

## Mother as an Archetypal Symbol in the Poetry of Meena Alexander

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Symbol is a word or phrase that signifies an object or event, which in its turn signifies something or suggests a range of reference beyond it. Northrop Frye defines symbol as, "A Word, a phrase or an image used with some kind of special reference" (Frye71) and suggests that all words are symbols as they symbolize sounds. The principle of manifold meaning has been an established fact about symbolism. Symbols are formed of the two things, an image and idea or conception that symbol suggests or invokes. Generally, symbolism is the representation of reality on one level of reference. The symbolic meaning of the word is different from the emotive meaning of the word in literature.

In the earlier period, people have confused symbol with allegory. Blake first distinguished between symbol and allegory. Symbol is characterized by translucence of the special in the individual, or of general in the special, or universal in the general. An allegory presents a pair of subject (an image and a concept) but a symbol only one (the image alone), allegory is relatively specific in its significance while symbol remains indefinite, suggestive in its significance and hence symbol is higher mode of expression. W. B. Yeats in his essays 'Symbolism in Painting' and 'Symbolism in Poetry' expresses his views on the symbolism. According to Yeats, allegory is product of memory whereas a symbol represents reality, which is unchangeable.

The symbols are employed to create deeper effects and subtler indefinable shades that enable the artist to approach the divine. The symbol also differs from metaphor and simile as it lacks the paired subject, which is identifying feature of these devices. The symbol has two correlated references, one literal and second symbolical. In symbolism, instead of extreme naturalism, "an emphasis is on the literal aspect of meaning." (Frye 80). Symbolism intends to describe a mode of literary expression in which words are used to suggest states of mind than for their objective, representational or intellectual content. Representing the vague and fleeting impressions before the mind's eye, symbolism concentrates on the inner experience. Withdrawing outer actuality of human life, symbolism returns to concentrate upon the more and more private and personal experiences, which lead symbolism to the flaw of over concentration on the exotic and bizarre.

The concept of symbol comprises of categories like conventional or public symbols and private or personal symbols. The symbols with particular determinate symbolic significance are conventional or public symbols; the cross, the colours like red, white refer to particular symbolic reference. In order to use the unconventional symbols, poets exploit widely accepted and shared associations between an object or event or action and a particular concept. The general association of fox with cunningness, eagle with heroic endeavor, setting sun with death, rising sun with birth, winter with desolation and death, spring with happiness, climbing with progress and descent with surrender or

failure acquire symbolic significance in many of the poets.

Apart from the general categories of symbolism, there are particular types of symbolism that can be found in poetry that may cause a little difficulty in dealing with them. Murphy has classified them in two categories in his book *Understanding Unseen* (1975). First is the use of associated objects, metonymy; sometimes which is associated with a person or institution and activity is used to symbolize the whole (crown is associated with royalty and is used as symbol of King's authority). The second is the use of a part for the whole that is synecdoche (the word 'factory hands' refers to the workers to work in factory and 'five hundred souls' symbolize five hundred people). Symbols are essentially the connotative words that are also evocative and emotive, and make language rich and expressive.

The present paper intends to interpret the recurrent symbol of mother by taking reference of the circumstances in which poet lives and had lived and the influences which have moulded her sensibility. Because symbolism is one of the remarkable device of interpretation of poetry as Freud writes in his essay, 'Symbolism in Dreams', "Symbols are stable translations" (Freud184). There is always relation between the symbols and unconscious and there is "a symbolic relation between dreams and the unconscious" (Freud185). The symbol of mother will be interpreted to explore the unconscious and latent elements of poet's sensibility.

The Archetypal symbol of mother has two significant aspects, the good mother, and the terrible mother. The Good Mother symbolizes the positive aspects of the Earth Mother and is associated with the life principle, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, and abundance. Demeter, Sita, Ceres, Savitri are the examples of Good Mother. While the terrible Mother is a witch, siren, whore and is associated with sensuality, fear, danger, death and terrifying aspects.

In Alexander's poetry, mother is the source and origin of the voice to be heard. Poet is always close to the mother as a source of good. Mother figure is the good mother: the omnipotent and generous dispenser of love, nourishment, and plentitude. The mother in Alexander's poetry symbolizes her own mother as traditionalist, quiet woman whose world is centered on the domestic responsibilities and religious rituals and suffering from the several types of injustices. She is the Mother who taught the poet importance of reticence for woman and believed that woman's place is in home by her children and not in career.

