering violence" [25] that people in those territories have to endure. In the same collection, Alexander also addresses the problematic question of the caste system in India with the poem *Death of a Young Dalit* in honour of Rohith Vemula, a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad. Vemula commits suicide in 2016 after facing several acts of discrimination from the university administration due to his caste – he belongs to the Dalit caste, therefore he has the status of 'untouchable'. His death sparks a series of

[23] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 159-161.
[24] Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts, "Introduction" in *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander,* ed. Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 8.
[25] Meena Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery: Reflections on the Composition of the Book of Poetry 'Atmospheric Embroidery'." *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 19, no. 1 (2019): 39.

protests across several Indian universities in support of Dalits rights. Meena Alexander's *Death of a Young Dalit* is not an explicitly political poem; however, given the context and the consequences of Vemula's death, the mere act of talking about him can be considered a political stance.

Another recurring theme of Alexander's work is her exploration of the consequences of colonialism and decolonization from a cultural perspective. She manages to use her own personal experience as a means to investigate several aspects of colonial legacy: from language, to identity, to dislocation. The question of language resurfaces often in Meena Alexander's poetry. As it has already been mentioned, she grows up surrounded by several languages, many of which she can only speak but not write nor read. This experience, beyond prompting the linguistic decolonisation discussed previously, is also fundamental to her formation as a poet and her understanding of poetry as a concept: "in this mingling of languages I understood dimly that there was so much that could not be spoken and that rich, even sorrowful awareness of the unsayable has been with me ever since. Out of this, poetry comes. This fine art of distilling language is also one that is predicated on silence"[26]. This understanding of the fallacy of language prompts her to search for a proper way to express her thoughts and emotions. Alexander believes that our thoughts and our perception of reality are not linked to language but rather to images and to a certain rhythm that we 'absorb' from our mother tongue and from the places in which we grow up[27]. In her poetry, this concept translates in a sort of 'hybridity' of language; the English language that she is forced to learn and that she chooses to use in her works is influenced by the rhythm of all the languages that surround her during her childhood. This is an aspect of her poetry that Alexander acknowledges as a possibility[28] but that other poets and scholars consider a distinctive characteristic of her work; among them there is the poet Ranjit Hoskote, who notices that "her language drew as much on English as it did on Hindi and Malayalam – I always heard, in her poems, patterns of breath that seemed to come from sources in Gangetic India, where she spent part of her childhood, and her ancestral Malabar"[29].

This hybridity goes beyond language and extends to the themes and images that Alexander's poems evoke. In her poetry there is a definite presence of elements from several eastern cultures – mainly Indian, but also from other traditions – that are often intertwined with

[26] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 37.
[27] Maxey and Alexander, "An Interview with Meena Alexander", 191.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] The Wire staff, "'The Angels Will Call on Me' – Meena Alexander, Indian-American Poet, Dies at 67", *The Wire* (November 22): 2018. [https://thewire.in/culture/i-think-the-angels-will-call-on-me-meena-alexander-indian-american-poet-dies-at-67]

images, moments and places that are distinctly western. This means that the reader finds New York inhabited by the Hindu goddess Sita waving from a manhole (*Inwood Sita*, from the collection *Atmospheric Embroidery*), or by Cleopatra and Osiris – who, instead of being thrown in the Nile after being killed and dismembered, has been thrown in the Mississippi river, although he is still "gleaming with Nile water"[30] (*Harlem Cleopatra*, also from the collection *Atmospheric Embroidery*). Or again, the phenomenon of 'acqua granda' in Venice is caused by monsoons and the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa dreams "of a high room by the Accademia bridge / that holds Sakuntala[31], still sleeping"[32] (*Acqua Alta*, from the collection *Quickly Changing River*). Venice in particular seems to hold a specific significance in Meena Alexander's poetry and life. She visits the city several times and also resides there for long periods; Alexander has always appreciated its complexity, and Venice's waters often merge with the waters of Kerala, her ancestral place of origin[33].

This mixing of images and cultures is an attempt for Alexander to find a metaphorical place where she "could reach her own self and where the multiple homes that she had inhabited converged"[34]. Through poetry, Alexander attempts to reconstruct the "broken geography"[35] of the several relocations that have marked her life. Her work is heavily autobiographical; she uses writing as a means to investigate her own identity. Memory and identity are, in fact, two main themes of Alexander's production. Both her poetry and her novels – but also her academic essays – are profoundly inspired by her own life experience. For Alexander, writing is a way to elaborate the several traumatic events that she had to endure – her numerous relocations, the abuse at the hand of her grandfather Ilya, the cultural repercussions of colonialism and postcolonialism, the question of gender, ethnicity and racism, living as a woman of colour in New York after 9/11 and so on. Exploring her memory through the act of writing is also fundamental in her process of construction of the self, since she believes that her self-identity is "a stratification of all her previous selves"[36]. After being protected by her own memory by

[30] Meena Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 29.
[31] Śakuntalā is a character from the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*; her story has been adapted in a dramatic play by the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa that can be dated in the 4th century CE.
[32] Meena Alexander, *Quickly Changing River* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 80.
[33] Bassi, "In Memoriam", 373.
[34] Grazia Micheli, "Stitching Together Broken Geographies: Meena Alexander's Transnational Writing." in *Identity Navigation: Rethinking Languages, Literatures and Cultures between Challenges and Misinterpratations*, edited by Nino Arrigo, Annalisa Bonomo and Karl Chircop (Avellino: Edizioni Sinestesie, 2019), 229.
[35] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 1.
[36] Micheli, "*Stitching Together Broken Geographies*", 228.

forgetting parts of her life as a coping mechanism, she uses that same memory again and again in order to discover her own self through the 'fractures' of her dislocations.

In this process of self-discovery and among all the several facets of Meena Alexander's work, there is one particular element that seems to be almost omnipresent: nature. Natural elements are present in almost every poem and represent a sort of 'fil rouge' in her work. It is clear that nature holds a symbolic value for Meena Alexander, for whom it is extremely important to live in the vicinity of a river[37] and who believes that "a poet needs a tree"[38]. Despite the prominent presence of natural elements in Alexander's poetry and the importance that they seem to have in her life and work, there has not been much academic interest in analysing her poems from an ecocritical perspective. However, given the significance of natural elements in Meena Alexander's life experience and in her construction of the self, her relationship with nature is an aspect that should be explored. But before doing so, it is important to understand what ecocriticism is and what it means to conduct an ecocritical analysis of a literary work.

### 1.2. Ecocriticism: past trends and contemporary approaches

In the last fifty years, there has been an increasing interest in environmental issues. There has always been a certain fascination with nature, however it has mainly been studied and observed as a passive object in relation to humans. The literary movement of Romanticism is a perfect example of this dynamic: nature is only interpreted through the lens of what kind of emotions it can raise in human beings, and not as an entity in itself. In this period, nature is seen either as something to be feared and revered – a source of *sublime* – or something idyllic in which to seek refuge. This 'conversation' around nature takes a different tone in the 20th century, when environmental issues such as climate change and pollution become more pressing, and the scientific community starts to discuss and study them.

Despite some authors, scholars and scientists have already started to discuss these issues, the real turning point is in 1962, with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. In the introduction to her book, Carson describes an idyllic city where humans and nature live in perfect harmony. This harmony is interrupted when every living being starts to get sick and die

[37] Duncan, *A Portrait of Meena Alexander*, 27.
[38] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 74.

due to pollution. Silent Spring is a warning about the negative effects of human activity – mainly pollution and the use insecticides such as DDT – on the environment. In order to elicit a sense of urgency and raise awareness on the danger of pesticides, Carson uses two ways of interpreting nature that humans have used for millenniums: that of pastoral narration[39] and of apocalyptic narration[40]. She consciously creates a romanticized version of nature "as a rhetorical strategy designed to enlist readers to combat threats to the environment"[41]. Carson then transforms this pastoral scene into an apocalyptic one, exploiting the atavistic fear of the end of the world, which is present in most cultures and religions throughout human history[42]. In this way, she manages to capture the public attention on the threat of pollution and of the use chemical products on the environment. By drawing on literary tropes to raise awareness on environmental issues, Carson implicitly demonstrates that literature and humanities in general can be an important means to analyse our relationship with nature through the centuries.

*Silent Spring* is now considered the starting point of modern ecocriticism, but its importance has been recognized only later in the academic field of literary studies. When it is initially published, in literary studies environmental issues are almost completely ignored despite the importance that they are starting to have in the public discourse and in several academic fields. Apart from some isolated scholars that conducts individual research, the environmental movement that is so prominent from a cultural point of view does not influence the academic literary discourse until the mid-eighties. It is only between the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties that the field of environmental literary studies starts to take hold, with literary journals dedicating whole issues to environmental studies and universities starting to include environmental literature in their English courses – in 1990 the University of Reno is the first to create an academic position in Literature and the Environment, just to give an example.[43]

From this moment onwards, a new way to interpret natural elements in literature starts spreading; scholars of several academic fields start to investigate the way in which nature is represented and perceived in different time periods. This is what is now called 'ecocriticism', which can be defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical

[39] Ken Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: the Essential Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 131.
[40] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 93-96.
[41] Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: the Essential Reader*, 131.
[42] For a further analysis of the concepts of pastoral narratives and apocalyptic narratives, see the chapters "Pastoral" (33-58) and "Apocalypse" (85-107) in Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
[43] Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xv-xviii.

environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies"[44]. This kind of analysis of literary works is an important factor in our understanding of cultural beliefs, as these literary representations have an important role in the creation of culture itself. A perfect example of this dynamic is the importance of Romanticism and of American nature writing in shaping our view of certain natural elements. As Ken Hiltner notes, our perception of nature has deeply changed thanks to these literary movements. Whereas before the nineteenth century nature – mainly forests and mountains, since they are considered the epitome of 'wilderness' – is considered dangerous and potentially deadly, during the nineteenth century this interpretation shifts thanks to the popularity of the aforementioned literary movements and nature starts to be perceived as something that must be preserved, "a sort of antidote for industrial modernity"[45].

The clear influence that British Romanticism and American nature writing have on our cultural perception of nature has lead scholars from the earlier stages of ecocriticism to focus their research on these two literary movements. Lawrence Buell is the first to popularize the distinction between two different ecocritical approaches, the earlier 'first wave' of ecocriticism and the more recent 'second wave'[46]. The so called 'first wave' of ecocritics tends to choose British Romantic authors – with a particular interest for poetry – and American nonfictional nature writers as the focus of their research. According to Buell, "the primary agenda of first-wave ecocriticism, which prevailed through the 1990s, became especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking toward more serious engagement with nonhuman nature"[47]. In order to do so, first-wave ecocritics engage with two main theoretical approaches. The first one follows the phenomenological theories of *deep ecology*, according to which human consciousness and the nonhuman living world are bound together in a relationship of close interdependence. However, this theoretical model has soon been discarded due to its holistic aspect and to a growing skepticism towards theories that prioritized an analysis based on individual perception rather than social context and collective experience[48]. The other theoretical approach that is characteristic of first-wave ecocritics is the attempt to integrate

[44] *Ibid*., xviii.
[45] Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: the Essential Reader*, xv.
[46] *Ibid.*, 131.
[47] Lawrence Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 89.
[48] *Ibid*., 89–90.

certain scientific fields – mainly ecology, environmental biology and geology – in literary criticism. An influential example of this theoretical approach is the ecocritical work concerning the concept of *bioregionalism*, that is, a line of thought that combines findings from different humanistic and scientific academic fields in order to support the idea that "a person's primary loyalty as citizen should be to the bioregion – or ecological region – rather than to nation or some other jurisdictional unit"[49].

In outlining the characteristics of the theoretical approaches of the two waves, Buell notes that the tendency to integrate science into literary theory carries on in the second wave, although in this case the focus shifts from science derived conceptual models to the so called 'science studies', which is "the study of scientific theory and practice as inflected by its historical-cultural contexts" [50]. A further shift occurs from a thematic point of view. Whereas, as it has already been mentioned, the thematic focus of the first wave of ecocriticism is British Romanticism and American nature writing, second-wave ecocritics prefer to concentrate on texts and places of environmental destruction, with particular caution in avoiding an excessive romanticisation of nature and of a phantomatic idyllic past, as some first-wave ecocritics instead have done[51]. With the second wave of ecocriticism, a sort of metaphorical broadening of thematic horizons takes place, embracing issues that were previously considered as separate. It is in the context of the second wave that the concept of environmental justice starts to enter the ecocritical discourse, and some ecocritics begin to grasp the interconnection between issues related to race, gender, class and sexuality and the environmental crisis from which minorities suffer the most devastating effects[52].

This sort of metaphorical expansion does not only happen from a thematical point of view, but also from a temporal and geographical perspective. According to Hiltner, "modern environmental attitudes were often thought of as having emerged in the past two centuries or so"[53]; therefore, many first-wave ecocritics tend to concentrate on fairly recent texts. This attitude changes with the second wave of ecocriticism, when ecocritics start to understand that the current environmental crisis and our relationship with the environment in general have much deeper roots than it was initially thought. This awareness leads second-wave ecocritics to take interest in primary texts from nearly any time period – spanning from antiquity to contemporary

[49] *Ibid*., 91.
[50] *Ibid*.
[51] Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: the Essential Reader*, 131.
[52] *Ibid*., 132.
[53] *Ibid*.

works – in order to better understand the cultural origin and development of the current environmental issues and of our perception of the nonhuman world[54].

Second-wave ecocriticism has striven to eliminate not only the thematic and temporal limitations of first-wave ecocriticism, but also its geographical boundaries. First-wave ecocritics tend to focus their attention on highlighting the importance of the places that inspired the authors they were researching; this tendency gives a geographically restricted dimension to their research[55]. Second-wave ecocritics are instead more aware of the fact that "our environmental problems are truly global in scale and understood as interconnected by our atmosphere and oceans"[56] and they propose a broadening of the geographical scale of ecocritical research and discourse. While trying to describe the main characteristics of the two waves of ecocriticism, Buell identifies a further shift concerning the physical places of interest for ecocritics of the first and second wave. More specifically, he observes a change in the concept of 'ideal landscape' with which the ecocritical discourse engages:

> First-wave ecocriticism typically privileged rural and wild spaces over urban ones. Against this, second-wave ecocriticism contended that that wall of separation is a historically produced artifact, that throughout human history nature itself has been subject to human reshaping, and that especially since the industrial revolution, metropolitan landscape and the built environment generally must be considered as at least equally fruitful ground for ecocritical work. That is partly why bioregionalism remains influential; for despite tending to attach special value to ecosystemic contexts and to small-sized, place-based organic communities, bioregionalism generally acknowledges at least in principle the significance of metropolitan networks as part of regional history and culture.[57]

The figurative geographical expansion promoted by second-wave ecocritics brings to light a problem that is generally spread in almost every academic field: the problem of Anglocentrism. Despite the broadening of thematic, temporal and geographical boundaries, even with the second wave the ecocritical academic discourse is metaphorically lead by a majority of anglophone scholars that conduct their research on anglophone texts and authors[58]. It must be said, however, that during the second wave of ecocriticism there is an attempt to contrast this tendency; for example, the presence of Asian – mainly Japanese, Korean and Sinophone –

[54] *Ibid.*, 132-133.
[55] *Ibid*., 132.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends.", 93.
[58] *Ibid.*, 92.

environmental criticism and Sinophone creative writing becomes increasingly more present in western ecocritical discourse[59].

Some ecocritics understand the problematic aspect of Anglocentrism and urge their colleagues to give a trans-cultural dimension to their research even as soon as the beginning of the 21st century, when the second wave of ecocriticism is just starting to develop. Among them there is Patrick D. Murphy, who considers "necessary to reconsider the privileging of certain genres and also the privileging of certain national literatures and certain ethnicities within those national literatures"[60]; according to him, this reconsideration would give scholars the ability to place the literature of their interest in a comparative framework and it would further broaden the academic field of ecocriticism[61]. During the last decade, there has actually been a decisive increase of diverse voices in ecocriticism and a growing interest in exploring human experience with the non-human world across different cultures[62]. Scholars like Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson have considered this new interest in the concept of ethnicity and culture as signalling the development of a third wave of ecocriticism "which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries"[63] and "explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint"[64]. In addition to this impulse to explore the concept of ethnic identity in a comparative perspective, third-wave ecocriticism also takes a new gendered approach – with the development of study fields such as material ecofeminism, eco-masculinism and queer ecology – and gives more space to the development of animal studies, which explore themes like animal agency and subjectivity, animal rights in the frame of environmental justice and evolutionary ecocriticism[65].

