Can Third-World Women Speak?: Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* and Decolonial Feminist Pedagogy

Soumitree Gupta

Carroll College, Montana, United States

Introduction

In the wake of Malala Yousafzai's landmark speech at the United Nations in July 2013, Taliban leader Adnan Rasheed penned an open letter accusing Yousafzai of using her "tongue on the behest [sic] of … others" and serving as a mouthpiece for western imperialist propaganda. He reminded her of the British colonial legacy of western education, and advised her to "come back home," where she could "adopt the Islamic and pushtoon culture," join a female madrassa, and use her "pen" to represent the "plight of the Muslim ummah" ("Taliban's Letter"). That same month, *Huffington Post* published an article by Assed Baig criticizing the "hypocrisy" of "Western politicians and media" that had "hijacked" Yousafzai's message to reinforce the colonial narrative of the west rescuing the brown girl from brown patriarchy while obscuring the violence of western imperialism—the "bombings"—in the global South. "Malala is the good native," Baig wrote; "she does not criticise the west, she does not talk about the drone strikes, she is the perfect candidate for the white man to relieve his burden and save the native" ("White Saviour Complex"). This figure of the "good native" is reinforced in Yousafzai's memoir *I Am Malala*, which was published a few months later and widely embraced by western audiences, despite its contentious reception in Pakistan. Allegedly ghostwritten by "co-author" Christina Lamb, *I Am Malala* critiques the violence of third-world (Taliban) patriarchy, but remains silent on the structural violence of the west against third-world girls and women.[1] Even the memoir's subtitle, *The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, foregrounds a selective narrative of third-world female victimhood.

While Yousafzai's politics and testimonies are more complex than how they have been framed in mainstream western and South Asian nationalist contexts (Ryder), the debates around her representation reflect how third-world women's voices and testimonies continue to be appropriated by both western rescue narratives (referenced in Baig's article) and anti-western nationalist narratives (exemplified by the Taliban's letter). Third-world women's voices have been sites of contestation between western rescue narratives and anti-western nationalist narratives since colonial times (Mani; Spivak). On the one hand, western imperialist and white

feminist narratives have posited the west as a liberatory telos and ideological "home"—signifying modernity and progress—for the third-world woman who is rendered as voiceless and immobilized by static, oppressive traditions.[2] On the other hand, anti-western masculinist nationalist narratives have prescribed an opposing telos—the static non-western home-nation—as a proper place for the third-world woman who has strayed too far from her own culture (Chatterjee; Grewal *Home and harem*; Kandyoti; Jayawardena).[3] This tension has become especially pronounced within what I call the 'neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex'—a growing market of neo-orientalist memoirs by third-world women that has become a widely consumed genre in the west, especially in the aftermath of the U.S. imperial 'war on terror.' With the growing visibility and co-optation of third-world women's testimonies into neoliberal, imperialist, and white feminist agendas since the 1990s, we are no longer faced with the question that Spivak asked almost four decades ago: Can the subaltern (third-world) woman speak? The more fundamental questions now are: *How* can third-world women represent their lived experience of violence, trauma, and agency in ways that resist appropriation by both western rescue and anti-western nationalist narratives? How can third-world women reclaim and (re)imagine their homes—as decolonial feminist spaces and communities—beyond the linear teleologies of colonial, masculinist nationalist, and white feminist scripts? How do we read and teach third-world women's life writing today, without reinforcing colonial frameworks?

This essay examines the challenges and radical possibilities of third-world women's life writing—especially representation of trauma, self, and home—in the west through a close examination of Meena Alexander's memoir *Fault Lines* (1993, 2003). Born in post-independence India in 1951, Alexander's story spans multiple locations, from India and Sudan to England and later the U.S. In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander examines her embodied lived experiences of alienation, violence, trauma, and feminist friendships and community-building across these multiple locations. Alexander spent her early years growing up partly in India under the familial legacies of her maternal grandparents' involvement in the anti-colonial nationalist movement in British India, and partly in the Sudan where she witnessed the horrors of the Sudanese civil war that she documents in *Fault Lines*. At the age of eighteen, she moved to England for doctoral studies. After receiving a Ph.D. in English from Nottingham University, she returned to universities in Delhi and Hyderabad in India, where she taught for a few years and met her future husband, David Lelyveld. In 1979, Alexander moved to the U.S. after marrying Lelyveld. She became a Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, and authored numerous novels, poems, and essays focusing on the themes of migration, home, and identity from a postcolonial feminist perspective. She died of cancer on November 21, 2018, in New York.