Still in spite of this, the female images in Alexander's works tend to center around strong and independent woman who defy culturally imposed conventions.

The mother figure in the form of Kali and Durga in *The Bird's Bright Ring* symbolizes mother principle with its fierceness, strength, as well as wisdom. The poem represents mother as giver of life who feeds poet with rivers of crystal flowing in the flesh of poet. Though poem expresses despair and melancholy on cotemporary degeneration, the mother is the symbol of "bright" amidst "black air" (13). She is the "brilliant mother" (17) who fed the poet with the light in her veins.

Finally, poet compares mother with the harvest and mother comes as the symbol of creativity and reproduction (BBR 24-25).

The mother figure in *Without Place* is mixed with sister. It reminds of T. S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' in which Mother is the symbol of savior who can relieve from the grief and sin of being. This mother and sister mixed with Goddess Durga become the

symbol of eternal reliever from grief in the poem 'Her Imageless Face' (WP 30). Mother in the form of Goddess Durga is the symbol of the feminine power of creation, recreation and procreation as well as protection from all evils of life. In *Raw Silk*, which speaks of violence, destructive way of bloodshed and terrorism, mother comes as the symbol of pain experienced by the poet as she writes in 'Firefly', "Mud in her mouth / my mother cries in me" (RS 28).

*House of a Thousand Doors* explodes with the images, memories, and voices of grandmother. The image of woman, who kneels at each of the three-foot high bronze sills that guard each of the thousand doors, reflects the symbols of good mother. The two grandmothers are highly symbolic. The paternal grandmother was housebound throughout her life and symbolized the traditional and domestic part of woman's existence while her maternal grandmother who had been politically active represented the new awareness and feminist consciousness of the contemporary women. In order to represent their lives imaginatively, poet metamorphoses the two grandmothers into the image of one ancestral mother figure. Finally, they "merge into one nameless woman who has no past" (Rustomji-Kerns Rev. of HoatD90). The symbol of grandmother is significant symbol around which Alexander has composed a number of poems. She felt sense of recovered identity closely related to life in Kerala as she explains in *Fault Lines*, "coming to America I felt that I didn't have a history and wanted a female ancestral figure and so made one up, as in so many poems in *House of a Thousand Doors*" (27). The mother and grandmother figures affirm the matrilineal rights distinctive of Kerala culture to which poet belongs.

To increase the expressive power of language, Meena Alexander has used symbolism and images on extended scale. In some poems, her symbols are straightforward and are easy to interpret. However, in some poems, her symbols become complex, personal, and complicated. She employed symbols to convey her inner sensation, her vision, her migratory experiences, feminist feelings, and sensuous passions. Alexander's symbols are highly evocative and suggestive and created the impression of complexity, richness, and intensity in poetry. Symbols are drawn from the diversity of sources such as myth, history, the worldly issues, personal feelings, academic career, multiple migrations and lived in places. Her family members like grandmothers, grandfathers, mother, aunts, children, daughter, and son have been converted into symbols. Some symbols are used in poem after poem, changing and expanding their meaning. The symbols and images are carefully woven into the pattern of the poem. Her dominant symbols are house, mother, grandfather, roots, birds, garden, snakes, stones, trees, silk, and tower.

Alexander's symbolism has potential of multiple interpretations. The overlapping of symbols makes the interpretation and elucidation of poems complex and gives rise to many contradictions. Symbolism is an important technique of Alexander's poetry through which she could communicate her ideas and vision. The unseen is made seen by the use of vivid, concrete images, which due to their constant repetition acquire symbolic significance. The images like grass, sea, rivers, birds, trees, gardens, houses, of earth, stars, sun and moon are all used as symbols to convey poet's perception of life. Personal emotions are woven into

patterns of images and symbols to express poet's love, pain, sufferings, and ecstasy. Alexander also employs archetypal symbols, which are passed from one generation to

another through the collective unconscious, and they form group of universal symbols. Such universal symbols include symbols of mother, colours, of the quest or journey, sky, earth, light, darkness, wheel, the archetypal woman, the wise old man, the Garden, the tree, the desert. Her poetry has the philosophical strength, experimental material, and approach. The symbols such as house, bird, water, garden and vegetation, abstract symbols, muse, mandala, plough, snake, mother symbol, grandfather, tower symbol, symbol of barbed wire, symbols of Mira, Draupadi, and Sita are the major symbols in Alexander's poetry.

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