Slovic goes as far as identifying a fourth and a fifth wave of ecocriticism. According to him, the fourth wave starts to develop around 2008 and focuses on the physical relationship between the human body and the non-human world and on interpretating the practical dimension of human experience as a form of cultural expression; fourth-wave ecocritics are

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[59] *Ibid.*, 92-93.
[60] Patrick D. Murphy, *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 58, cited in Scott Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." *Ecozon@ European Journal of Literature Culture and Environment* 1, no. 1 (April, 2010), 6.
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] Scott Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." *Ecozon@ European Journal of Literature Culture and Environment* 1, no. 1 (April, 2010), 4.

[63] Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, "Guest Editors' Introduction: The Shoulders We Stand on: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism," *MELUS Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 34, no. 2 (January, 2009): 7.
[64] *Ibid.*, 8.
[65] Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism", 7.

also interested in studying the way in which the human mind processes information[66]. During the fifth wave identified by Slovic – which, according to him, starts to develop around 2015 – there is an increase in the public presence of ecocritics, who start to publish their research on open platforms accessible to the general public and become more involved in decision-making processes[67].

Buell's two waves of ecocritical theory and, later, Slovic's five waves are not meant to be interpreted as definite phases with a distinct starting and ending point. Buell himself admits the fallacy of the term 'wave' right after proposing it:

> No definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can [...] be drawn. Still, one can identify several trend-lines marking an evolution from a "first wave" of ecocriticism to a "second" or newer revisionist wave or waves increasingly evident today. This first-second wave distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors. In this sense, "palimpsest" would be a better metaphor than "wave".[68]

Therefore, the 'waves' of ecocriticism should be rather understood as general trends of theoretical approaches, each still relevant for the academic discourse; these trends are to be considered "overlapping phases"[69] and signal a fervour of discussion that makes ecocriticism an exponentially growing and rapidly changing academic field, despite being a fairly recent one.

### 1.2.1. The development of ecopoetry

The worsening of the environmental crisis has brought the theme of the environment to the centre of the academic discourse in several fields, including literary theory. The development of ecocriticism coincides with a noticeable increase of the presence of environmental themes in

[66] Scott Slovic, "Introduction: Special Issue on Ecocriticism." *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies* 8, no 15 (December 2020): 167.
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literature Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 17, cited in Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism", 5.
[69] Slovic, "Introduction: Special Issue on Ecocriticism", 166.

creative writing[70]. Environmental issues have gained a predominant position in contemporary literary and artistic production, leading to the creation of new artistic and literary genres. Among them, there is the poetic genre of ecopoetry. This kind of poetry is not to be confused with what is considered nature poetry in the traditional sense, meaning "a long-established tradition from classical pastoral to Renaissance versions of pastoral, 18th-century landscape poetry and Romantic celebrations of nature"[71], at least in the western canon.

Not every nature poem is also an ecopoem; ecopoetry has its own defining characteristics. According to scholar John Shoptaw, an ecopoem can be considered as such if it is both environmental and environmentalist[72]. By 'environmental', Shoptaw means that an ecopoem should be about the nonhuman world, "wholly or partly, in some way or other, but really and not just figuratively"[73]. There are undeniable cultural differences in the perception and representation of nature; however, Shoptaw argues that there are also some objective environmental facts that can be explored beyond the personal perception of the poet. Therefore, an ecopoem can be self-reflexive but it must always be connected to the nonhuman natural world[74]. Another factor of the environmental aspect of ecopoetry is its ecocentrism: human interests cannot be at the centre of an ecopoem[75]. In this sense, it can be said that ecopoetry is both biocentric – meaning that an ecopoet understands that all organisms have a purpose – and anti-anthropocentric – because it deals with the concept that humans are not the only living beings that have moral rights[76]. These characteristics differentiate ecopoetry from traditional nature poetry, along with its environmental ethics and the understanding of the dynamicity of the environment[77].

Going back to Shoptaw's description of ecopoetry, the other characteristic that he identifies as a defining aspect of an ecopoem is being environmentalist. He argues that "the environment of an ecopoem is, implicitly or explicitly, impacted by humans"[78]. Ecopoetry brings light to the devastating effects of human activities on the natural world[79], which is

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[70] Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Climate Change* 7, no. 2 (January, 2016): 266.
[71] *Ibid.*, 271.
[72] John Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetry?" *Poetry* 207, no. 4 (January, 2016): 395.
[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid*., 396.
[75] *Ibid*.
[76] Hein Berdinesen, "On Ecopoetry and Ecocriticism." *Philosophia* 20 (2018): 88.
[77] *Ibid*.
[78] Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetry?", 400.
[79] Peter Abbs, ed., *Earth Songs : A Resurgence Anthology of Contemporary Eco-poetry* (Dartington: Green Books, 2002), 14, cited in Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies", 271.

something that traditional nature poetry generally did not do. The environmentalist aspect of an ecopoem is not expressed only in its representation of the themes of damage and threat, but also in its rhetoric: ecopoetry "is urgent, it aims to unsettle"[80], with the hope of having an actual impact on society, just like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* led to a new legislation[81] against the excessive use of pesticides.

With the development of ecocriticism and the increasing production of ecopoetry, there has also been an attempt of constructing a literary canon of ecocritical creative writing, which included the publication of anthologies of ecopoetry. In the initial stages of this attempt, some ecocritics – like Jonathan Bate – have proposed a depoliticized interpretation of ecopoetry, one which "is concerned less with the kinds of representational politics essential to feminist and critical race theory, and more with the evocation or stimulation of a mood, tone, or force of attachment capable of re-making the lost connection with nature"[82]. This approach has brought a renovated interest in Romantic poetry, which some ecocritics have retroactively categorized as ecopoetry and included in their anthologies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it also meant that the only authors that were included in these anthologies were white western men. Authors and literary critics are now distancing themselves from this approach and, in general, from the idea of considering Romanticism as ecopoetry, since it portrays a kind of experience and relationship with nature that is neither realistic nor universal[83]. Ecopoetry brings attention to the interconnection between human and natural history[84]; this also means that it brings light to different human experiences. Portraying only white western male poets in anthologies of ecopoetry means representing the experiences and perceptions of only a limited portion of population. As Camille Dungy explains, "many black writers simply do not look at their environment from the same perspective as Anglo-American writers".[85] In response to the necessity of exploring a diverse variety of experiences and perceptions, "poets and critics have begun to chart alternative histories of ecopoetry, […] recognising the contributions of women

[80] Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetry?", 401.
[81] *Ibid*.
[82] Samantha Walton. "Ecopoetry" in *Companion to environmental studies*, edited by Noel Castree, Mike Hulme and James D. Proctor (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 394.
[83] *Ibid*., 393-394.
[84] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.
[85] Camille Dungy, ed., *Black Nature Poetry: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), xxi, cited in Walton, "Ecopoetry", 394.

and poets of colour, incorporating more intersectional approaches to nature and ecology, and exploring the ecopoetical significance of experimental and avant-garde traditions"[86].

As it has been previously mentioned, ecopoetry must be ecocentric and not anthropocentric. However, given the way in which human beings and the nonhuman natural world are interconnected, it is impossible to talk about the current environmental crisis without talking about colonialism, capitalism, gender discrimination and so on. Amitav Ghosh perfectly explains this concept in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse*: "the crisis that now grips the planet […] is a crisis that is all-pervasive and omnipresent, in which geopolitics; capitalism; climate change; and racial, ethnic, and religious divides interlock, each amplifying and accelerating the other"[87]. In the same way, talking about ecopoetry and ecocriticism without including authors that belong to minorities means depriving the subject of discussion from its complexity and nuances.

[86] Walton, "Ecopoetry", 395.
[87] Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 222.

# Chapter II

## *The representation of nature in "Atmospheric Embroidery"*

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### 2.1. *Atmospheric Embroidery*: an overview of the collection

Despite not being the last work ever published by Meena Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018) is the last poetry collection published while she was still alive[88]. The title of the collection is an homage to Alexander's father and to his job as a meteorologist[89]. The collection is also inspired by the work of Alighiero Boetti, an Italian artist who became famous, among other art pieces, for *Mappa*, a series of embroidered maps of the world. Alexander explains that his artwork *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo*, exposed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has deeply influenced her: "haunted by his embroidered art work […], I kept seeing the names of rivers I had known, the Ganga of my birthplace, the Nile in Khartoum, the Mississippi and Missouri in Minneapolis"[90]. She reflects on the complexity of the artwork in the poem that gives title to the collection:

> In Boetti's embroidery, in his mapping of the world
> Everything is cut and coupled,
>
> Occult ordering—silk and painted steel
> Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked man.[91]

Alexander's fascination with Boetti's art is not a coincidence. In her literary production there is a definite presence of the motif of fabrics and clothes: "one of the recurrent motifs employed in her work is that of fabrics — fabrics being wrapped, touched, shared, even passed on, weaved, stitched, and embroidered upon"[92]. *Atmospheric Embroidery* confirms this presence

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[88] *In Praise of Fragments*, her last work, was published postmortem in 2020.
[89] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 37.
[90] *Ibid*.
[91] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 51.
[92] Parvinder Mehta, "Meena Alexander's Atmospheric Embroidery: A Review". *Weber – The Contemporary West* 32, no. 2. (Spring/Summer, 2016): 15.

not only in its title but also in its poems. For example, in the collection there is a recurring presence of the traditional sari "stitched in with bit of saffron"[93] (*Shook Silver*), or taken out of a broken suitcase after a long journey (*Bright Passage*), or stitched together after being torn (*Udhistanam*). The poems mention curtains, blankets, torn coats, veils, silks, cotton clothes and so on; the presence of fabric in general is definitely a recurring theme in the collection. Meena Alxander takes a step further and goes beyond the material world, becoming a sort of seamstress with language itself; she stitches together different places, cultures, times, feelings and creates an 'embroidery' of human experiences.

In this tapestry of humanity, there is one thread that seems to stand out: that of childhood. In *Atmospheric Embroidery*, Alexander explores the experience of being a child dealing with traumatic events: "the child has been a witness to violence, haunted by painful memories, fraught with grief, and affected by displacements that impel her to create or draw, yet all she can reproduce are images of violence and death"[94]. Some of the painful memories that haunt the child in the poems belong to Alexander herself. One of these memories is that of her first ocean crossing, which is explicitly explored in *Shook Silver* and echoes throughout the whole collection. Alexander even mentions it while discussing her inspiration for *Atmospheric Embroidery*:

> Let me turn to an early memory from childhood. There is a moment I have turned over and over in my head. I am standing on deck on the SS Jehangir, deep green waves of the Indian Ocean crashing all around. Broken free of my mother I stand clutching the white railings of the ship. I am dressed in a pink frilly frock with embroidery on the yoke and skirt. The dress whirls about my leg, a froth of organza and lace, wind whipped. Amma had brought it along and tucked it in at the bottom of her leather suitcase, all ready for my fifth birthday. […] That first voyage marked me forever, its hieroglyphs of loss and longing filled with meanings I am still trying to decipher.[95]

One of the other traumatic events that Meena Alexander explores from the point of view of children is war. Inspired by some drawings of children who lived in relief camps during the war in Darfur, Alexander tries to portray the violence they had to endure. In *Nurredin*, for example, a child has to watch the horrifying scene of their mother's death and has to take shelter during an airstrike:

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[93] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 11.
[94] Mehta, "Meena Alexander's Atmospheric Embroidery", 16.
[95] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 37.

Mother lay not moving, out of her throat
A black river. I saw a man with a gun
In his mouth, he was trying to eat it.

From the cloud-ship Antonov drops fell

We ran to the wadi, many people came.
Creatures too, camels, dogs, cats with no fur

Birds with torn wings.
I curled up in the wadi house,
Hungry, with bones and ash to stay.[96]

Another example is *Green Leaves of El Fasher*, where a girl recalls the physical abuse she had to bear: "Do not touch my hair, I cried. They forced me / To uncover my head then beat me when my veil slipped"[97]. These two poems are part of a cycle of five poems – the so-called *Darfur Poems* – which also includes *Sand Music*, *In Our Lifetime* and *Last Colors*. Given the importance of children in *Atmospheric Embroidery* in general and in this cycle in particular, it is not a coincidence that the *Darfur Poems* are introduced by a verse from William Blake's *Introduction to the Songs of Innocence*: "On a cloud I saw a child"[98].

The *Darfur Poems* are not the only cycle in the collection. *Atmospheric Embroidery* is divided in three sections, which include a total of four different cycles of poems. The shortest cycle, composed of only two poems (*Stick and Stones* and *Slow Burn*) is titled *Phillis Wheatley Suite* and is an homage to the poetess Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), the first African American woman to publish a poetry book. Another, longer cycle is *Univocity*, which contains fragments from Meena Alexander's life: "scattered pieces of life are crystallized here – grandmother's death before Indian independence, well before I was born; painful memories from childhood;

[96] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 38.
[97] *Ibid*., 37.
[98] William Blake, *Introduction to the Songs of Innocence* cited in Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 33.

reading Gerard Manley Hopkins a few years later in Khartoum, Sudan; summer in Provincetown, when I saw Robert Motherwell's oil-on-paper series *Beside the Sea*"[99].

Perhaps the most important cycle, however, is *Indian Ocean Blues*, which Alexander considers the 'backbone' of *Atmospheric Embroidery* and was conceived as a singular long poem divided in multiple parts:

> The spine of this book of poetry is the multipart poem 'Indian Ocean Blues'. At its simplest it was triggered by that childhood ocean crossing. I could not have composed the poem without the inspiration of Aimé Cesaire's *Cahier d'un Retour Au Pays Natal*. Time and again I heard the waves beat in his lines. *One sea leads to another* I wrote in response. Perhaps our migrant selves are true marks of being and a steady place, what we constantly long for, is nothing but a palimpsest of time, on which we scrawl our lives and memories, our vulnerable moving bodies.[100]

In the same way in which *Indian Ocean Blues* exists in conversation with Aimé Cesaire's book-length poem, it also interacts with the rest of the poems in *Atmospheric Embroidery*. Differently from the other cycles included in the collection, *Indian Ocean Blues* is scattered throughout the whole book of poetry, disappearing and resurfacing like a stitch that runs through the metaphorical fabric of the collection; it is no coincidence that Meena Alexander describes *Indian Ocean Blues* as being "woven in separate sections"[101] through *Atmospheric Embroidery*.

In an interview conducted by Zainaab Ali and Dharini Rasiah, Meena Alexander affirms that "a poem can travel; the imagination does in fact move over boundaries"[102]. The poems included in *Atmospheric Embroidery* do exactly that; they travel across boundaries and bring the reader on an imaginary journey through different moments, places and cultures that often mix together. It can be said that the collection itself has travelled across the world, considering that the poems are not only set in different cities and countries – mainly in New York, in India and in Sudan -, but they have also been written in different places. Just to give an example, Alexander starts to write *Indian Ocean Blues* in her house in New York and completes it in the city of Shimla, in the foothills of the Himalayas[103]. This continuous movement in place and time provokes in the reader a feeling of displacement and, at the same time, it perfectly portrays

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[99] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 96.
[100] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 38.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] Zainaab Ali and Dharini Rasiah. "Meena Alexander" in *Words matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers,* ed. King-Kok Cheung (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 79.
[103] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery"*,* 38.

the concept of a constant search for *home*, the absence or the crushing presence of which is another central theme of the collection[104]. This characteristic contributes to the interpretation of Meena Alexander's poetry as 'global', since she "not only reminds her readers of the alarming sense of homelessness but also inspires an ethical compassion to relate to, even accept, the rootlessness of migrant subjects. Her poems are marked by a global, collective appeal for a world of acceptance and empathy, despite the ever-increasing threat of violence"[105].

And it is exactly in a time of violence that we need poetry the most, as it has the potential to "reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist"[106], a concept in which Meena Alexander firmly believes and which she reiterates in the essay *What Use is Poetry?*. Poetry in general brings forward "what is deeply felt and is essentially unsayable"[107], and Alexander is a true expert in exploring and depicting the unsaid. She manages to do so by using language "as a painter uses color, a primary material out of which to make art"[108]. In her poems, Meena Alexander creates vivid images – sometimes extremely defined, sometimes confusing and unexpected, but always able to convey certain emotions, moments, memories. The rest of this chapter will explore the way in which Alexander uses and creates images related to nature in order to portray what would otherwise remain unsaid and unsayable.