Notably, Alexander published her memoir in two editions. In the first (1993) edition, she writes about her fractured postcolonial migrant self "[w]riting in search of a homeland" (3). She articulates her multiple, fluid identities as "a poet writing in America, but American poet—An Asian American poet—a woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a third-world woman poet" (193). What I find particularly compelling, however, is her foregrounding of the precariousness of memory and life writing as she documents her lived experiences across multiple geo-temporalities of violence and trauma:

> […] the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind's space. Even what I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed for me in the face of present danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed. And there is little sanctity, even in remembrance.
>
> What I have forgotten is what I have written: a rag of words wrapped around a shard of recollection. A book with torn ends visible. (3)

These opening lines in the first edition of *Fault Lines* foreshadow the publication of the second (2003) edition a decade later. The revised edition, published in the aftermath of 9/11 and the imperial war on terror, consists of two parts: while Part I, entitled "Fault Lines," is a reproduction of the first (1993) edition of Alexander's memoir, Part II introduces an entirely new section entitled "Book of Childhood." In the expanded edition, which this essay focuses on, Alexander writes that her experience of racial violence as a South Asian woman in post-9/11 New York triggered her suppressed childhood memories of being sexually molested by her revered maternal grandfather in her idyllic childhood home in Kerala, India. Alexander admits in the "Book of Childhood" that she had mis-remembered and misrepresented her relationship with her maternal grandfather in the first edition, and "had written a memoir that was not true" (241). In effect, what we read in the post-9/11 edition is a complex, layered narrative that fractures the clichéd trope of the migrant third-world woman as the "good native" (Baig), who arrives in the west to depict her third-world home as a static site of patriarchal violence or superior cultural traditions in stark opposition to a western modernity that is progressive, empowering, and devoid of violence.[4]

My essay will examine Alexander's depiction of this fraught relationship between trauma, memory, and self-representation, particularly in relation to the shifting landscape and politics of third-world women's life writing—often focused on violence and trauma—in the west. I contend that Alexander's foregrounding of the contingency and non-linearity of trauma writing—enacted through her self-reflexive, fragmentary, and layered narrative—destabilizes the figure of the third-world woman as 'native informant' or 'authentic insider' within the neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex. In particular, I argue that

Alexander's non-linear trauma aesthetics highlight the interconnected structural violence experienced by third-world women in both the global South and the global North, and in turn, produce alternative imaginaries of decolonial feminist homes that resist the linear teleologies of western colonial, anti-western nationalist, and white feminist narratives.

Fault Lines (1993, 2003) and the Neo-Orientalist Memoir-Industrial Complex

The publications of the two editions of *Fault Lines* in 1993 and 2003 reflect significant transformations in the landscape of third-world women's life writing, as well as tensions surrounding its reception in the west. When the first (1993) edition of Alexander's memoir came out, third-world women's life writing was an already established genre in the North American academy and literary market. The growing visibility of third-world women's life writing—as a subaltern oppositional genre amidst the "memoir boom" (Gilmore, *Limits of Autobiography* 2) during the 1980s and 90s—has been attributed to decolonial feminist movements and publications as well as the rise of academic fields such as postcolonial studies and ethnic studies. Groundbreaking experimental texts within the emergent genre of third-world feminist life writing during the eighties centered and politicized third-world women's lived experiences and testimonies as powerful forms of bearing witness and resistance to the multiple, intersecting violence of imperialist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and racist structures.[5] However, despite its genealogies in decolonial feminist activism and writing, third-world women's life writing has not always retained its oppositional politics.

The neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex, within which I situate Alexander's memoir, reflects broader shifts in the political economy of third-world women's life writing in the U.S. and the west since the 1990s. By the time the revised (2003) edition of *Fault Lines* was published, the rise of neoliberal multiculturalism and global feminism had reshaped western academia and publishing, fueling the fetishization of third-world women as abject victims and exotic "native informants from elsewhere" (John 25).[6] In a 2022 article, Berlin-based visual anthropologist Sadaf Javdani reflects on this continuing trend and critiques the persistent demand placed on third-world women to produce first-person victim narratives of trauma "rather than structural analysis of the systems that produce those experiences" ("Commodification of Trauma"). In this "trauma economy," marginalized communities must narrate and sell their suffering and trauma—their "biggest, darkest, most exotic and enticing traumas" (Javdani)—in order to gain authenticity and visibility within the western public culture. Drawing on Yasmin Nair's critique of trauma in liberal identity politics, Javdani observes: "We are at our most visible

when we are othered and victimised—in other words, when we are constructed as having the least possible agency."

Javdani's observation is particularly relevant to the 'neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex,' a term that I use to refer to the growing production and circulation of a particular brand of third-world women's memoirs in the western publishing market, academia, and para-academic spaces such as women's book clubs since the 1990s and especially in the aftermath of the war on terror. In these memoirs, the third-world female narrator often recounts experiences of violence and trauma through trenchant critiques of third-world patriarchy and nationalism while ignoring the systemic violence of western imperialist nationalism and global capitalism. In the post-9/11 iteration of the neo-orientalist memoir, the third-world woman is reconfigured as an oppressed Muslim woman, often of South Asian or West Asian descent—as exemplified by bestselling memoirs such as *I Am Malala* (Sadaf; Walters; Thomas and Shukul; Afzal-Khan) and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Dabashi; Kulbaga; Behdad and Williams). This figure emerges as a contemporary variation of the subaltern brown woman from colonial times. However, if colonial-era western rescue narratives depicted white men and women as saving brown women from brown men, the brown woman herself becomes the mouthpiece of that colonial rhetoric in the post-9/11 neo-orientalist memoir, thereby constructing what Theresa A. Kulbaga calls affective "'regimes of truth' (Grewal 121)" lending "substance to U.S. imperialist projects" ("Comment and Response" 541).

Neo-orientalist memoirs derive their legitimacy and popularity from the authors' claim to authenticity and "experiential authority" (Bedad and Williams 287), which, as Saba Mahmood notes, provides the "ethnographic grist" (84) for enduring orientalist scripts in the west. The third-world woman's testimony in these memoirs typically engages in "selective memory" (Dabashi 67-69) and "ahistorical historicism" (Bedad and Williams 289) while relying on orientalist tropes in linear western rescue narratives—such as "clash of civilizations"—in order to ultimately posit the third world as an exotic and backward site of patriarchal violence and the west as a liberatory telos for the oppressed third-world woman. After 9/11, neo-orientalist memoirs gained traction in liberal white feminist circles in U.S. academia and popular culture, functioning as a "soft weapon" in the war on terror (Whitlock 3). This popularity is tied to what Wendy Kozol and Wendy Hesford describe as the "politics of pity" (1), or what Theresa Kulbaga calls the "commodification of empathy" ("Pleasurable Pedagogies" 508)—forms of liberal western feminist affect that render third-world women as legible primarily through their suffering and trauma. This dynamic echoes Javdani's recent critique of the continuing demand for third-world women's testimonies of otherness and trauma in the west, and exemplifies what Wendy Brown theorizes as the politics of "wounded attachments," where injury becomes central to identity and visibility of marginalized groups in postmodern capitalism. Within the neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex, such wounded

attachments are embodied by the figure of the third-world woman who "criticizes her culture from a knowing position" (Amireh and Majaj 9), only to promote neoliberal feminist rhetorics of individual choice and empowerment while obscuring the historical and structural violence perpetrated by the western imperial nation-state.

However, this fraught trope of the third-world woman as an authentic insider is neither new nor unique to the post-9/11 memoir-industrial complex. Well before 9/11, postcolonial feminist scholar Uma Narayan had critiqued the politics of authenticity that have long shaped how third-world women are codified and received in western academic and feminist spaces. Building on Narayan's observations, Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj argue that this "predefined role" (1) of the authentic insider ultimately limits or even silences these writers as their voices are co-opted to reinforce western imperialist and neoliberal agendas. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty cautions, the proliferation of third-world women's trauma testimonies in the west is driven as much by market forces as the "conviction to 'testify' or 'bear witness,'" and their mere presence is "not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance" (78).