### 2.2. The role of nature in dealing with trauma

It is undeniable that Meena Alexander's life has been full of significant and often traumatic events, and that these experiences have inevitably shaped her creative work. By reading her poetry, it is also quite clear that natural elements have provided a metaphorical vocabulary with which to reflect on several topics and experiences. Through the creation of images linked to the natural world, Alexander has been able to give a shape to her thoughts and feelings in order to

[104] Anu Mahadev, "Singing Stones Fill with Music: A Review of Meena Alexander's *Atmospheric Embroidery*," *Tupelo Quarterly*, August 30, 2018. https://www.tupeloquarterly.com/reviews/singing-stones-fill-with-music-a-review-of-meena-alexanders-atmospheric-embroidery-by-anu-mahadev/
[105] Mehta, "Meena Alexander's Atmospheric Embroidery", 17.
[106] Maxey, "An interview with Meena Alexander", 187.
[107] Meena Alexander. "What Use Is Poetry?" *World Literature Today* 87, no. 5 (January, 2013): 18.
[108] *Ibid*.

better understand, share and elaborate them. In the poem *The Journey*, nature helps the poet to remember some painful memories:

> I was blindfolded and had only the mercy of the sea
> (And sprigs of jasmine in my arms).
> […]
> Rock and ruin, pathways of salt, scents of crushed jasmine,
> Returning me to what I cannot bear to remember.[109]

The protagonist of this poem, who we can assume to be Alexander herself, is completely vulnerable; she can only count on "the mercy of the sea" and on the "sprigs of jasmine" that she is carrying, which seem to be the only thing she has with her. Jasmine – more specifically, its scent - seems to be a recurring presence in Meena Alexander's memories. In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander mentions it while she describes a personal conversation with her mother, in a moment of emotional closeness brought by the fear for her father's health after he had a heart attack: "The cool wind brought the scent of jasmine that grew in clusters by the side of the steps, and the delicate, more elusive scent of box that had blossomed on the far side of the well"[110]. This is not the first time in the memoir where the smell of jasmine is mentioned; it is also present when Alexander describes the first train journey from her house in Allahabad to her grandparents' house in Tiruvella, when she was just four months old: "On the first journey, when I was four months old, Appa helped amma and the ayah into the train and the porter lowered his red turban, unloading a huge slab of ice. The ice was covered in sawdust and rough sacking. It had the odor of crushed jasmine, a rich, slightly overripe scent"[111]. In *The Journey*, it is the smell of crushed jasmine – among other elements – that 'returns' the poet to memories she "cannot bear to remember", implying that they are too painful. This sense of a return, of a certain circularity is strengthened by the presence of jasmine itself, which is still intact and it is the only thing that Alexander is carrying in the beginning of the poem and which gets crushed at the end of it. The violent act of the sprigs of jasmine getting crashed seem to be the action that metaphorically frees her forgotten – and unbearable – memories.

[109] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 32.
[110] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 212.
[111] *Ibid.*, 55.

The poem *Torn Branches* is another example of a poem where natural elements are used to talk about difficult memories, this time related to Alexander's maternal grandfather. This poem is part of the section *Univocity*, which Meena Alexander has described as a crystallization of "scattered pieces of life"[112]. In the beginning of the poem there is again the image of a plant – more particularly, a berry – being crashed, this time to represent the inability to communicate, which seems to be an important theme of the poem:

Grandfather lies in wait for me.
I cannot flee.

My voice is young and burnt
My voice is a bramble berry squashed on stone.

All afternoon I lay curled in a hole
In the bamboo grove where cobras rove.

No one knew.
*Rove* – how did I learn that verb?

From my Scottish tutor–
She rapped my knuckles hard.

*A swan in a bag, worth two in the lake.*
*A stitch in time saves nine.*

She taught me such things.
Who will bring me sweetmeats

Swirl henna on my palms?
Who stokes sugarcane with kerosene

Binds cords of broken rope?

[112] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 96.

> Dark sisters in the sky, their wings are torn.
>
> They have stumps for wrists.
> They sing hosannas to our Lord.[113]

Many elements in this poem make it reasonable to believe that it deals with the traumatic event of Ilya's abuse. The first two verses give the impression that something inevitable and terrible is about to happen, something linked to Alexander's grandfather – who is waiting for her – and that she cannot escape. Ilya is lying, a position that probably makes him harmless, but this doesn't diminish Alexander's fear and her immobility in the face of it. This sense of being stuck is deepened by the metaphor of the berries; Alexander's voice is "a bramble berry squashed on stone", possibly meaning that she cannot use it. The theme of impossibility to communicate is further explored later in the poem. Alexander mentions her "Scottish tutor", a woman who was supposed to teach her English while she was in Karthoum:

> As a small child in India, I had learnt to speak English along with Malayalam and Hindi. Syllables, phrases, sentences of English flowed along as part of the river of my experience. In Khartoum, however, as a young child of five, cut from the fluidities of my Indian world, I had to learn English all over again. Now it was not just one language spoken among many: it was the most important one and I was an outsider confronting it. No doubt my English tutor, Mrs. McDermott, had a lot to do with my feelings of utter ineptitude when faced with the complexities of her mother tongue. Over and over she made me repeat the words she felt I should learn till their sharpness overwhelmed me, made my mouth hurt. […] It was a ruinous waste of time but she persisted. I was all wrong, I knew it. And I felt quite ashamed.[114]

In this sense, the refence to the English tutor gives the impression of an inability to communicate and be understood, and a feeling of shame due to this inability.

In the face of these complicated emotions, the protagonist of the poem hides in a bamboo grove: "All afternoon I lay curled in a hole / In the bamboo grove where cobras rove". She seeks safety in a potentially deadly place: it seems as if she is so overwhelmed by her feelings and by the impossibility of communicating them, that she becomes careless in the face of potential danger. At the same time, it seems like she becomes one of the animals that could kill her; she *curls* in

[113] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 57.
[114] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 111-112.

a hole – a temporary burrow – as if she's one of the snakes that shelter there. It is almost as if, in the face of something that she "cannot flee" and given the impossibility of communicating her feelings, she metaphorically tries to become something that can defend itself – a snake, a cobra. Still, she is *curled* – a motionless and defensive position – while the cobras are *roving*, they keep moving; there is definite difference between her and the snakes.

Alexander says that "no one knew", but it is unclear to what she is referring. It could mean that no one knew that she was hiding in the bamboo grove, but it could also refer to a broader situation, possibly the abuse and her confusion and general emotions about it; no one knows what is happening to her and how she feels. The elements that make it reasonable to believe that this poem deals with Ilya's abuse are mentioned in the last three verses: "Dark sisters in the sky, their wings are torn. / They have stumps for wrists. / They sing hosannas to our Lord". The "dark sisters in the sky" with torn wings could represent all past women who have been victims of violence, abuse and oppression. They are mutilated, "their wings are torn" and "they have stumps for wrist" to signal the extreme violence that they had to endure. The image of having "stumps for wrist" is particularly evocative, since it can be interpreted as a clear reference to William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus.* More specifically, it is a reference to the character of Lavinia, daughter of Titus Andronicus. In the second act of the play, Lavinia gets violently raped, and her tongue and hands are cut off. The perpetrators of this violent attack refers to her mutilated hands as "stumps"[115] (2.4.4); when her uncle finds her, he asks her who has "made thy body bare / of her two branches"[116] (2.4.17-18). The reference to this specific Shakespearean character is not a coincidence. In *Book of Childhood*, Meena Alexander explicitly says that, when she started to remember and elaborate Ilya's abuse, she kept thinking about Lavinia:

> Later I was able, bit by bit, to feel rage at an old man, my grandfather who had torn my innocent childhood, cut my woman's life so that desire for me was ever after etched in with the sharpened stick of pain and always in my mind was Lavinia, she who I had seen on the stage at Stratford a lifetime ago, hands cut off, tongue torn out, forced to set a twig to her teeth to spell out the name of the man who had violated her.
>
> In my notebooks from that era of my life I see the lines I have copied over and over from Shakespeare's play: "*Sorrow concealed, like to an oven stopp'd, / Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is.*"

[115] William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 43.
[116] *Ibid*, 44.

> Sorrow concealed. I ponder the phrase. How slowly I learn to breach the firewall of my own heart.[117]

Meena Alexander's interest in the character of Lavinia is not only due to the shared experience of sexual abuse and to the symbolic meaning of being physically unable to communicate the identity of the abuser. Shakespeare identifies Lavinia's body with a tree and uses images related to the destruction of nature in order to portray the violence against her. This interpretation of the woman body is perfectly in line with Alexander's perception of her own body: "as a woman I feel that the only materials I am allowed to use are the elements of my own body; blood, which is so close to any woman; bones, though I do not speak of them and use stone instead, and flesh, which I locate, I think, in trees"[118]. Meena Alexander uses natural elements in order to talk about her own body; it only makes sense that she also uses nature in order to portray traumatic experiences and the consequent feelings that surround them.

The two poems after *Torn Branches – Ars Poetica* and *Lines with Red Ants* – deal with the same themes and seem to be two different descriptions of the same moment. In *Ars Poetica*, a person who we can assume to be a child is hiding in a tree:

> By the crook of my knees
> I hang in a mango tree.
>
> The leaves are very green.
> I slip a finger under my skirt,
>
> I touch the bark of the tree with wetness.
>
> I write on knobbly bark.
>
> A red ant crawls on my skin.
> I turn my face to the sky.

[117] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 242.
[118] Susie Tharu, "Susie Tharu Interviews Meena Alexander." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 21, no. 1 (Winter, Spring 1986), 11.

The blue is splattered with white
I write the sky.

The blue is cut with reddish flecks.
From a great distance, they are calling me

I am in the green tree,
They keep calling my name.

When I hear their voices
My finger threatens to catch fire.[119]

At first reading, *Ars Poetica* is a light, playful poem. The simplicity of language and the way in which the images succeed one after the other give the impression of a child observing and interpreting the world around her, while possibly exploring her own body. The "very green" leaves and the blue sky "splattered with white" make the scene almost idyllic. The child is almost part of her surroundings. She keeps touching the bark of the tree and a red ant crawls on her, as if she is part of the tree itself. At the same time, the child keeps writing, first "on knobbly bark" and then she "writes the sky", as if she is leaving a physical mark and actively creating the environment that surrounds her and to which she seems deeply connected; despite this, there is an underlying understanding that she is not creating nature, but rather describing it and actively interacting with it 'from the inside'.

A closer reading might reveal a different aspect of this poem. The protagonist is hiding in a tree, something that Meena Alexander used to do as a coping mechanism when she was a child and that she starts to do again when the repressed memories of the abuse begin to resurface in the form of physical symptoms:

> But what I felt was all too real. In the days and months ahead there were moments when I went into a tailspin and had to call my therapist on her cell phone to help me. I felt as if I were jerked helplessly upside down. As if I were a top being whirred at high speed, all my atoms flying apart. Pain afflicted my back. My torso was utterly numb. I had always believed in the truth of the body. What was my own body telling me now?

[119] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 58.

> "They are feelings that you had that are coming back," my therapist said to me. "They are frightening, but you are not a child anymore. Go through the pain and it will release you." Once hearing the panic in my voice, she asked me what had comforted me when I was a child. Holding onto trees, I told her. I had run away into the Tiruvella garden and climbed trees, the great branches had saved me.
>
> "Then do that," she said, "hold onto a tree."
>
> I walked out into Fort Tryon Park. I found a flowering lilac, a tree that stood at the opening of the heather garden. It did not blossom in the hot season. It had four or five arms, knobby, dark brown. I went up to the tree. I did not care who saw me. I stood there, a grown woman, and held tight to the tree. I could feel my flesh again, clarified, sap and bark upholding me. Calmer, I returned home, to cook and set out food, to read and write. But something had altered beyond recognition.[120]

Once again, the child protagonist seeks refuge in a hidden spot where she can be in close contact with nature, like in *Torn Branches.* She is observing and describing her surroundings and her own movements in almost an anxious way. The detail of the child slipping "a finger under my skirt" and touching "the bark of the tree with wetness" becomes haunting if we take into consideration Alexander's recollection of her emotional state right after Ilya's abuse:

> I walked slowly out of the library. Dress mussed up and wet.
>
> I felt grandfather Kuruvilla's hand on my thigh. His hand was dark, with flecked hairs at the wrist.
>
> The hairs were pure white like the cabbage butterfly's wings.
>
> I floated toward the kitchen. Held onto the door and stared in. I could not cross into the kitchen, let go of the door, let my feet touch the dark red tiles of the kitchen.
>
> I wanted to hide inside your sari, amma, let the soft pleats drape about me, make me vanish. Deep inside your sari, no one could touch me.[121]

The reader can only speculate from where the wetness in *Ars Poetica* comes from, but this detail from *Book of Childhood* inevitably and sadly comes to mind, especially considering that Alexander's state of confusion and need to hide seem to be similar to the general vibe of the poem.

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[120] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 240.
[121] *Ibid*., 302.

In *Ars Poetica* the mango tree and the natural surroundings provide the safe and hidden space that the protagonist is seeking, like a metaphorical cocoon where she can explore, observe, write and live her childhood freely. In the last part of the poem, this safe environment is threatened by an element that is extraneous to it: that of the voices that keep calling her. In the same way in which the blue of the sky is "cut with reddish flecks", the shelter of the "green tree" is invaded by the voices that "keep calling my name". Hearing these voices is unsettling for a child that doesn't want to be found, and it provokes a violent reaction: "When I hear their voices / my finger threatens to catch fire". The element used by Alexander to portray this potential violence is fire, something that could completely destroy the mango tree like the voices have destroyed the safe space that the child has found in it.

The element of fire is also present in *Lines with Red Ants*, which seems to be a complementary poem to *Ars Poetica*:

> Some things have holes in them
> Leaves on the mango tree
>
> When sparks fly through.
> I have a hole in between my legs
>
> I pick red ants off the tree,
>
> I let them crawl over me
>
> Fire blossoms where they bit.
> I liked it when the red ants bit.[122]

This poem creates a completely different atmosphere compared to *Ars Poetica*. From the beginning it suggests an image of subtle destruction. The first verses seem to be a sort of continuation of the last verses of *Ars Poetica*; the mango leaves have "holes in them" because they have been burned by some sparks, which perhaps are coming from the child's finger that "threatens to catch fire" in *Ars Poetica*. This is another instance in which the female body is

[122] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 59.

associated with a tree; in the former poem it is the finger that could catch fire, but in *Lines with Red Ants* the mango leaves are the ones that are burning. This association continues in the following verses. After talking about the holes in the leaves, the protagonist says that she "has a hole in between my legs", further enforcing the identification of her body with the tree.

The awareness of the "hole in between my legs" seems to deeply unsettle the child; immediately after acknowledging this part of her body, she starts to "pick red ants off the tree" and let them bite her. In *Ars Poetica*, the red ant crawls on the child freely, without any intervention from the protagonist of the poem, almost to testify her stillness and her connection with the tree and with the natural environment. In *Lines with Red Ants* the red ants are instead picked up and purposefully put on her body by the child herself; she *allows* them to crawl on her skin, it's not a spontaneous event anymore but rather an intentional one in which the red ants become a source of pain. The child welcomes this pain: "Fire blossoms where they bit. / I liked it when the red ants bit". The mention of fire in the final verses of the poem reinforces the idea of it being complementary to *Ars Poetica*. "The fire blossoms" on the child's skin like a flower, providing another comparison between her body and a tree, and anticipating the idea that the pain is something seen as positive by the child.

The action of bringing herself pain that is described in *Lines with Red Ants* is in line with the interpretation of this poem – and of the previous ones, *Torn Branches* and *Ars Poetica* – being about Ilya's abuse, since self-harming is one of the behavioural warning signs of sexual abuse in children[123] and considering that the action is provoked by the awareness of having "a hole in between my legs".

In the analysed poems, natural elements take on several different roles; they are used as shelters and as a source of comfort, but also as a source of pain. Through nature, Meena Alexander finds a way to talk and elaborate traumatic memories; nature provides Alexander a language with which she can discuss her own body, the violence it had to endure and her emotions about it. She uses natural elements to transform the unbearable and the unsaid into something that has a shape, to give a life and a voice to everything she had to forget in order to survive. Even though the analysed poems can be interpreted as dealing with Ilya's abuse, this does not mean that natural elements are only present as a means to elaborate this traumatic event. In *Atmospheric Embroidery*, nature is a strong presence that allows Alexander to discuss

[123] NSPCC – National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, *Sexual Abuse*, n.d. https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/child-sexual-abuse/

several aspects of her life. One of these aspects is the experience of displacement, which will be considered in next part of this chapter.