It is in relation to these critical conversations about third-world women's life writing and its fraught politics of authenticity—especially as they inflect the neo-orientalist memoir-industrial complex—that I situate my reading of the post-9/11 edition of *Fault Lines*. In the "Book of Childhood," added to the revised edition, Alexander's self-reflexive engagement with trauma, memory, and self-representation enacts a powerful critique of the authenticity politics that continue to govern third-world women's life writing in the west. In unearthing her repressed memory of sexual assault by her maternal grandfather in Tiruvella, India, Alexander foregrounds the very processes of remembering and narrating trauma as contingent, palimpsestic, and non-linear. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reflections on memory in "A Berlin Chronicle" (230), Alexander writes, "I must work back from the pressure of the present into the past … in all my work, place is layered on place to make a palimpsest … That is the kind of art I make. Yet the very indices of place have been altered by traumatic awareness" (284). At the outset of the "Book of Childhood," Alexander articulates her purpose in revising her earlier portrait of her grandfather: "My aim is not to cross out what I first wrote but to deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created" (229). Through this excavation, the pastoral image of her Tiruvella home is dismantled and transformed into a space of intimate violence and trauma. "If I have conducted myself like a woman digging," Alexander writes, "it is as a woman who has tried to understand that she must dirty her hands with mud and red earth and broken stones so that splintered images of the past can shine through" (230). This memory-work yields an aesthetic of "fragments" and palimpsest: "After I look at Djebar's book I write a single

sentence in my notebook. *Write in fragments, the fragments will save you* … A decade after *Fault Lines* I turn to flashes of remembrance, bits and pieces of memory, backlit, given at high intensity" (237). As Alexander confronts her repressed childhood trauma, she asks: "We go back home and what do we find? … A woman who did not know herself, how could I have written a book of my life and thought it true?" (230, 241).

These moments of self-interrogation not only destabilize truth and authenticity claims of life writing, especially in third-world women's texts focused on trauma, but also foregrounds what Cathy Caruth[7] and other trauma theorists identify as the belated, non-linear temporality of trauma memory. However, to read the unreliable narrator and fragmented form of *Fault Lines* solely as belated trauma testimony—or more broadly, as a performance of the constructedness and fluidity of female selfhood, as theorized in postmodern feminist life writing scholarship (Smith; Gilmore, *Autobiographics*; Smith and Watson)—risks overlooking the decolonial feminist politics underlying the memoir's form. By interrogating and critically revising her earlier narrative about her maternal grandfather, Alexander dislodges the conventional trope of the third-world woman as 'authentic insider' in the west; yet she also anchors this instability within a self-reflexive palimpsestic form that enacts a deliberate aesthetic and political strategy. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander refuses to be positioned as either authentic insider or abject victim, and instead crafts a complex voice that is deliberately grounded in transnational genealogies of decolonial struggles and resistance. Beneath its fragmented trauma aesthetics, the memoir offers a nuanced decolonial feminist narrative that resists monolithic constructs of third-world women in imperialist, nationalist, and neoliberal discourses.

Early in the memoir, Alexander describes herself as a woman who has been "cracked by multiple migrations" and "[u]prooted so many times" that "she can connect nothing with nothing" (2). Yet her memoir ultimately becomes a form of "shadow work" that connects fragmented representations of violence, erasure, and resistance across multiple geographies of trauma. Recounting an interaction with her mother about an embroidered handkerchief passed down from her maternal grandmother, Alexander describes "shadow work" as "embroidery" that is "done with great care on the underside of the fabric. The missing parts are hidden under the skin of cotton or silk. All that is missing casts a shadow. And sometimes the shadow is considered lovelier than the thing itself…" (270). Shadow work, as Alexander's mother reflects in that conversation, is "invisible. Except when they stain" (270). This motif of "shadow work" becomes a powerful metaphor of Alexander's intricately layered trauma narrative. Her buried memory of childhood sexual violence not only emerges to stain her previously idealized portrait of one of her childhood homes in Tiruvella, but it becomes entangled with the racial violence that she experiences as a South Asian woman in her current home in post-9/11 New York:

> *What follows tells of trauma and memory, childhood and its forgotten past. A book contained within a book, held as darkness... I began this writing in New York City in the months immediately after September 11, 2001.... The destruction visited on the island where I make my home, a second home, tore open the skin of memory, made me start to write again.* (229)

While Alexander's reconstruction of Tiruvella as a space of abuse may risk reproducing orientalist stereotypes of the oppressive third-world home where third-world girls become victims of patriarchal and sexual violence, she undertakes this revision with careful nuance. Her recovered memory of sexual abuse is not isolated, but woven through a transnational matrix of structural violence: racialized violence in post-9/11 New York (229), sexual violence of Hindutva brigades against "innocent women" in Gujarat in 2002 (243), and the violence of U.S. military attacks in Afghanistan, resulting in "stones ground down, children starving, women in burkhas fleeing" (288). "All this," she writes, "has been part of my personal history, and has left a mark on my writing" (289). This aesthetic of juxtaposition, bridging both editions of *Fault Lines*, enacts what Jasbir Puar theorizes as "assemblage"—a decolonial feminist methodology that maps contiguities between seemingly disparate but structurally connected sites of violence. I contend that the non-linear aesthetics of assemblage in *Fault Lines* are rooted within a trauma-informed decolonial feminist framework that calls readers to recognize the interconnectedness of violence experienced by third-world women in both the global South and the global North. In turn, *Fault Lines* enacts a decolonial feminist practice of life writing that rejects both third-world nationalist and western rescue narratives—each of which seeks to contain third-world women within their respective ideological homes—and instead constructs alternative, empowering imaginaries of home beyond the linear teleologies of these hegemonic scripts.

Non-Linear Aesthetics and Decolonial Feminist Politics in *Fault Lines*

In both editions of *Fault Lines*, Alexander crafts an intricate narrative that juxtaposes her lived experiences of gendered and racialized violence across her multiple homes in India, Sudan, and the U.S. She writes about how she used to be chided by her paternal grandmother in India for being a "dark," "unfeminine" girl child, and the permanent mark that her grandmother's words had left on her (49-50). She also writes about her experiences of being humiliated and bullied by her white classmates in the British school in Khartoum because she was the only student of color in her class (248). After moving to Minneapolis with her husband David Lelyveld, she remembers sticking out "like a sore black thumb" among "the welter of Scandinavians" in the bars (168) and being called "You

black bitch!" while strolling with her almost two-year-old son on a street in Minneapolis (169). She recollects the racist backlash against Arab and South Asian communities, alongside her daughter's experience of being stared at and alienated by the "white, Jewish children" in her drama class, in New York and her own decision to not go out in a sari into the streets of New York in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (280, 287). Alexander's assemblage of these various fragments of her lived experience of violence throughout her memoir ruptures the reductive binaries between a progressive, liberatory west and a regressive, violent third world, which have been uncritically chronicled in neo-orientalist memoirs. In turn, her layered narrative potentially urges readers to move beyond essentialist representations of the third world as a static, backward site of oppression, and to recognize intersecting forms of violence in the west.

Alexander's musings on her postcolonial migrant identity are tied to her fraught relationship with the English language**,** the very medium through which she articulates her voice as a writer. In the chapter "Language and Shame" in the first edition of *Fault Lines*, Alexander reflects on how English has operated as both a site of colonial violence and trauma *and* as a tool of self-expression and resistance. She recounts her formative experience of being forced by her Scottish tutor in Khartoum to "polish out" the "traces" of her Indian English and "replace it with the right model" (112). Ironically, more than two decades later, her perfected Queen's English accent cast her "as an oddity in the eyes of the white Midwestern feminist at a university in the colder reaches" of the U.S., "who wanted nothing to do" with her, "who turned and said, 'Of course they'll hire you. They'll trot you out because you speak such good English'" (112). Alexander's juxtaposition of these two experiences highlights the continuity of racialized linguistic disciplining, revealing the othering of her brown, female, English-speaking body in both post/colonial and white liberal feminist spaces. However, Alexander counters this linguistic violence by invoking and aligning herself with a transnational collective of writers and activists—including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Sarojini Naidu, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Susie Tharu, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Assia Djebar—who have strategically transformed the European language into a tool of creative expression and decolonial resistance (126-129, 199).

Notably, Alexander's ambivalent relationship with the English language reflects broader tensions arising from the entanglement of colonialism, anti-colonial nationalist movements, and global capitalism, which enabled the mobility of a select class of English-educated Indian intellectuals—including women writers—into Western academic and literary institutions during the latter half of the twentieth century (Grewal, *Transnational America*; John). Alexander, like her contemporaries Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, belongs to a generation of elite, mobile, English-educated South Asian American women writers from post-independence India, who grappled with the tensions between the British colonial legacy of English education and anti-colonial

nationalist discourses. However, unlike Mukherjee and Divakaruni—whose popular "chick lit" (Butler and Desai) novels often reproduce the east/west, tradition/modernity binaries from teleological western imperialist, anti-western nationalist, and neoliberal feminist narratives by casting Indian culture and tradition as either regressive or exotic while positing the west as a site of modernity—Alexander locates her Anglophone, postcolonial, migrant female subjectivity within a transnational genealogy of decolonial resistance.