### 2.3. Nature and displacement

One of the recurring themes of Meena Alexander's literary production is the experience of displacement and the search for a home. This is a characteristic that is shared among the majority of what is considered postcolonial literature. Postcolonial poetry particularly emphasizes the importance of the land: "postcolonial poetry in particular is concerned with a sense of place, an importance attached to the land, and thus nature; the internal nature of the postcolonial condition traditionally finds expression in the external landscapes of origin and destination"[124]. This concept is perfectly expressed in a specific verse from the poem *Aesthetic Knowledge*, the first poem of *Atmospheric Embroidery*, when Alexander says that "so landscape becomes us"[125], creating an intimate relationship between "us" and the surrounding environment.

Meena Alexander's poetry offers a "perceptive handling of the intricate nuances of a fragmented, traveling soul seeking a home amidst constant displacements"[126]. The poem *Pitching a Tent* seems to encapsulate the idea of the uncertainty that surrounds a perennial search for home:

> Where the ground shakes
> I set my tent.
> *We cannot know ourselves ever*.
> I write this on your sleeve,
>
> Fold the cotton over.
> Sweet sunlight—

[124] Kopisch, "Still Writing of the Linden Tree", 171.
[125] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 3.
[126] Mehta, "Meena Alexander's Atmospheric Embroidery: A Review", 14.

What swans found

In their last flight.[127]

The act of setting a tent "where the ground shakes" perfectly portrays a sense of uncertainty and temporariness. A tent cannot be a permanent solution, it is made to be moved and it is fragile, it can be ripped. Alexander sets it where the ground is shaking; she chooses an unstable place, a place of potential danger and chaos.

In *Poetics of Dislocation*, Meena Alexander writes a piece with the same title of this poem, *Pitching a Tent*:

1. Poetry makes a dwelling for us, a tent of words.

2. The tent has holes for the wind to blow through, holes pierced by gunfire, by arrows, by sharp stones.

3. It can be pitched on solid ground, or rolled up, borne through air, carried over water. It can be unfurled here or there.

4. Inside the shelter we turn from the violence of history, to the lyric measures of poetry, so that we can see again, eyes wiped free of blood; so that we can hear again, the voices that allow us to be human.

5. Poetry makes ground in a vertiginous world.

6. All this is true, and necessary for our survival.

7. None of this is true.[128]

Poetry creates "a tent of words", a shelter from violence, a space where we can hear "the voices that allow us to be human". Through poetry, Alexander has managed to create inside herself the home that her numerous relocations have prevented her to find in the physical world[129]. In the poem from *Atmospheric Embroidery*, she sets her tent "where the ground shakes", where everything is uncertain and unstable. Alexander gives the reader a sort of reminder that she then hides like an intimate secret, almost a confession: "*We cannot know ourselves ever.* / I write this on your sleeve, // Fold the cotton over". There is no anxiety around this statement, it is not a knowledge that unsettles; it is said as a matter of fact. The metaphorical tent created by poetry is not there to allow us to know ourselves; it is there because "we have poetry so we do not die

[127] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 70.
[128] Meena Alexander, *Poetics of Dislocation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 79.
[129] Micheli, "Stitching Together Broken Geographies", 229.

of history"[130]. In the tent set "where the ground shakes" there is still space for something warm and bright, for "sweet sunlight". This small moment of light becomes bittersweet in the last two verses: "What swans found / in their last flight". Swans found light, but only during their last journey, presumably before death, perhaps still searching for a home.

The poem *Bright Passage* is another poem that deals with the conflicting emotions that a person can feel due to continuous displacements:

> Grandmother's sari, freckles of gold poured into silk,
> Koil's cry, scrap of khadi grandfather spun,
> I pluck all this from my suitcase, its buckles dented, zipper torn.
> Also pictures pressed into an album: parents by a rosebush,
> Ancestors startled in sepia, eyes wide open—
> Why have you brought us here?
>
> Mist soars on the river, my door splits free of its hinges:
> My children's children, and those I will never see—generations swarm in me,
> Born to this North American soil, dreamers in a new world.
> I must pass through that rocking doorway,
> Figure out words, clean minted, untranslatable—O body, bright passage—
> Already in the trees, finches are calling, warbling my name.[131]

This poem perfectly encapsulates the feeling of being on verge of a drastic change. The protagonist has brought with her objects from her culture, things that are part of her identity. Her grandmother's sari with its "freckles of gold poured into silk" almost becomes something from a fairy-tale, and the fact that the "scrap of khadi" was spun by her grandfather gives it the implicit sentimental value of a family heirloom. She *plucks* these objects from her suitcase – which is broken from a long journey, perhaps after several other journeys – like one could pluck a flower or some fruit. In the same way, the pictures of her ancestors are *pressed* into an album, like flowers pressed between the pages of a book; this parallelism is reinforced by the following image of her parents "by a rosebush", near flowers. Among all these physical objects also

[130] Alexander, Meena. *Birthplace With Buried Stones* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 89.
[131] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 17.

appears a figurative "koil's cry"; the term koil is probably an alternative name for the Asian koel[132], a bird that can be found in Indian folklore, traditional poems and mythology[133]. The koil's cry signals the same pain and discontent that is later reinforced by the pictures of the ancestors; they are "startled in sepia, eyes wide open" as they ask her "why have you brought us here?", almost as an accusation.

The second part of the poem is definitely more positive, less nostalgic compared to the first part. The first image that Meena Alexander creates is that of mist *soaring* over a river, a term that is usually associated with a bird's flight; the presence of mist symbolically indicates uncertainty about what will happen next. It is a moment of profound change, a defining moment not only for the protagonist but also for future generations. While the first half of the poem is focused on the protagonist's cultural and familial history, the second half shifts the focus on the future. Alexander thinks about "my children's children, and those I will never see —generations swarm in me, / Born to this North American soil, dreamers in a new world"; she recognizes that, in this initial moment of arrival, she embodies all the future possibilities of her successors. In order to give life to the generations that "swarm" in her – once again, a term associated with the flying of an animal, this time of bees or wasps – she has to take the next step and "pass through that rocking doorway". She must go through an unstable passage, a metaphorical "rocking doorway" full of uncertainty, confusion and internal conflict. The term *rocking* also evokes the oscillating movement of a boat, a suggestion of her physical migration.

The poem ends with another image of birds: "Already in the trees, finches are calling, warbling my name". The koil from the beginning of the poem is crying, while finches in the end are "calling, warbling my name". This parallelism could indicate the need to leave one home behind in order to build another one; the finches are waiting for the protagonist, they are calling her toward a new future where they will take the place of the koil and become as familiar as the previous bird.

As it has already been mentioned, the collection *Atmospheric Embroidery* was inspired by Alighiero Boetti's artwork *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo*, which brought Meena Alexander to reflect on all the rivers she has encountered in her life of displacements.[134] This

[132] In his book *Animals in Indian English Poetry* (Raleigh: Lulu Publication, 2019), 21-22, Dr Gajanan T. Hivale includes the koil among the birds mentioned in Meena Alexander's poetry, further confirming that this term refers, in fact, to a bird.
[133] Centre for Excellence in Sustainable Development of the Goa Institute for Management, *Asian Koel*. https://sustainability.gim.ac.in/fauna/birds/asian-koel/
[134] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 37.

encounter with Boetti's artwork is a central theme in the poem that gives its title to the collection, *Atmospheric Embroidery*. The first draft of this poem was written "in Provincetown, during a summer of violent storms, sunshine and sudden senseless deaths"[135]; this atmosphere is perfectly portrayed in the final version through the underlying tension between several elements of the poem:

> Wads of ice cream glisten on Route 6.
> We stroll into summer, thoughts thrust into a bramble
>
> Oriental bittersweet pocking the hedges,
> Fists in pockets, lemonade dripping from a child's hem.
>
> In Boetti's embroidery, in his mapping of the world
> Everything is cut and coupled.
>
> Occult ordering-silk and painted steel
> Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked man.
>
> In *The Thousand Longest Rivers*
> The Nile is the hardest water
>
> Then comes the Mississippi-Missouri.
> Once we lived by brilliant waters
>
> Suffered the trees soft babble
> Fissures in magma.
>
> Already it's August—
> Season of snipers in the heartland
>
> Season of coastlines slit by lightning
> And smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose.

[135] *Ibid.*

Now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever

To put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking.[136]

The mention of Route 6 situates the poem in a distinctly American context, but its themes go beyond a specific geographical place. There is a definite tension between several elements of this poem. The initial image that Alexander creates is that of a pleasant summer stroll, with "wads of ice cream" and "lemonade dripping from a child's hem" reinforcing the idea of a carefree summer day. This image of relaxation is however undermined by the fact that "thoughts are thrust in a bramble", which indicates an internal turmoil; furthermore, the image of the bramble anticipates that of "oriental bittersweet pocking the hedges". The oriental bittersweet is considered an invasive plant in North America, since it smothers other plants to the point of eradicating them with its weight[137]; the image of the oriental bittersweet on the hedges is perhaps a parallelism of the way in which migrants are perceived by the majority of the American population, given the political climate during the first Trump administration (2016 – 2020).

Alexander then proceeds to reflect on Boetti's art, in which "everything is cut and coupled" in an "occult ordering", therefore an order that is not completely knowable and understandable. The order that she chooses to describe Boetti's embroideries is, in fact, "occult" and peculiar. At first glance, it might seem that Alexander has chosen contraposing couples of elements, one belonging to the non-human natural world and the other to the artificial one. However, a more attentive read will reveal that that is not the case. The first couple that the reader encounters is that of "silk and painted steel". Silk, despite being considered a natural fiber, is actually a product of human violence against nature; in order to obtain it, breeders kill silkworms to prevent them from breaking their cocoon and thus damage the fibers that are needed to manufacture the fabric. The species that produces silk has undergone an intense selection, to the point that now the butterfly is blind and cannot fly; it can only lay more eggs to provide more silkworms.

[136] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 51.
[137] National Invasive Species Information Center of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Oriental Bittersweet*. https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/terrestrial/plants/oriental-bittersweet

The second couple is that of “Sun and electric moon”, two elements that are often associated together; in this case, however, the moon is “electric”, implying artificiality. It is worth to note that *Electric Moon* is also the title of a movie from 1992, a social commentary in the form of satirical parody of western tourists that visit India expecting to find the stereotypical notions that they believe to be true[138]. It is probably a coincidence, but an interesting one nonetheless.

The third couple of elements that we find in the poem is that of “butterfly and naked man”. The state of nakedness of the man gives the impression of almost a primordial condition; the association with the butterfly – which exits its cocoon in a new form, deeply different from its initial one – reinforces the idea that humans are inherently part of nature, something that we tend to forget too often.

The idea of a primordial condition extremely different from the current one continues in the second half of the poem. Meena Alexander mentions the Boetti’s artwork that has inspired the whole poetry collection: “In *The Thousand Longest Rivers* / the Nile is the hardest water // then comes the Mississippi-Missouri”. The Nile, the Mississippi and its affluent the Missouri are all rivers that Meena Alexander has encountered in different moments of her life; her focus on these three rivers acts as a reminder of her condition of migrant. The Nile has always been culturally associated with fertile lands and the prosperity of civilization; calling it “the hardest water” creates tension with this cultural image, perhaps as a reminder of the duality – or, better yet, neutrality – of nature, which can be both the cradle of humanity and “the hardest water”. The description of a previous condition and the use of imagery related to water continues in the last part of the poem; Alexander says that “once we lived by brilliant waters // suffered the trees soft babble, / fissures in magma”. This passage seems to evoke a past where humanity lived in close contact with the natural environment, which proved to be both a positive condition – the waters were “brilliant” – and a difficult and potentially dangerous one. The element of “the trees soft babble” apparently suggests a certain gentleness in natural sounds, which is however challenged by the use of the verb “suffered” and by the image of “fissures of magma”, both elements that imply hardship and pain.

The poem continues with a temporal shift and a reaffirmation of the underlying violence implied in the previous verses: “already it's August— / season of snipers in the heartland // season of coastlines slit by lightning / and smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose”. Meena Alexander manages to convey a strong sense of tension and turmoil through the juxtaposition

[138] James H. K. Norton, *Global Studies: India and South Asia* (New York: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 2001), 172.

of natural and human violence. There is a parallelism between the presence of the man-made internal threats of "snipers in the heartland" – perhaps a reference to social tensions, civil unrest and global wars – and the violence of nature which has already been introduced; the coastlines are "slit by lightenings", the "bouquets of the salt spray rose" are destroyed. This tension perfectly portrays a time of unrest and hardship coming both from the human world and from the non-human natural world. Alexander reflects on these turbulent times: "now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever / to put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking". It is true that, despite all the hardships, "once we lived by brilliant waters"; however, now that there is more violence from different fronts, more turmoil both external and internal, "it's a miracle" that people are still able "keep on walking" and move in the world.

The fact that the collection *Atmospheric embroidery* was inspired by an artwork that portrays rivers shouldn't come as a surprise. During a conversation with Erika Duncan, Meena Alexander has admitted that "it has always been very important for me to live near a river"[139]; the presence of water in general is a recurring element in the collection. A confirmation of the importance of water and water-related imaginary is the fact that the spine of entire collection is the section *Indian Ocean Blues*[140], which will be analysed in the next part of this chapter.

### 2.3.1. *Indian Ocean Blues*

The first ocean crossing from India to Sudan on the steamer *SS Jehangir* is a memory to which Meena Alexander keeps returning throughout her whole life. For her, this haunting voyage is both a deeply traumatic event and a source of creative inspiration: "that first ocean crossing obsesses me. I think of it as a figuration of death. Losing sense, being blotted out, thrown irretrievably across a border. But it also provokes the imaginary. I am forced to fabricate, trust to the maquillage of words, weave tales"[141]. The section *Indian Ocean Blues* of the poetry collection *Atmospheric Embroidery* is an exploration of this experience; Alexander admits that "at its simplest it was triggered by that childhood ocean crossing"[142]. The first poem of the section, *Shook Silver*, deals exactly with this memory:

[139] Duncan, "A Portrait of Meena Alexander", 27.
[140] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 38.
[141] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 65.
[142] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 38.

I was a child on the Indian Ocean.
Deck-side we dance in a heat-haze,
Toes squirm under silver wings.
Under burlap someone weeps.

Amma peers out of the porthole
Sari stitched with bits of saffron
Watch out for flying fish,
She cries.

Our boat is bound for Africa.
They have goats and cows just like us,
Also snakes that curl
Under the frangipani tree.

Remember what grandmother said?
If you don't keep that parasol
Over your head
You'll turn into a little black girl.

Where is she now,
Child crossing the livid sea?
Older now,
I must speak to the shadows.[143]

The use of the past simple in the first verse of the sentence immediately identifies this poem as a recollection of a childhood memory; "I was a child on the Indian Ocean" implies that she is not a child anymore, as stated also in the final stanza of the poem. Alexander opens *Shook Silver*

[143] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 11.

with an apparently cheerful image of a dance, which is however strained by the element of the "heat-haze" that implies a certain level of discomfort due to the high temperature. This uneasiness is reiterated by the fact that "under burlap someone weeps". This detail is a subtle reminder of the difference between the people dancing on the deck-side – who belong to the middle and upper class – and the poor lower-class people separated from the rest of the passengers by a barrier. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander remembers this separation and its social implications:

> If I dropped a book or a ball of thread from something I was stitching, I could peer down through the angle of my legs, past the little white socks, blurred now with my haste. In that way I could see the figures in the hold behind us, through the part of the metal covering that was raised. A blur of figures, mothers, children, old grandparents, all knotted into each other. I heard a babble of tongues, watched rice bubbling in a blackened cooking pot, parts of life I recognized, the poverty, the desperate energy of making do, the enervation. All the while amma and I sat quietly, cut out like two paper figures in our well-ironed clothes. I was drawn towards the figures in the hold, frightened too by the darkness there. I knew that, when the rains came, the passengers would have to huddle under the huge canvas pilings tossed now to the side of the metal bulwarks. And sea storms were sudden. In the rising heat that always overcame the rain on the Indian Ocean, the hold people would hang out their bedding and wet clothes, boil up the lentils, or play cards. The children, in little groups, chattered and raced. I heard their stamping feet.[144]

Even though she is just a "a child on the Indian Ocean", Alexander already notices and understands these social disparities and their implications.

She is travelling with her mother: "amma peers out of the porthole / sari stitched with bits of saffron / watch out for flying fish, / she cries". Amma's "sari stitched with bits of saffron" introduces the theme of a strong cultural identity, which is also present in a different form in the rest of the poem but which is in contrast with how Alexander actually feels in that moment: "in spite of Amma, sitting in her Kashmir silk sari in a deck chair in the shade, I felt I had no name, no nature"[145]; during this ocean crossing, she feels without identity.