It is important to note, however, that while Alexander's account of her alienation as a third-world woman is deeply attentive to gendered and racialized violence—and strongly aligned with political legacies of decolonial writing—it rarely reckons with the author's own class privilege and its influence on her identity and resistance politics. Although there are moments in *Fault Lines* where Alexander gestures toward her elite background, these acknowledgments remain peripheral to her otherwise nuanced engagement with structural violence and decolonial resistance. Alexander's family, on both of her parents' sides, belonged to Kerala's wealthy, landowning Syrian Christian community. Her references to class privilege in *Fault Lines*—for example, her description of her parents' aristocratic lineage and westernized upbringing (13, 50, 53-54, 60) as well as her mentions of the domestic workers in her parents' home in Allahabad and her maternal grandparents' home in Tiruvella (33-34, 43, 48-49, 54, 64), the bonded male laborers traveling from India to the "Persian Gulf" (179), the exploited "girl-women" with "small hands" (186) working in sweatshop factories in the Dominican Republic, and the homeless people on Manhattan's streets (183-184)—are often fleeting, observational, or marked by contradictions.

At times, Alexander pairs her recollections of class privilege with incisive commentary on its entanglement with patriarchy and colorism within her family. For instance, in the chapter, "Kerala Childhood" in the first edition, Alexander's portrait of her paternal grandmother's sexism and colorism highlights how the complex intersections among class, caste, race, and gender ideologies shaped the women's lives in her family. Either these women, such as Alexander's own mother (13-14) and paternal grandmother (44-46, 49-50), internalized existing class- and caste-inflected notions of domestic femininity, or like Alexander's maternal grandmother, Kunju (11), they used their class privilege to defy patriarchal norms. This ambivalence extends to Alexander's portraits of the men in her family. In the same chapter, she critiques her paternal grandfather for exploiting the laborers on his land and fearing the rise of communism (43–44). She is similarly critical of her beloved maternal grandfather, Kuruvilla. Despite his education in Marxist and Gandhian thought (9), his commitment to the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and his friendships with Indian Communist leaders like E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Kuruvilla "never questioned his own class basis" (51). Alexander ends the chapter with a poignant observation on this contradiction: "the very things he taught me about—love and equality and

the sameness of all human beings in God's sight—were what our lives in Tiruvella [Kuruvilla's home] did not have and could not brook" (52). Alexander herself is not devoid of this contradiction. For example, in the chapter "Narrow Gate," she critiques the ostentatious display of wealth at her cousin's traditional wedding—"gold slippers…the band … elephants … crystal gifts … while the children of the very poor stood outside" (207)—and contrasts it with her own modest civil ceremony. However, this cynicism is tempered by her nostalgic description of her mother's expensive bridal trousseau and her parents' lavish wedding feast featuring both local Kerala delicacies and "European style" "cutlets and bread" "[t]hat was only for the guests and not the housefolk" (217-220).

These examples expose the interwoven dynamics of class, gender, and postcoloniality, along with Alexander's uneasy and at times contradictory relationship to these entanglements. Alexander's ambivalence about class in these examples exposes a key tension within third-world feminist life writing: the risk of reproducing partial or uneven critiques of power. Alexander insists in her memoir that she must write herself "into being. Write in order not to be erased" (73). Yet, while her memoir offers an incisive critique of gendered, racialized, and colonial violence, it seldom directly interrogates how her privileged class background and elite western education shaped her mobility and access to transnational literary and academic spaces. Without engaging in an intersectional analysis of the entanglements of heteropatriarchy, imperialism, racism, and capitalism, even politically conscious memoirs such as *Fault Lines* risk obscuring how privilege mediates who gets to speak, be heard, and be celebrated, especially within the global literary marketplace. A careful reading of *Fault Lines* must remain attentive to these tensions, especially as it engages with the text's decolonial feminist aesthetics and politics.

An important dimension of Alexander's decolonial feminist praxis in *Fault Lines* is her portrayal of transnational feminist friendships and solidarities, particularly with other women of color. These relationships not only offer her emotional and intellectual sustenance, but also a shared political framework for interrogating structural violence and historical erasure. Alexander's reflections on these alliances—and the transnational feminist genealogies they invoke—are central to the memoir's decolonial feminist reimagining of home and belonging across geopolitical boundaries. For example, in the "Book of Childhood," Alexander recounts an evening spent with Algerian writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar in post-9/11 New York. When they meet, they recount "[un]speakable things": "the sounds of planes, the harsh fires of September 11," "the refugee camp in Jenin that has been torn down by Israeli tanks," "young suicide bombers in Israel," "the carnage in Gujarat," "the rape of innocent women, a pregnant woman, belly slit open by a sword, an unborn child, heart still beating, raised on a sword tip. Evil in Gandhi's land" (243). Later that night, Alexander tells Djebar "how much her book *Fantasia* has helped" her (243).

This exchange exemplifies what Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose term "dissident friendship"—transborder feminist alliance that resists the "divisive and fragmenting lies of structural power" (14). This exchange also enacts the decolonial feminist modality of assemblage in *Fault Lines*, where the act of feminist witnessing stitches together seemingly disparate experiences of violence across multiple geographies, urging the audience to consider the structural contiguities of nationalist and imperialist violence. In this context, Alexander's friendship with Djebar—rooted in their shared histories of marginalization—becomes a powerful site of decolonial feminist knowledge production. Dissident friendships offer third-world women powerful alternatives to both the "imagined community" of exclusionary nationalisms *and* the universalizing discourse of global "sisterhood" based in liberal white feminism's erasure of race, class, and sexuality.[8] For Alexander, these friendships create intimate, albeit fraught, spaces of belonging—decolonial feminist homes—grounded in radical love, mutual care, and shared resistance. Through memories and narratives that Alexander shares, she shows how such relationships enabled her and other third-world women to name, process, and challenge structural violence together. One striking example is her conversation with Audre Lorde, following the erasure of "three Third-world poets" (74)—Kamala Das from India, Claribel Alegría from Nicaragua, and Lorde herself from the U.S.—from the general program of a poetry reading that Alexander had helped organize in New York. A distraught Lorde who came "all the way from Berlin after … cancer treatment," tells Alexander: "They want to suppress our names, Meena, they want to scrub us out … They cannot bear us … those women of color who talk out" (74). Alexander writes, "[h]er pain, her rage entered me, her delicacy too" (74). She ponders if she put kerosene in her sari and burned her body, "what would that do?...[w]hat would they say? ... For an instant, standing next to Audre, I imagine the words in the local paper: 'Woman of Color from the Edge of Harlem Discovered Burnt, Wrapped in Long Oriental Garment'" (75).

In naming their erasure, grief, anger, and precarity as women of color, their conversation enacts radical feminist witnessing and solidarity. Yet, while such dissident friendships are necessary survival and resistance tools for third-world women, they are not—as Nicole Froio and Constanza Marambio caution—the "cure-all" ("Dissident Friendships") for the systemic violence of imperialist, nationalist, and capitalist institutions. Although Alexander ends this story on a hopeful note recalling the "thunderous applause" (75) of a packed poetry reading, the conversation's affective weight—the ongoing pain and struggle faced by women of color as they navigate structures designed to "scrub [them] out"—ruptures that moment of affirmation. These tensions—between erasure and resistance, between radical hope and unresolved trauma—haunt Alexander's memory-work, especially in the post-9/11 edition of *Fault Lines*. While the "Book of Childhood" begins with a sense of hope and "absolution" (230) as Alexander confronts her "buried childhood" (229), it ultimately

remains, in her own words from the first edition, "a book with torn ends" (3). This tension is reflected in the final lines of the revised edition: "I have written what I could through the rips and tears in the dress I once wore, a shield for a small child's soul, silk stitched with shadow work in delicate rose, violet, and green" (317).

Conclusion

The lack of a neat closure at the end of *Fault Lines* reflects not only trauma's ongoing and fragmented nature, but also serves as a critique of the neoliberal feminist narrative that positions the west as a liberatory telos for third-world women—a narrative that is often reinforced in popular neo-orientalist memoirs such as *I Am Malala* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The recurring motif of "shadow work" in the "Book of Childhood" becomes a powerful metaphor for Alexander's layered memory-work, which resists the teleological arc of redemption often demanded of third-world women's trauma narratives in the western literary marketplace. The decolonial feminist pedagogy of Alexander's memoir lies in its self-reflexive, palimpsestic, and non-linear form, which foregrounds the contingencies of trauma memory-work while stitching together a transnational feminist archive that connects personal trauma to broader decolonial struggles and solidarities against interlocking structures of violence. This strategically crafted shadow work in *Fault Lines* not only assembles seemingly disjointed fragments of violence and resistance, but in the process, it constructs an imagined home that is rooted in decolonial feminist kinships and genealogies. This home embraces a multigenerational and transnational community of third-world women, from Alexander's maternal grandmother, Kunju, and the historical figure of Sarojini Naidu—both of whom were involved in the nationalist movement in India—to third-world feminist writers such as Susie Tharu, Kamala Das, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Assia Djebar.