Amma is disquiet, she "cries" to Meena to be careful and "watch out for the flying fish". In this case, the flying fish and Amma's worried behaviour could symbolize something deeper. In *Book of Childhood*, when reflecting on her first journey, Alexander says that "afloat on the

[144] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 66.
[145] *Ibid.*, 65.

Arabian Sea, I searched for a dip in water, a dart of darkness, something that might turn into a tunnel so I could slip back into the Tiruvella house lost to me. […] I prayed for strength to leap into the sea, become a water child, an amphibious thing, a silver flying fish"[146]. The flying fish has clearly taken on a symbolic quality for Alexander, who inevitably associates it to a condition of loss and change, and to the desire of changing one's identity in order to deal with traumatic experiences. Nature is used to deal with the trauma of dislocation in the next part of the poem as well. After stating that "our boat is bound to Africa", Alexander seems to search for familiar elements, for something that she might recognize in a new unfamiliar place. She finds this necessary and reassuring familiarity in the non-human natural world: "they have goats and cows just like us, / also snakes that curl / under the frangipani tree". Despite the division created by the distinction of "them" and "us", Alexander tries – and manages – to find something in common, something that can help her through the confusion of being uprooted. Given how important it seems for Meena Alexander to recognize the natural elements around her[147], it is not absurd to think that, during a traumatizing dislocation, she might find comfort in the prospect of finding the same familiar animals and trees.

The sense of familiarity that she manages to find is immediately contrasted by the following verses, in which Alexanders recalls a warning from her grandmother: "if you don't keep that parasol / over your head / you'll turn into a little black girl". This warning encapsulates the standard of beauty common in Indian society and inherently intertwined with the concept of whiteness, and, therefore, colonialism and racism. Whiteness becomes the epitome of female beauty and Indian women are expected to avoid any behaviour that could darken their skin and make them "turn into a little black girl", like simply standing in the sun. The familiarity and common elements that can be found between "us" and "them" are jeopardized by a belief system that is based in a sense of superiority and underlying racism of some so called 'traditional' people.

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[146] *Ibid*., 291-292.

[147] In her piece "A Portrait of Meena Alexander", Erika Duncan recalls a walk in the park with Meena Alexander, during which the poet brought a book of America trees (27); in the same essay, Duncan affirms that she could easily imagine Meena Alexander "looking out the window saying: *This is all right. This is my home now. Some day I must learn the names of the trees*" (23). In her article on Meena Alexander, professor Daniela Ciani Sforza cites the essay "Migrant Memory: Reflections on the Question of Home" in which Meena Alexander, looking out the window of her New York apartment, says that "if I were standing in my mother's kitchen I would know the name of the blossoms on the tree. I would be able to name them: champak, gulmohar, raathke raani, mulla. I would know the particular scent, the touch of the pollen, what the earth is like under a tree I had wondered by as a barefoot child" (Meena Alexander, "Migrant Memory: Reflections on the Question of Home" in Daniela Ciani Sforza, "Voci migranti dall'Asia agli USA: Meena Alexander, una poetessa indiana a New York." *Oltreoceano* 3 (2009), 100). These references confirm the fact that Alexander associates the concepts of home to knowing her natural surroundings.

The last verses of Shook Silver provide a moment of open reflection of this childhood experience. Alexander wonders "where is she now, / child crossing the livid sea?"; this passage implies a deep sense of loneliness, of loss, and also a certain tenderness and care for her child self. The image of a "livid sea" perfectly portrays the challenges and hardships of this journey both from the practical and the emotional point of view. Meena Alexander is retrospectively thinking of herself when she was a "child crossing the livid sea". She is "older now", that child doesn't exist anymore, the boat and the flying fish and the people dancing and even the house in Tiruvella to which she wants so desperately to return – everything lives just in her memory now. The only way that she has to reflect on it is to "speak to the shadows"; she *must* do it, she feels compelled to do it in order to better understand and elaborate her past.

The image of a shadow is also present in the poem *Human Geography*, which comes right after *Shook Silver*:

> Out of the belly of stone
> India pours,
> Wild grass is torn
> From its roots.
>
> On broken rock
> Your face is etched in shadow.
> Is this what love does—
> Sempiternal marking?[148]

While *Shook Silver* creates an image related to water and to the ocean, *Human Geography*'s main theme is that of stone and hardness. The image of India *pouring* "out of the belly of stone" is a clear reference to the act of birth; however, the element of a "belly of stone" suggests a certain hardness and the fact that "India pours" out of it indicates a forceful emerging, an impetuous act of creation. The event of the "belly of stone" opening and India pouring out of it inevitably reminds the reader of the birth of the goddess Sita, a recurring figure in this collection and in Meena Alexander's poetry in general. Like any mythological figure, there are several

[148] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 12.

versions of Sita's birth; in many Hindu versions, Sita is believed to be the daughter of the earth: "in Vālmīki's Sanskrit epic Rāmāyana (VR) and Kamban's Tamil epic Irāmāvatāram (KR), Sita is said to have sprung miraculously from a furrow"[149]. After a dispute with her husband Rama about her purity, Sita decides to not go back to his palace and finds refuge in the earth, which splits open to welcome her[150]. Alexander is very familiar with this myth; it is difficult to believe that this parallelism is only a coincidence, considering also the cultural significance of the character of Sita. In *Human Geography*, it is not Sita that is born "out of the belly of stone", but India in its complex cultural and traditional history. The fact that India *pours* out of the depth of the earth implies a deep connection and a sense of belonging to the natural world. However, this *pouring* also has a violent aspect and "wild grass is torn / from its roots". In the context of *Indian Ocean Blues*, this image seems to also symbolize a violent displacement, an actual uprooting from one's cultural origins.

The theme of being abruptly torn away from a loved one is implied in the second stanza. Like in *Shook Silver*, this final part of the poem deals with the question of memories. Alexander says that "on the broken rock / your face is etched in shadow"; this image suggests that the face to which she is referring is only in her memory, it is not a definite image but it is instead "etched in shadow", unclear and obscure. She then wonders if this is love's capacity of creating a "sempiternal marking", of "etching" faces and emotions in one's memories and making them eternal. The fact that the first part of the poem mentions India seems to indicate that the person she is referring to in the second stanza is related to her origins; perhaps, this person is her younger self, that "child on the Indian ocean" about whom she is wondering in the final stanza of *Shook Silver* and who compels her to "speak to the shadows".

The journey on which *Indian Ocean Blues* brings the reader continues with the poem *Song Lines*:

One sea

Leads to another

(O mirror drunk with salt)

[149] S. Singaravelu, "Sītā's Birth and Parentage in the Rāma Story", *Asian Folklore Studies* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 1982): 235.
[150] Maha Kaushik, "All About Devi Sita", *Hindu American Foundation* (May 17, 2021). https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/devi-sita

Also to that dreamless sleep

Where all seas start.
On this North American coast
Birch trees swallow the wind
Ranunculus petals tumble

In the heat of spring.
We shut our eyes to the glare
Stumble into the hole
Where Sita lay:

Eye of heaven, earth's soul.
After the trepidation of rocks
After burst blood vessels
Will fields of saxifrage

And self-heal bloom?
Girls gather in sunlight,

Perch on a fault mass
Combing out their hair.[151]

The section *Indian Ocean Blues* was inspired by Meena Alexander's first ocean crossing, but also by Aimé Cesaire's book-length poem *Cahier d'un Retour Au Pays Natal*; the first verse of *Song Lines* is a sort of response to Cesaire: "time and again I heard the waves beat in his lines. *One sea leads to another* I wrote in response"[152]. The initial verses of this poem give the idea of a certain circularity, but also a definite sense of inevitability; "one sea / leads to the other" in a perennial journey until "that dreamless sleep // where all seas start". This idea reflects Meena

[151] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 13.
[152] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 38.

Alexander's own life experience, considering that all her ocean crossings have, in fact, led to another: her first journey from India to Sudan, her second one to study in England and then back to India, and her third ocean crossing when she moved to America with her husband. In this case, the sea becomes symbolic of an eternal change, an inevitable movement. The figure of a "dreamless sleep" evokes a sense of death, but at the same time it is "where all seas start", where everything begins in a sort of ancestral, almost primordial condition. The sea becomes a "mirror drunk with salt", something that shows us our own reflection and possibly compels to reflect on the inner self. This mirror is, however, "drunk with salt", implying a certain degree of confusion and lack of clarity; a continuous journey may provide the possibility of introspection, but it also provokes a deep sense of instability and uprootedness.

This eternal movement where "one sea / leads to the other" brings the reader to North America, where "birch trees swallow the wind / ranunculus petals tumble // in the heat of spring". In this passage, natural elements are used to create tension. The image of the birch trees that "swallow the wind" not only indicates a sense of resilience, but also a certain invincibility. They are not simply resisting the wind, they are *swallowing* it, completely subverting the usual dynamic of trees enduring the wind – bending but not breaking – into the opposite interaction of the trees 'devouring' the wind. This demonstration of strength is in contrast with the image of "ranunculus petals tumble // in the heat of spring". In this case, the ranunculus petals become something delicate and fragile that inevitably succumbs to that same wind that the birch trees *swallow*. Like in the previous verse, there is subversion of the usual dynamic; spring is usually the season of renewal and rebirth, the season in which trees blossom and flowers bloom. In this passage, however, this concept is overturned and the "ranunculus petals tumble" instead of sprouting.

After this subversions of dynamics, Meena Alexander wonders if there is hope for a better future: "after the trepidation of rocks / after burst blood vessels / will fields of saxifrage // and self-heal bloom?". The mention of a "trepidation of rocks" evokes a sense of anxiety, of fear, almost an impending doom. The use of the element of rocks – which are generally considered a symbol of stability – seems to indicate that this turmoil is something deeply rooted and almost insurmountable, inevitable. The mention of "burst blood vessels" reinforces this image of chaos and pain, turning it into something visceral and violent. Alexander wonders if, in this complicated context, it is possible for "fields of saxifrage // and self-heal" to bloom. The image of whole fields of flowers blooming seems to indicate that the real question is not just whether it is possible to heal after such violence, but rather if it is possible to come to the point of

thriving, of *blooming* so much that it doesn't matter if some "petals tumble", because there are whole "fields of saxifrage // and self-heal".

This passage creates tension between an image of destruction and violence and one of growth and healing; this tension continues in the last verses of the poem. Alexander describes a seemingly innocent and mundane activity of girls "combing out their hair" in sunlight. This image of an everyday action is threatened by the fact that the girls "perch on a fault mass", an instable place, a fracture in the earth. They "gather in sunlight" to do together an almost ritualistic activity, unaware of the potential danger; this could suggest the idea that a traumatic event is not something that can be predicted or avoided. On the other hand, there is nothing in the passage that suggests that the choice of being perched "on a fault mass" is not a conscious one. Considering the previous verses about healing after violence, this passage could also symbolize the process of healing itself, of going on with normal activities even when one is "perch on a fault mass", in a place of extreme instability that could collapse at any time.

The element of a fault mass inevitably evokes the idea of a geological event. Meena Alexander seems to be fascinated by the symbolic potential of some geological phenomena, and *Song Lines* is not the only poem – in *Indian Ocean Blues* but also in *Atmospheric Embroidery* in general – that explores this potentiality. In the poem *Inwood Sita*, the event of the earth opening intertwines with the story of the goddess Sita, which is inevitable given the circumstances of her birth and her search for refuge in the depth of the earth:

> Sita bathed in sand.
> By wildwort
> And willowherb
> Fire starts—
>
> Dry ground cracks,
> Swallows her whole.
> Sita-found-in-a-field
> Fled to Inwood.
>
> Rama cast her out,

Lava storms cooled her

Dirt cloaked her,

A shimmering stole.

Days later, on Dyckman Street

As cobbles crack

She slips into a manhole,

Waves at me.[153]

This poem is a perfect example of a sort of hybridity of Alexander's poems, in which several elements from different places and cultures merge and mix together. In this case, Alexander recounts the story of the goddess Sita, but she changes it so that Sita ends up inhabiting Manhattan: "in my imagination she slips into the earth of Manhattan island, through the crevices of Inwood marble and appears in metamorphic form, on the other side. Time whorls into place, disparate world merge in a shimmering whole which is what memory mingling with desire can sometimes grant us"[154].

The first stanza seems to reference Sita's Agni Pariksha, her trial by fire. After saving her from Ravana – the demon king of Lanka – who abducted her and held her captive for a year, Sita's husband Rama questions her purity; in order to prove her virtue, Sita volunteers to walk into fire, conscious of the fact that her loyalty would protect her. She survives the Agni Pariksha completely unharmed and the god of fire himself – Agni – appears to announce her chastity. Despite this proof of her innocence, Rama succumbs to the public opinion of his subjects – who doubt Sita's virtue – and decides to send her into exile[155]. In *Inwood Sita*, the scene is immediately located in a natural environment, "by wildwort / and willow herb". The term "wildwort" does not refer to a specific plant species; the suffix *-wort* derives from Old English and was often used in the names of plants and herbs that had medicinal properties. By the middle of the 17th-century *-wort* begins to fade from everyday use and it is now considered an archaic and historical term[156]. This suggests that using the term "wildwort" is probably an intentional

[153] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 65.
[154] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 38.
[155] Timeslife, *The Real Story of Agni Pariksha of Sita in the Ramayana* (December 27, 2024). https://timeslife.com/relationship/real-story-sitas-agni-pariksha-ramayana/articleshow/116724661.html
[156] Oxford English Dictionary, *Wort, N.[1] Meanings, Etymology and More*, n.d. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wort_n1?tab=meaning_and_use

poetic choice; the use of an historical term helps to give the impression of an ancient and distant world. Furthermore, the choice of "wildwort / and willow herb" – both with medical properties – might indicate the potentiality of a healing process interrupted and destroyed when "fire starts", when Rama betrays Sita's trust.

In the next verses, Sita's story continues. After the fire, "dry ground cracks, / swallows her whole"; in the epic Ramayana, Sita is deeply offended by Rama's betrayal and decides to retire in the depths of the earth, which splits open to welcome her. In *Inwood Sita*, however, it almost seems like she has no choice; it is not her that decides to go away but rather it is the ground that "swallows her whole", as if the earth is engulfing her and consuming her rather than giving her refuge. The only choice that she seems able to consciously make is to flee to Inwood, a neighbourhood in Manhattan. Sita's story is incredibly modern and reflects the experience of having one's worth and credibility continuously questioned, something that every woman has endured. If we take into consideration the circumstances of her Agni Pariksha and of her exile, Sita's situation sadly becomes even more relevant for current times. She is kidnapped and held captive for an entire year, yet she is forced to prove her loyalty to Rama, as if she were the one at fault. Even if Ravana had assaulted her and she could no longer be considered 'virtuous', Sita would be a victim, not someone to blame and accuse. Unfortunately, having to prove your innocence again and again even when you are the one who was harmed is a shared experience among most victims of sexual abuse, even more so if they are women. Alexander makes Sita end up in Manhattan, perhaps to symbolise exactly this universality; it happened to Sita, but it also happens to 'normal' women, across time and cultures. In this sense, Sita is every woman, in every place.

After the ground "swallows her whole" and "Rama cast her out", Sita seems to undergo a deep transformation that takes on almost a geological quality when Alexander says that "lava storms cooled her / dirt cloaked her, / a shimmering stole". In this way, Sita becomes part of the earth and its metamorphic processes; "lava storms cooled her" instead of burning her, and "dirt cloaked her" like a regal garment, "a shimmering stole" that enriches her instead of making her dirty. After this metamorphic transformation, Sita "slips into a manhole" in Manhattan and waves at Meena Alexander. The act of waving indicates a certain degree of intimacy; Sita becomes almost a friend, the distance and unreachability of her godly status is no longer there.

The goddess is now someone we know, a familiar face that "waves at me" while she "slips into a manhole".

In the section *Indian Ocean Blues*, Meena Alexander brings the reader on a journey through her memories and experiences of dislocation; she manages to do so by mixing different places, cultures, times, and realities. In this merging of different elements, however, nature is always present, providing the images necessary to create this imaginary journey. Natural elements are especially important for Alexander in the formation of her own personal concept of *home*, which will be explored in the next paragraph.

### 2.3.2. Natural elements and the concept of *home*

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander describes her thoughts and emotions during the train journey to Bombay, where she and her mother would board on the *SS Jehangir* and sail towards Sudan: "I shut my eyes and tried to imagine the Tiruvella garden, the freckled green leaves on the mango tree by the cow shed, the chickens that might finally have tricked Chinna and managed to lay their eggs in the ash pile, cackling and dancing in their triumph"[157]. She is not thinking about the house in Tiruvella, but about its garden; most of her childhood memories from the time in Tiruvella are in the garden, where she used to play every day but also hide if she wanted to avoid a certain situation or person. While recalling her time in Khartoum University, her first political experiences and some reflections on seeing her poems translated in Arabic, Alexander says that "I was fascinated by the corrosive magic of the first person singular: its exuberant flights, its sheer falls into despair. Still there was always a desire to tell the stories of my life, to write of Ilya's garden. My experiences as a young child, as a guardian of the cashew nut grove, were sufficiently troublesome to lead me to want to set down those feelings in words"[158]. Once again, she associates her childhood and "the stories of my life" with her grandfather's garden rather than with the house itself. In her essay "Migrant Memory: Reflections on the Question of Home", Alexander nostalgically reflects on the fact that she doesn't know the name of the plants outside the window of her New York apartment: "if I were

[157] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 63.
[158] *Ibid*. 120.

standing in my mother's kitchen I would know the name of the blossoms on the tree. I would be able to name them: champak, gulmohar, raathke raani, mulla"[159].

Meena Alexander strongly associates the concept of *home* with knowing the natural environment of a certain place, rather than with the building itself. This characteristic also appears in the poem *Shook Silver*, which has already been analysed in the previous subchapter. In the poem, during her ocean crossing towards Sudan, Alexander tries to find comfort in the idea that she will find animals and trees with which she is already familiar: "they have goats and cows just like us, / also snakes that curl / under the frangipani tree"[160]. Her emotional attachment to the natural environment is also central in the poem *Tarawad*, a word that in Malayalam means "ancestral house"[161]; despite this meaning, once again the focus is more on the garden rather than the house:

You find this hard to believe:
I am a creature of house and home
Bound by a cord of blood—
Wild grasses blazed, nettles turned

Their stalks to the setting sun.
I was born to a house with red tiled roof,
Courtyard where sunbirds drew
Glittering wings across mulberry bark,

Pond where koi crawled
Then shot into light, circling
The mouth of the lotus bloom.
House of mist and stone,

[159] Meena Alexander, "Migrant Memory: Reflections on the Question of Home" cited in Daniela Ciani Forza, "Voci migranti dall'Asia agli USA: Meena Alexander, una poetessa indiana a New York." *Oltreoceano* 3 (2009), 100.
[160] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 11.
[161] *Ibid.*, 95.

Unseen umbilicus

That tethered me

Even as the ocean

Swept on and on.

*Going, going, gone!*

Someone banged the gavel.

Hearing the house was sold

She lay down in the mango grove

And stopped her eyes with stones,

Crazy girl, inconsolable!

Where is she now?

Where is the path where laburnum

Dropped its liquid gold,

Casuarinas flashed green needles into flints?

Jamun and jacaranda trees chopped.

Down into the hole

He went the priest in white robes

Singing praises

To the Lamb of God.

Tor of fragments,

Blunt pinnacle of longing

What becomes of houses torn down?

In the room where she slept

Milk trickles

Syllables swarm, lacking a script

Door jamb stuck to emptiness,

Threshold split of walls.[162]

The poem begins with a statement that underlines the importance of a home for Alexander: "I am a creature of house and home / bound by a cord of blood". The idea of being "bound by a cord of blood" indicates that this deep connection is not only to the "house and home" as a place, but also and especially to her family history; it is an ancestral bond to her origins. In her memoir *Fault Lines*, when talking about her origins, Alexander explains that she considers both her maternal home in Tiruvella and her paternal home in Kozencheri her 'tarawad':

> Though I was born there, Allahabad is not my home. It is far from Tiruvella, about a thousand miles due north. Nadu is the Malayalam word for home, for homeland. Tiruvella, where my mother's home, Kuruchiethu House, stands, and Kozencheri, where appa's home, Kannadical House, stands, together compose my nadu, the dark soil of self. I was taught that what I am is bound up always with a particular ancestral site. Perhaps I will return there to be buried, my cells poured back into the soil from which they sprung.[163]

The term "bound" used both in the poem and in *Fault Lines* is an ambivalent term; it indicates a deep attachment, but also something smothering and suffocating. This ambivalence suggests that Alexander's relationship with her family history is complicated and, at times, oppressing.

The concept of home and being "bound by a cord of blood" is immediately associated with the natural environment in which "wild grasses blazed, nettles turned // their stalks to the setting sun". Even when Alexander introduces the physical building of the house, she does so briefly and then goes back to describe the garden. She only says that "I was born to a house with red tiled roof" and then continues to evocate the atmosphere in the garden, describing the "courtyard where sunbirds drew / glittering beaks across mulberry bark, // pond where koi crawled / then shot into light, circling / the mouth of the lotus bloom". This description portrays a vibrant environment full of vitality, an image that is in contrast with the almost mystical description of the "house of mist and stone". The house being both "of mist and stone" suggests

[162] *Ibid*., 66.
[163] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 22–23.

permanence and impermanence at the same time, in a blending of solidity and intangibility that perfectly describes the intertwining of memory and reality. The continuous alternation between the mention of the house and the images of the natural environment that surrounds it further solidifies the idea that the concept of home overlaps with the natural elements in which Alexander has been immersed during her childhood.

Meena Alexander considers India "the fixed point of the compass, even as the other point shifted with travels"[164]. In this sense, the house becomes an "unseen umbilicus / that tethered me / even as the ocean / swept on and on", a metaphorical and indelible source of life that "tethered" her despite her several ocean crossing and dislocations. This explains her desperation and her feeling of loss when "someone banged the gavel" and sold the house: "she lay down in the mango grove / and stopped her eyes with stones". The use of the third person seems to evoke a sense of detachment and depersonalization brought by the shock of finding out that her ancestral home has been sold. The act of laying down "in the mango grove"[165] and stopping "her eyes with stones" is extremely similar to a funeral ritual; this macabre image perfectly portrays her condition of distress and her being "inconsolable" in front of this incommensurable loss.

This reference to ritualistic practices continues later in the poem. Alexander starts to wonder – with an underlying feeling of anxiety and desperation – about the faith of the vibrant natural surroundings of the house: "where is the path where laburnum / dropped its liquid gold, // casuarinas flashed green needles into flints?". She then states that "jamun and jacaranda trees" have been chopped; this mutilation of an ancestral place is followed by a peculiar image: "down into the hole / he went the priest in white robes // singing praises / to the Lamb of God". This religious imaginary could be a reference to her Christian upbringing[166], but it could also be a way to console herself in a moment of deep distress. Despite not being religious anymore, Alexander has admitted that she still finds comfort in the habit of praying: "now, there is a way in which my separation from Christianity is more clear. I still dream though of being a believer some day, entering a church and finding that I can pray. In times of crisis I do turn to the prayers of my childhood"[167]. The religious imagery of the priest "singing praises / to the Lamb of God"

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[164] Shoba Viswanathan. "A Lonely, Glorious Art: Q & A With Meena Alexander." *Bloom*, July 10, 2018. https://bloomsite.wordpress.com/2018/05/22/a-lonely-glorious-art-q-a-with-meena-alexander/

[165] Once again, Alexander hides in a hidden place surrounded by nature in order to deal with traumatic events, like in *Torn Branches*, in *Ars Poetica* but also in both her childhood and adult life.

[166] Meena Alexander was born into a Syrian Christian family.

[167] Poetry Society of America. "Questions of Faith: Meena Alexander," n.d. https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/interviews/questions-of-faith-meena-alexander

could also symbolise something else, especially considering that this scene is described immediately after mentioning the "jamun and jacaranda trees chopped". The Lamb of God is biblically a sacrificial victim; mentioning it right after describing the devastation of the garden seems to be an intentional parallelism between the sacrifice of the Lamb and the destruction of the natural environment around Alexander's 'tarawad'; in this way, the wreckage of the garden becomes almost a sacrilegious act.

The last part of the poem perfectly portrays the void left behind by the loss of the ancestral home. The image of a "tor of fragments, / blunt pinnacle of longing" evoke the deep loss of the house – and its emotional meaning – being torn to pieces and the intense longing for a home that is no longer there. Alexander then wonders "what becomes of houses torn down?", but this in an unanswerable question; the "syllables swarm, lacking a script", indicating that language is lacking in front of a loss of this entity. The final verses evoke a sense of finality, an irreparable void that is both emotional and physical; doorjambs are "stuck to emptiness" and thresholds are "split from walls", where once there was a 'tarawad' now there in nothing.

During her life of displacements, Meena Alexander feels the urge to build a place inside herself, a place that she can inhabit and where she can recompose her "broken geography"[168]. She manages to create this place through poetry: "I looked out at the museum where a banner hung and realized that, for me, poems made real places. They had to. My life was so torn up into bits and pieces of the actual that I depended on the poems, irruptions of the imaginary to make an internal history for me"[169]. In this place made by poetry, in this "internal history", nature holds a symbolic space, a constant presence that provides comfort and gives Alexander the chance to express her internal world even when language is "lacking a script".

### 2.4. Environmental issue and climate change

The poems analysed until now have demonstrated that Meena Alexander has a certain ecological sensibility, and that nature has a significant role in both her poetry and her life. This does not necessarily mean that her poetry deals with environmental issues; they are not among the main themes of Meena Alexander's poetic production. There are a few poems that mention

[168] Alexander, *Fault Lines*, 1.
[169] *Ibid*., 125.

climate change and imply a certain degree of environmental concern; however, she just mentions the issue without actually expanding on it.

In the poem *Chilika Lake*[170], for example, she mentions that "still the planet's heat is too much to bear". This verse does not provide an actual commentary on climate change; rather, it seems to serve only as a reinforcement of the general emotion of being overwhelmed in a poem where time moves too fast, "the prose of the world is taunting me" and the past is full of "festoons of words no one believes". The poem *Magnificat* provides a similar example:

> On the road near the hospital
> A plum tree points to Krakatoa and her plumage
>
> The skies Munch painted athwart an open mouth
> Are molten still, the tint of ripe plums.
>
> The radiologist a young thing quips—New kind of tattoo—
> Marks initials on my breast
>
> A man in a mask scrawls X under that
> His eyes dark with volcanic mist
>
> (The one in Iceland,
> Sooting up airspace, grounding planes).
>
> My niece said—As Sarah died, we sat up all night,
> Five women massaging her hands, her feet.
>
> Afterwards our eyes were like that:
> My niece forced her eyes wider with her fingers

[170] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 44.

Pupils roared. ROYGBIV.
All objects emit radiation—*My soul doth magnify the Lord*

In the hospital window leaves burn—
The color of Mary's cheeks when the angel tore in with his trumpet.

You are quite well now, quite well really, voices chime.
A rougher voice: We must take care of the hole

In the ozone layer before more of us fall through.
Some of us become death's midwives.

Question: What holds up the rainbow?
Answer: Only a little fountain of wind.[171]

In this poem, Alexander continuously alternates the private sphere with a more enlarged, public setting. The intimate and personal dimension of the hospital expands to the Krakatoa, and Munch's art is juxtaposed with the "initials on my breast", which indicate an imminent surgical procedure; this private dimension is followed by the more global image of "volcanic mist // (the one in Iceland, / sooting up airspace, grounding planes". A personal story told by Alexander's niece intertwines with the religious image of "the color of Mary's cheeks when the angel tore in with his trumpet"; this continuous alternation of different places and situations culminates in a state of anxiety over the effects of pollution, with the observation that "we must take care of the hole // in the ozone layer before more of us fall through". In *Magnificat*, the concern for the state of ecological fragility of the planet is part of the general anxiety of the situation; it seems like the condition of vulnerability of a potentially dangerous surgical procedure has triggered a general concern for the realistic risk of ecological disaster. The way in which Meena Alexander deals with environmental issues is similar to the way in which a 'common' person would deal with this topic; she mentions it only in a couple of poems, usually just in passing, as part of a general state of anxiety and dread and often as an objective information, a thought that appears

[171] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 30-31.

from time to time among other thoughts, a situation that worries her but that she cannot really change or control. This does not mean that Meena Alexander is insensible in front of human mistreatment of nature. On the contrary, her poems are full of images of human violent acts against nature, and nature related imagery is often used as a means to portray violence in general.

### 2.5. The representation of violence through nature

Meena Alexander's poetry is characterised by an omnipresent underlying tension, as author and professor Kazim Ali has noted: "her work shimmered with beauty but always – always – the tension of violence quivered just beneath"[172]. Her poetry can become extremely political, and some of the underlying violence in her poems is correlated to specific events that have a strong social impact and deeply political implications. This is the case of the poem *Moksha*[173] dedicated to Jyoti Singh Pandey – called 'Nirbhaya' by the media –, who was victim of a brutal group rape that took place on a moving bus. The otherworldly atmosphere of this poem is haunted by "the winds of the underworld", by spirits that "beckon through clothes" and, most importantly, by the figure of Alexander's sister-in-law – who died of breast cancer a few years prior to the creation of *Moksha* – that appears in a dream "in a crush of women severed from their bodies"; Nirbhaya is right next to her, "a young thing, raped by six men in a moving bus // (she fought back with fists and teeth)". The poem reaches a turning point when Alexander hears the two women sing, in a moving expression of solidarity and metaphorical sisterhood:

> […]
> Now I hear them sing
> In delicate recitative
>
> My sister-in-law and Nirbhaya,

[172] Ali, Kazim. "The Terrifying Condition of the Human Heart," *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, May 7, 2019. https://aaww.org/terrifying-condition-human-heart-meena-alexander/
[173] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 81-82.

That other, less than half her age,

A song as intricate as scrimshaw

In vowels that flowered

Before all our tongues began,

Their voices

The color of the bruised

Roses of Delhi.[174]

Meena Alexander considers *Moksha* as one of the poems that stand out in the collection:

> I think back to mapmaking this book involved. There are poems that like sign posts stand out for me. 'Moksha' evokes the gang rape in Delhi of the young woman Jyoti Singh Pandey. Those who did not know her name and those who did called her 'Nirbhaya', which means 'without fear'. Her violent death and suffering still resound for us. Huge numbers of people young and old marched in the streets of Delhi and elsewhere, in protest. Her story is not finished.[175]

Another poem that stands out for its inherently political content is the poem *Death of a Young Dalit*, dedicated to Rohith Vemula, a PhD student at the university of Hyderabad who committed suicide after being discriminated by the university administration – who also interrupted his monthly stipend – due to his belonging to the 'untouchable' Dalit caste and his activism for Dalits rights:

Trees are hoisted by their own shadows

Air pours in from the north, cold air, stacks of it

[174] *Ibid*., 82.
[175] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 39.

The room is struck into a green fever
Stained bed, book, scratched windowpane.

A twenty-six-year-old man, plump boy face sets pen to paper—
*My birth is my fatal accident, I can never recover from my childhood loneliness*.

Dark body once cupped in a mother's arms
Now in a house of dust.

Not cipher, not scheme
For others to throttle and parse

(Those hucksters and swindlers,
Purveyors of hot hate, casting him out).

Seeing stardust, throat first, he leapt
Then hung spread-eagled in air:

The trees of January bore witness.
Did he hear the chirp from a billion light years away,

Perpetual disturbance at the core?
There is a door each soul must go through,

A swinging door—
*I have seven months of my fellowship,*

*One lakh and seventy thousand*
*Please see to it that my family is paid that.*

She comes to him, girl in a cotton sari, holding out both her hands.
Once she loosened her blouse for him

In a garden of milk and sweat,
Where all who are born go down into dark,

Where the arnica, star flower no one planted
Thrives, so too the wild rose and heliotrope.

Her scrap of blue puckers and soars into a flag
As he rappels down the rock face into our lives,

We who dare to call him by his name—giddy spirit
Become fire that consumes things both dry and moist,

Ruined wall, grass, river stone,
Thrusts free the winter trees from their own crookedness,

Strikes us from the fierce compact of silence,
Igniting red roots, riotous tongues.[176]

*Death of a Young Dalit* and *Moksha* come one after the other, in a sort of sequence of political, commemorative poems. *Death of a Young Dalit* is accompanied by a comment in which Alexander explains her creative process in writing the poem and the impact that Vemula's death had on her:

> Later that month, news came that a Dalit student at the university had killed himself – a tragic act of protest that resonated throughout the country. He left a haunting letter for us to read. I have included lines from his letter, and set them in italics in my poem.
>
> Night after night as I worked on this elegy, the wind and winter chill commingled with the memory of rocks and stones and trees in a city I loved. I was consumed by the tumultuous hope and the very real despair of a young man I had never met.[177]

[176] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 79-80.
[177] ICF Team. "'On Asphalt, You Hold Your Arms Out' — Remembering Meena Alexander", *Indian Cultural Forum*, November 22, 2018. https://indianculturalforum.in/2018/11/22/meena-alexander/.

The atmosphere of "wind and winter chill" in which Meena Alexander writes this poem is the setting of the opening verses, in which "trees are hoisted by their own shadows" and "air pours in from the north, cold air, stacks of it", an image that perfectly portrays a sense of eeriness, a dark omen. The room "struck into a green fever" strengthens the idea of an altered state of mind, and the description of a "stained bed" and a "scratched windowpane" collocates the scene in a deteriorated space. In this context the protagonist of the poem appears, "a twenty-six-year-old man, plump boy face sets pen to paper— / *My birth is my fatal accident, I can never recover from my childhood loneliness*"; this is the first direct quote from Vemula's final letter, but references to his last words are scattered throughout the whole poem. He is "not cipher, not scheme / for others to throttle and parse // (those hucksters and swindlers, / purveyors of hot hate, casting him out)"; this could be a response to a specific passage in Vemula's letters, in which he reflected on the fact that "the value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living"[178]. He believed that his value "was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility"; Meena Alexander is refusing this idea and stating that he was so much more than a "scheme / for others to throttle and parse", implying also that his life should not be dissected, and his death should not be manipulated and exploited.

In his final letter, Vemula mentioned the idea that humans are "a glorious thing made up of star dust"[179]. This concept of a cosmic origin of humans is referenced in *Death of a Young Dalit*, when Alexander describes the moment of his death by hanging: "seeing stardust, throat first, he leapt / then hung spread-eagles in air: // the trees of January bore witness". The idea that "the trees of January" acted as the only witnesses of Vemula's death reinforces the concept of being interconnected with nature that was introduced by the mention of "stardust", but it also underlines his deep existential loneliness; the only witnesses to his suffering are the trees, there is no one else, he is completely isolated.

Alexander then asks a question: "did he hear the chirp from a billion light years away, // perpetual disturbance at the core?". This passage could be another reference to Vemula's last letter, more specifically to the passage in which he affirms that "I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the

[178] Raiot Collective. *Last Words of Rohith Vemula*, January 18, 2016. https://raiot.in/last-words-of-rohith-vemula/
[179] *Ibid*.

stars. And know about the other worlds"[180]; Alexander is wondering if his belief came true and he has managed to "travel to the stars" after his death.

She then inserts another sentence from the letter: "*I have to get seven months of my fellowship, // one lakh and seventy five thousand rupees. / Please see to it that my family is paid that*". This sum was owed to him by the university administration, who blocked his monthly payments for months with the excuse of a bureaucratic delay. This passage is followed by the image of a "girl in cotton sari" that goes to him "holding out both her hands"; her gesture of opening her arms to him could indicate that this girl "in a cotton sari" is his mother, since it is extremely similar to the earlier description of his "dark body once cupped in a mother's arms". The following verses could be a confirmation of the identity of the girl: "once she loosened her blouse for him // in a garden of milk and sweat", in a moment of intimacy that resembles that of a mother breastfeeding her baby. This past moment of closeness between mother and son takes place "in a garden of milk and sweat", a seemingly liminal place in which the nourishment and vitality represented by the milk intertwines with the hardship implied by the presence of sweat, perhaps to symbolize the complexity of life in general. This almost suspended space is "where all who are born go down into dark", a possible reference to death, but it is also where life thrives in the form of "the arnica, star flower no one planted" and "the wild rose and heliotrope". The arnica, the wild rose and the heliotrope all thrive despite not being planted, despite being neglected and not cared for. This passage seems to perfectly portray the act of resistance against abuse; it suggests that, even in the face of systemic oppression, there is always a force that persists and thrives despite hardships.

In the context of *Death of a Young Dalit*, this resisting force is fuelled by the circumstances of Vemula's death, an event that bursts into the lives of everyone and acts as a catalysing factor for a larger movement for justice. His suicide has in fact sparked a series of demonstrations for Dalits rights across several major cities in India, and he has become a symbol of protest against injustice and prejudice[181]. In this sense, Vemula becomes a "giddy spirit" that leads others to "become fire that consumes things both dry and moist", engulfing everything. This fire, this wave of resistance can be destructive, but it is freeing, since it "thrusts free the winter trees from their own crookedness". The event of Vemula's death and the

[180] *Ibid*.
[181] Omer Farooq, "Rohith Vemula: The Student Who Died for Dalit Rights." *BBC News*, January 19, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35349790

mistreatment and abuse that has provoked it "strikes us from the fierce compact of silence, / igniting red roots, riotous tongues", awakening a political consciousness and calling for action.

Another extremely political poem that deals with the themes of resistance and political activism is *Crossroad*, which Meena Alexander has written after the U.S. presidential election in 2016 as a response to the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory:

> I wrote the poem called 'Crossroad' after I had completed the rest of the manuscript. It came to me in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.
> It starts just out the Graduate Center where I teach. I was at Fifth Avenue about to cross the street to go to my office when I saw the barricades in front and the array of bikers in leather, flying American flags. A sudden dread filled me. I feared for our immigrant lives. That's how the poem starts, but like so many of my poems it stitches in and out of discrepant spaces and through spaces of memory, trying to hold together in a shining space of the imagination what would otherwise remain forever apart. I imagined the great Indian writer Mahasweta Devi, in the wake of the bikers. She had come to speak to me.[182]

The title of the poem is a both reference to the moment and place that inspired it – the crossroad near the Graduate Center where Alexander sees the bikers – and to the unsure time after the election, a moment full of uncertainty, a metaphorical crossroad in which American citizens have to decide how to react. Alexander describes it as "a frightening moment, I think, for many of us, but it's also, by the same token, a moment where we really have to stand on our toes and walk in the streets or do whatever we can, however it comes"[183]. *Crossroad* seems to be an encouragement to openly demonstrate dissent for the political ideals of the Republican party, to find the courage to protest and not lose hope:

> There I am, almost at the crossroad
> Stuck in a sudden storm of bikers, men in leather, engines snarling.
> Flags spurt skywards.
>
> I freeze at the metal barricade, the seam of sense unpicked,
> Brown body splayed.
> In the aftermath of light, what proof is there of love—

[182] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 39.
[183] Tanya Domi, host. The Thought Project. Episode 8, "Interview with Meena Alexander" CUNY Graduate Center, August 10, 2018. Podcast, 21 min., 39 sec. https://soundcloud.com/gc_cuny/the-thought-projects-episode-8-interview-with-meena-alexander

Buoyancy of the soul hard to mark

Apart from the body

Its tenuous equilibrium unpicked,

Wave after wave of arrival

Etching questions in encirling air

As if life depended on such flammable notations.

*

You come, sari with blue border blowing,

Just as I saw you first, head bare.

A sudden turn on asphalt, you reach out your arms

As if in a palash grove and call to me —

Come over here!

Sometimes the bleeding petals bring down a house

Bring down a republic.

Children are bought and sold for money—

*Ghee to burn her. Teen taka. Ten rupees. Ek taka one rupee.*

*Cloth to cover her with.*

*Camphor for the burning. Bhang to make her drowsy.*

*Turmeric. Chandan.*

You halt at the crossroad, hair thrummed by a savage wind

(Later I try to follow marks of feet, touch cold cotton

That lashed your flesh in place).

I hear your voice —

Brood, and it will come, a seizure of sense, a reckoning:

Write with chalk, sticks of lead, anything to hand

Use a bone, a safety pin, a nail, write on paper or stone

Let the poem smolder in memory.

In the desolation of time write

How one inked the bubble with a woman's name

Way at the top of the paper ballot, saw her own hand quiver.

This was in the school with empty metal desks, near Fort Tryon Park.

One set her nipple to her infant's lips

Felt her heart sprout wings, flit over the barbed wire

Of the Immigration Detention Center.

One whimpered in her sleep — Mother, I know I am a tree,

I trail my roots behind me, the man with bad hair will axe me down.

One daubed her face with white paint, crawled

Into a cage outside the museum, hung a sign round

Her own neck — *We are barbarians come to live amongst you*,

*Some of us speak this language*.

*

Hoarse already, you whisper—

Come closer to me.

You who were born in the Gangetic plains

A year after mid-century

Consider the fragility of the horizon,

The arc of stars into which your father raised you.

When you fall, as surely you will one day

Try to swim forward into blackness

Arms pointing to where you imagine the vault of heaven to be

As Draupadi did, a great throated cry

She made in the forest,

Only the birds could save her, they picked up her cries.

Think of Antigone, who anointed her brother's corpse with dirt

To keep away the wild dogs,

She too made bird sounds, guttural cries.

Go to Standing Rock, where people mass outside their tents

In splintering cold, to guard the quiet springs of water.

There the palash blooms,

Tree used for timber, resin, dye,

Tinting the nails of the love god.

On its leaves names swarm—

Anna Mae Aquash, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray,

Balbir Singh Sodhi, Julia de Burgos countless more.

Thrust from earth's core

From the shadow of musk deer,

The green throat of the hummingbird,

In the honeycomb of light, they step forward to be counted.[184]

The poem begins with a description of the moment that inspired it. Meena Alexander is at a crossroad, "stuck in a sudden storm of bikers, men in leather, engines snarling, / flags spurt skywards". In this dangerous context, she freezes, "brown body splayed" to emphasise her vulnerability; her own body makes her a potential target of violence, since it marks her as 'the enemy' for the "men in leather" that are celebrating Donald Trump's victory. Alexander has a moment of painful realisation of the gravity of the situation; "the seam of sense" is "unpicked", as if reality itself is coming apart and nothing makes sense anymore.

In this moment of profound turmoil and struggle, a woman wearing a "sari with blue border blowing" appears. This woman is the Indian poet Mahasweta Devi[185], who Alexander imagines "spectral now, coming to the crossroad to give me courage"[186]. Meena Alexander directly addresses Mahasweta Devi with the second person, as if she is talking to her; Devi calls Alexander with an inviting gesture, "you reach out your arms // as if in a palash grove and call to me— / come over here!". The palash tree that Alexander mentions is a sacred tree for both Hindus and Buddhists, and it is used in several religious ritual[187]; the mention of this tree gives almost a sacred undertone to the scene. Alexander then goes on and addresses the violence that minorities – especially children and women – have to endure. As minorities, they are already extremely vulnerable; in *Crossroad* they become "bleeding petals" – something delicate that is victim of violence and abuse - who can "bring down a house // bring down a republic", meaning that systemic violence against vulnerable marginalized groups has destructive consequences on society as a whole. The poem continues with a vivid description of the exploitation and commodification of children - who are "bought and sold for money" – and of acts of brutality and violence against women, which take on almost a ritualized quality: "*ghee to burn her*. Teen *taka. Ten rupees. Ek taka, one rupee.* // *Cloth to cover her with.* / *Camphor for the burning. Bhang to make her drowsy.* / *Turmeric. Chandan*". All these elements seem to be direct refences to South Asian culture, perhaps to denounce cultural practices that have normalized violence against women and that Meena Alexander has fought since she was in her 20s and part of the feminist movement in India.

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[184] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 87.
[185] Mahasweta Devi was an Indian writer and activist who worked for the rights of several indigenous tribes in India. She died in July 2016, just a couple of months before Trump's election.
[186] Meena Alexander, "Crossroad", *CUNY Academic Commons*, April 2017. https://meenaalexander.commons.gc.cuny.edu/crossroads-april-2017/.
[187] Sacred Trees of BHU. *Flame of the Forest – Palash*, n.d. http://sacredtreesbhu.com/index.php?id=FlameOfTheForest.

After these brutal images of violence, Alexander continues the poem with a stanza that underlines the role of writing and memory as acts of resistance. She is encouraged by Devi to use whatever she can to write and remember: "write with chalk, sticks of lead, anything to hand // use a bone, a safety pin, a nail, write on paper or stone / let the poem smolder in memory". In this way, writing becomes a revolutionary act and remembering becomes an act of celebration and resistance, something that has the power to transform pain into a lasting testament of survival. Alexander intertwines the memory of her own experience with that of other oppressed women. She is encouraged by Devi to "write how one inked the bubble with a woman's name / way at the top of the paper ballot, saw her own hand quiver"; this is a direct reference of the moment when Alexander – and millions of other women – voted for Hillary Clinton, an understandably emotional moment that comes to her mind when she sees the "men in leather" at the crossroad:

> And I was crossing the road to come into the graduate center right to this building very shortly after the election, and I saw this whole storm of white men on motorbikes with American flags, and I was just terrified. And it threw me back to the moment when I was inking in the name of Hillary Clinton with that bubble in the polling booth, and I had tears in my eyes, and I thought, you know what, I'm going to tremble.[188]

Remembering the experiences of oppressed minorities is inherently a political statement, and it becomes even more so when Alexander contraposes the joyful experience of motherhood with being unfairly detained, as a woman "set her nipple to her infant's lips / felt her heart sprout wings, flit over the barbed wire / of the Immigration Detention Center". Another of the experiences that Alexander is exhorted to remember and write is that of a young girl – probably a child – who is rightfully frightened by the political climate after the election; she "whimpered in her sleep—Mother, I know I am a tree, / I trail my roots behind me, the man with bad hair will ax me down". The image of trailing "my roots behind me" is a symbolic reference to celebrating one's cultural identity, something that will get completely destroyed by "the man with bad hair" – a direct reference to Donald Trump and his harmful ideologies. This passage could also imply the inevitable interconnection between the systemic violence against minorities and the destruction of natural environments, two dynamics that are deeply correlated. This carousel of experiences of oppression culminates with a provocative image of rebellion, an active demonstration of dissent of a woman who "daubed her face with white paint, crawled // into a cage outside the museum, hung a sign round / her own neck—*We are barbarians come to live amongst you,* / *some of us speak this language*". This action of protest is a response

[188] Domi, "Interview with Meena Alexander".

to political and social forces that want to completely dehumanize and erase minorities of any kind; it is an open critique to an ideology that strips away identity, it is an assertion of presence, a reclamation of the right to exist and "*speak this language*".

The fourth and final part of *Crossroad* seem to be a commemoration of different forms of resistance and resilience, from which to draw strength; Alexander is encouraged by Devi to imitate and follow the example of several figures, both mythological and real. The invocation of both Draupadi – a character from the epic *Mahabharata* – and Antigone – a figure from Greek mythology – seems to frame resistance as a deeply rooted human impulse, one that transcends time and culture. In order to avoid humiliation, Draupadi ask for divine help with "a great throated cry" of desperation; in this case, nature seems to be the only recipient of her prayers: "only the birds could save her, they picked up her cries". The figure of Antigone – who defied a direct order from her king to honour her dead brother – is also associated with nature, when Alexander says that "she too made bird sounds, guttural cries".

This connection between nature and acts of resistance continues in the rest of the poem. Devi exhorts Alexander to "go to Standing Rock, where people mass outside their tents / in splinter cold, to guard the quiet springs of water". This is a reference to a series of grassroot protests against the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline, which would destroy sacred land of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as well as poison their water supplies[189]. In this place where a community[190] comes together to resist and protect natural resources, "the palash blooms"; this sacred tree becomes a symbol of rebellion and resistance against the systemic oppression of both minorities and the environment.

On the leaves of the palash tree, "names swarm— // Anna Mae Aquash, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, / Balbir Singh Sodhi, Julia de Burgos countless more"; the people mentioned in this passage are all victims of systemic violence or police brutality, and remembering their names and their stories is extremely important in the context of a government that wants to erase their experiences and that of minorities in general.

Anna Mae Aquash is an indigenous activist and member of the Mi'kmaq tribe; she moves to Boston in the '60s and become a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM). In 1975

[189] Nick Tabor, "Standing Rock Protests | Summary, Violence, & Outcome." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d. https://www.britannica.com/event/Standing-Rock-protests

[190] These protests are considered the largest single gathering of Native Americans in over a century, with members of more than 100 tribes represented; they also involved thousands of non-Indigenous protesters and supporters of the cause, in an extraordinary demonstration of communal resistance.

she is kidnapped, raped and murdered; her body is found only two months later, in February 1976. After decades of investigation, in 2003 two AIM members are indicted for her murder; they are later found guilty and receive life sentences. Her daughter, Denise Pictou Maloney, considers her "a symbol of the violence and mistreatment Indigenous women still suffer inside their own communities, and of the code of secrecy that prevents such victims from finding justice"[191].

Eric Garner and Freddie Gray are two African American men, both victims of police brutality. Eric Garner is murdered in 2014 by a police officer that uses a banned chokehold on him; despite his autopsy rules his death as homicide by suffocation, the NYPD tries to cover up the murder and blame his death on health issues. The officer that killed him initially faces no consequences and is fired only five years later, only thanks to the continuous fight for justice lead by Garner's family[192].

Freddie Gray dies while being transported to a police station after his arrest. The autopsy determines that his death was caused by a spinal injury caused by the unsafe way in which he was transported; he was cuffed and not secured inside the van, and had no way to brace himself during a probably intentionally turbulent drive. The medical examiner's office concludes that Gray's death is a homicide, because officers failed to follow safety procedures. Despite this, none of the six officers involved is convicted of any crime.[193]

Balbir Singh Sodhi is shot and killed on September 15, 2001, in Arizona; his death is considered the first fatal act of hate violence as a consequence of 9/11. The man who kills him has previously expressed his intention to "kill a Muslim" in retaliation for the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. The reason why he chooses Sodhi is simply because he has a beard and is wearing a turban in accordance with his Sikh faith. After killing Sodhi, he shoots – and, fortunately, misses – a Lebanese American clerk in a service station and then shoots at a home of a family of Afghan descent; fortunately, no one else is injured. Sodhi's murder is only the first of a series of violent racist attacks that take place in the aftermath of 9/11[194].

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[191] Foot, Richard. "Anna Mae Pictou Aquash" *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, June 27, 2018; Last Edited November 01, 2024. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/anna-mae-pictou-aquash#EarlyLife.

[192] Communities United for Police Reform, *Justice for Eric Garner*, n.d. https://www.changethenypd.org/ericgarner

[193] Stanford University Library, "Freddie Gray", *Say Their Names - Spotlight at Stanford*, n.d. https://exhibits.stanford.edu/saytheirnames/feature/freddie-gray

[194] SALDEF – Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, "The First 9/11 Backlash Fatality: Balbir Singh Sodhi", n.d., https://saldef.org/balbir-singh-sodhi/.

Julia de Burgos is a Puerto Rican writer who deals with themes like feminism, anticolonialism and social justice. She moves to New York with the intention to never return to Puerto Rico; in 1953, she is found unconscious in the street by some police officers who bring her to Harlem Hospital, where she later dies due to pneumonia. Initially, de Burgos gets buried anonymously in a common grave; only later her family manages to locate her grave and identify her[195]. The importance of her literary work is recognized only after her death, and she is now considered as the foremother of the Nuyorican poetry movement in New York[196].

In *Crossroad*, these stories seem to be part of nature itself; these names "and countless more" swarm on the palash tree's leaves and they become part of the "earth's core", buried in the depths of the earth. Their stories seem to be intertwined with the natural environment, and they can be found in "the shadow of musk deer, / the green throat of the hummingbird", once again underlining the relationship between oppressed minorities and the environment. The act of writing, remembering and resisting, however, brings them again to the light; in an empowering act of reclaiming their own existence, "in the honeycomb of light / they step forward to be counted".

The interconnection between minorities and the non-human natural world is clear in Meena Alexander poetry, in which the description of the experiences of oppressed minorities and their resistance against this oppression is portrayed also through the use of nature imagery. Natural elements are a fundamental part of Alexander's representation of violence; their importance is even more clear in the cycle of the *Darfur Poems*, which will be explored in the next subchapter.

### 2.5.1. *Darfur Poems*

The cycle of the *Darfur Poems* is inspired by some drawings made by children that escaped the violence of the war in Darfur. Meena Alexander is deeply moved by these drawings, and she

[195] Maira Garcia, "Overlooked No More: Julia de Burgos, a Poet Who Helped Shape Puerto Rico's Identity", The New York Times, May 2, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/obituaries/overlooked-julia-de-burgos.html.
[196] The Poetry Foundation, *Julia De Burgos*, October 31, 2017. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/julia-de-burgos

tries to use poetry as a means to portray the traumatizing experience of war through the children's perspective:

> In this book I have a cycle of Darfur poems based on drawings by children from the war zone. I had friends from Darfur. Where are they now, I wonder? These poems were inspired by drawings by children who lived in relief camps on the Chad border. The children used crayons and paper brought by visitors from Human Rights Watch. […] The simple drawings with crayons, on cheap paper from notebooks, moved me deeply. I could not get over the worlds the children depicted with their topography marked by earth shattering violence, the order of things as they knew it, utterly destroyed. It was the voices of these children that I had never heard that came to me through the flimsy pieces of paper.[197]

The poems of this cycle provide a haunting testimony of the atrocities of war through the eyes of children. The opening poem of this cycle, *Sand Music*, begins with the multiple voices of these children, but also of refugees in general:

> The wind is blurring our faces
> We do not know who we are or what songs we might sing.
> A stranger enters the village, lets go his horse.
> A woman drags a cart filled with pots and pans
> Pulling the sky behind her.
> When I was a young girl I saw nothing,
> My skin set fire to everything.
> A tethered horse is pecked to death by songbirds.
> In Muhagiriya everything's laid out
> As if in a Japanese garden, the sort one dreams of—
> Circles of sand, beaten rocks, tree stumps
> Tilting into blue. A child's elbow pokes out of a well.
> In a mosque, men kneeling, five beheaded.
> *And the daughters of music brought low.*[198]

[197] Alexander, "Making Atmospheric Embroidery", 39.
[198] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 35.

The poem opens with a plurality of voices expressing a sense of confusion and loss of identity. In this context, the wind becomes an erasing force that "is blurring our faces", destroying a fundamental defining feature. They "do not know who we are or what songs we might sing", the experience of having to flee from war causes a sense of disorientation and a deep loss that is both personal and cultural, since the act of singing together might be a reference to traditional practices. These initial verses are followed by the appearance of two figures. The first one is a stranger that "enters the village, lets go of his horse"; the apparently nonsensical action of letting his horse go seems to be explained later in the poem, when Alexander says that "a tethered horse is pecked to death by songbirds"; this implies that the man "lets go of his horse" to spare him this fate. The grim image of the "tethered horse" being "pecked to death by songbirds" perfectly portrays the inescapability of war; the horse is bound, he cannot go anywhere, not even to save his life. The songbirds, usually appreciated for their colourful appearances and their singing abilities, in this poem become dangerous and deadly. The desperate conditions caused by war force them to completely subvert their instincts in order to survive; the reality of war is so horrifying and devastating that even nature starts to act in an abnormal way.

After the man, Alexander introduces the figure of a woman who is dragging "a cart filled with pots and pans / pulling the sky behind her"; this woman is probably fleeing from war and bringing with her "pots and pans", necessary things that she needs to survive. She is not only carrying the weight of the cart, but she is also "pulling the sky behind her", implying that she is also carrying a heavier burden, perhaps the existential and totalizing weight of her circumstances as a refugee. The act of "pulling the sky behind her" also suggests that she is metaphorically bringing everything with her, even the sky itself, leaving only a void; behind her there is only war and destruction.

These images of chaos and desolation are replaced by the description of an apparently peaceful and calm place: "in Muhagiriya everything's laid out / as if in a Japanese garden, the sort one dreams of— / circle of sand, beaten rocks, tree stumps / tilting into blue". Muhagiriya – a small town in southern Darfur – should represent almost an oasis, but there is a sort of a dissonance in its description; the place that should be "the sort one dreams of" has "tree stumps" and "beaten rocks", elements that convey a sense of desolation and abandonment. Furthermore, the choice of the city of Muhagiriya is extremely symbolic of impending violence, as in 2007, during the war in Darfur, a violent massacre in which more than 30 civilians are killed takes

place in this town[199]. The parallelism with the Muhagiriya massacre continues in the final verses of the poem, when Alexander mentions "in a mosque, men kneeling, five beheaded. / *And the daughters of music brought low*". This final passage perfectly encapsulates the atrocity of war. The five men are in place of worship, kneeling, probably praying; despite this, they are not just killed but beheaded, as in an execution. Not even the sacrality of religion is respected during a war; the very act of worship, a symbol of peace and devotion, is turned into an image of violence and death.

Another poem that mentions religious elements in the context of war is *Green Leaves of El Fasher*:

> Everything that's real turns to sun
> Stones, trees, the jeeps they came in, those men.
> In Jebel Marra, the leaves are very green.
> Here, in El Fasher too.
> I am singing, stones fill with music.
> Do not touch my hair, I cried. They forced me
> To uncover my head then beat me when my veil slipped,
> Not the pink one I am wearing now, with stripes—this
> My aunt gave me. I am not an animal,
> They are more free, birds in the tree, horses too.
> I am your language, do not cover me.
> I am burning in what you take to be the present tense.
> We are the letters *alif, ba, taa, mim*—
> What the sun makes as it spins a nest of fire.[200]

This poem immediately introduces the theme of change: "everything that's real turns into sun / stones, trees, the jeeps they came in, those men". The image of things that are real and tangible turning "into sun" seems to indicate a transformation, from "everything that's real" to something more distant, unreachable and abstract, like a memory. The poem then lists the

[199] UPI – United Press International, *New Atrocities Emerge in Darfur*, October 17, 2007. https://www.upi.com/Top_News/2007/10/17/New-atrocities-emerge-in-Darfur/42281192630968/
[200] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 37.

elements that the protagonist considers real: “stones, trees, the jeep they came in, those men”. The first two elements – stones and trees – represent something stable, something that is part of everyday life, almost a grounding presence. This natural image is interrupted by the introduction of elements of human conflict: “the jeep they came in, those men” represent a violent force that disrupts ordinary life. Immediately after introducing this element of conflict, the focus shifts again on natural elements, as if the protagonist were trying to distract herself from the memory of “those men”; she notes that “in Jebel Marra, the leaves are very green. / Here, in El Fasher too”. This reference to two different places in Darfur also indicates her displacement, probably due to the necessity to flee from war.

The underling tension created by the alternation between elements of human conflict and natural elements culminates in explicit violence, in what can be assumed to be the memory of a traumatic episode: “do not touch my hair, I cried. They forced me / to uncover my head then beat me when my veil slipped”. The violence and humiliation that the protagonist has to endure is inescapable; the fact that “those men” force her to “uncover her head” only to physically punish her for it indicates that they are only searching for an excuse to beat her, in a gruesome confirmation of the unnecessary cruelty of war, and, in general, of patriarchal oppression.

The protagonist of the poem is conscious of this oppression; she contrasts her situation with that of animals: “I am not an animal, / they are more free, birds in the tree, horses too”. She is being treated as worse than an animal, as a mere object; birds and horses represent freedom from the oppression she faces, something for which she longs. In response to this dehumanizing treatment, the protagonist reclaims her place in the essence itself of her – and her oppressor’s – culture. She states that “I am your language, do not cover me”, in a plea for recognition and freedom of expression. In the final verses of *Green Leaves of El Fasher*, this reclamation of worth becomes a plural statement: “we are the letters *alif*, *ba*, *taa*, *mim*— / what the sun makes as it spins a nest of fire”. The letter that the protagonist mentions are the first letters of the Arabic alphabet; these letters are foundational, just as her identity – and that of other people in her same circumstances – is rooted in her culture, language, and history. By invoking the alphabet, the protagonist is asserting that their identity is irreducible and intrinsic, something that cannot be taken away or erased; they are “what the sun makes as it spins a nest of fire”, they become part of the very functioning of the universe.

In the *Darfur Poems*, it is clear that the violence of war impacts not only people, but also animals and the natural environment in general. This is particularly evident in the poem

*Nurredin*, in which Meena Alexander portrays the brutality of the situation through vivid and direct images:

> A garden bright with fruit trees,
> Each tree, in its own shadow, singing.
> Above our house, a cloud of locusts stinging.
>
> Mother lay not moving, out of her throat
> A black river. I saw a man with a gun
> In his mouth, he was trying to eat it.
>
> From the cloud-ship Antonov drops fell
>
> We ran to the wadi, many people came.
> Creatures too, camels, dogs, cats with no fur
>
> Birds with torn wings.
> I curled up in the wadi house,
> Hungry, with bones and ash to stay.
>
> Remember me, Nurredin
>
> My name means light of day.[201]

The poem begins with the portrayal of an idyllic image, a sort of garden of Eden, a harmonious place that is "bright with fruit trees, / each tree, in its own shadow, singing"; this initial peaceful and almost ethereal setting is also the only positive image in the whole poem. It is immediately replaced by a series of extremely disturbing images, starting from "a cloud of locusts stinging" above the house of the protagonist, reinforcing the idea of a painful looming threat, something that can invade even the intimate space of a house.

[201] Alexander, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, 38.

The threat of impending doom introduced by the "cloud of locusts stinging" becomes reality when Alexander describes a gruesome image: "mother lay not moving, out of her throat / a black river". Considering that this poem is probably from the point of view of a child, this image becomes even more horrifying; the "black river" coming out of her throat, possibly her blood, becomes the confirmation that the mother is dead. In this case, the natural element of a river becomes a symbol of death and suffering; the only way that the protagonist has to try to understand and describe such a terrible reality is through nature-related imagery. In the same way, the Antonov airplane[202] becomes a "cloud-ship" and the barrel bombs - which are never explicitly mentioned - become "drops" that fall like rain.

In order to escape the bombing and find a safe place, the people of the village are forced to flee and they "ran to the wadi, many people came". The term 'wadi' is an Arab term that usually indicated a river valley[203]; once again, nature provides a safe refuge, a dynamic that can be found more than once in the whole collection of *Atmospheric Embroidery*. Despite this, nature is not immune to the devastation brought by war and the people of the village are not the only ones that have to escape; with them there are "creatures too, camels, dogs, cats with no fur // birds with torn wings". The presence of "cats with no fur" and "birds with torn wings" underlines the damage that war has done, harming not only humans but also animals; war brings only a totalizing suffering that involves every aspect of life and damages both the human and the non-human.

After all these images of violence and pain, the final verses of *Nurredin* provide a deeply personal moment, a plea to be recognized: "remember me, Nurredin // my name means light of day". The desire to be remembered, to assert one's identity amidst chaos, is part of the broader existential need for recognition and meaning in the face of dehumanization; the plea to "remember me" becomes both an acknowledgment of loss and a refusal to be forgotten, in a final, desperate act of courage in the face of possible annihilation.

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[202] The Antonov is a cargo airplane. During the war in Darfur, the Sudanese military starts to use it to drop barrel bombs in Darfur's territory; it is by far the most heavily used aircraft in Khartoum's aerial assaults on civilian and humanitarian targets in Darfur. (Reeves, Eric. "The Infamous Antonov (An-24 and An-26) Cargo Planes/Crude Retrofitted Bombers." *Sudan Research, Analysis, and Advocacy*, February 5, 2015. https://sudanreeves.org/2015/02/05/the-infamous-antonov-an-24-cargo-plancrude-retrofitted-bomber/).

[203] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Wadi*, n.d. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wadi

# *Conclusion*

The poems analysed in this study have demonstrated that natural elements have an important role in Meena Alexander's poetry. She uses nature-related imagery in order to explore what would otherwise remain unsaid and unsayable. Nature provides a vocabulary with which Alexander can talk about her body and her grandfather's abuse, but also about women's body and its oppression in general. Natural spaces represent safety and are sought repeatedly during moments of distress and turmoil throughout several poems in *Atmospheric Embroidery*. Animals, plants and trees become a point of reference during her multiple ocean crossings, a source of comfort and familiarity in the midst of the confusion and loss of a displacement. A general anxiety for ecological disaster seeps in the collection and strengthens the vibe of uneasiness in some of the poems, while in others nature is used to represent an unstoppable force of social change and resistance. The brutality of war and the violence of systemic oppression is portrayed through images of mutilated animals and destroyed landscapes, in a powerful statement on the totalizing consequences of war and on the interconnection between the mistreatment of minorities and the destruction of the environment.

Despite the complex role of natural elements and their widespread presence in Meena Alexander's poetry, while reading her works there is never the impression of a higher moral value of nature. In Alexander's poems, nature remains impartial; it exists on its own, it does not have a moral meaning, it just *is*. The non-human natural world represented by Meena Alexander is not an anthropocentric reality and it is not an idyllic place; as Dr. Wendy Anne Kopisch has noted, in Alexander's work there is no sign of pathetic fallacy[204]. Natural elements are used to portray certain emotions, experiences and situations, but they are never humanised or exploited to teach a moral lesson. Nature is there, it exists; emotions and symbolic meanings are conveyed *through* it, but they are never an ontological aspect of it. In the poetic landscape created by Meena Alexander, nature exists *with* humans, *despite* humans, and never *for* humans.

[204] Wendy Anne Kopisch, "Still Writing of the Linden Tree: the Role of Nature as Preserver of the Lyric in the Poetry of Meena Alexander" in *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander,* edited by Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 184.

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