Although Alexander's ambivalence around class persists in this intricate assemblage of decolonial feminist memory-work, *Fault Lines* offers a powerful model for engaging with third-world women's trauma and agency beyond reductive colonial and liberal western feminist narratives of victimhood and otherness. In foregrounding trauma and identity as fluid, contingent, and context-specific processes, Alexander's memoir unsettles the tropes of wounded attachments and authenticity that third-world women are often compelled to perform within western academic and publishing spaces. A careful reading of the complex, nuanced, and ambivalent memory-work in *Fault Lines* invites critical reflection on the politics of third-world women's life writing, especially in the west: How do the entangled structures of colonialism, nationalism, and neoliberal capitalism shape publishing industries, and influence which narratives gain traction? Whose stories are told, and how are they framed?

Can trauma be represented without being commodified? These questions remain urgent to decolonial feminist pedagogy, especially amidst the global resurgence of authoritarian nationalism, neoliberal globalization, and neo-imperialism. By critically engaging with the tensions and contradictions in *Fault Lines*, educators and activists can cultivate reading practices that attend to third-world women's narratives beyond the linear teleologies of imperialist, nationalist, and neoliberal scripts.

Notes

1. In this essay, I use the terms "third world" and "west" to refer to the global South and global North, respectively, while recognizing their contested genealogies. Both terms have been critically examined in postcolonial and third-world feminist scholarship for their colonial and Eurocentric underpinnings (Shohat and Stam; Mohanty; Narayan; Fatima *et al*.). Like other postcolonial scholars, I use lower case for both terms to decenter hegemonic western frameworks (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh). My use of "third-world women" draws on transnational and U.S.-based feminists of color scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s, which challenged colonial and liberal western feminist constructs of third-world women as voiceless, passive victims in need of rescue by the west. These scholars reclaimed "third-world feminism" as a coalition of women of color feminists from the global North and the global South, sharing and resisting intersecting structures of racism, sexism, colonialism, and global capitalism (Narayan; Mohanty and Torres; Anzaldúa and Moraga). In the twenty-first century, however, this term has faced renewed critique for its universalizing tendencies, prompting scholars like Saba Fatima and Stella Nyanzi to reject it, and others like Ranjoo Seodu Herr to defend its continued relevance in anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminist praxis when situated within the specific historical context of post-Cold War decolonization movements (Fatima *et al*.). These ongoing debates highlight the term's provisional value: "third world" remains analytically useful only when applied within decolonial frameworks. As I explore in this essay, not all third-world women writers reflect the decolonial commitments of third-world feminism.

2. For further analysis of linkages between colonial feminist and post-9/11 liberal western feminist narratives of rescue, see Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis of Laura Bush's radio address on 17 November 2001, and Saba Mahmood's analysis of the "imperialist underpinnings" (207) of Barbara Ehrenreich's 2004 op-ed piece, "The New Macho Feminism," published in *The New York Times*.

3. The challenge for third-world feminists has been to reclaim the fraught tropes of the third-world woman and home from both western rescue narratives and anti-western nationalist narratives, and to reclaim their homes—as decolonial feminist spaces and communities—beyond the linear teleologies of these hegemonic narratives. For further discussion, see "What's Home Got to Do with It?" (co-authored by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Biddy Martin), "Sisterhood, Coalition, and the Politics of Experience," and "Genealogy of Community, Home, and Nation" in Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* and the editors' prefaces and selections in the anthology *This Bridge We Call Home,* eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating.

4. See Inderpal Grewal's discussion of how the canon of immigrant Indian women's writing in the U.S. has either denounced the third world as a site of patriarchal oppression, or romanticized its cultural traditions in her book *Transnational America* (2005).

5. For example, see Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: *The New Mestiza* (1987, 1999, and 2007), Audre Lorde's memoirs *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Cherríe Moraga's *Loving In The War Years/Lo Que Nunca Paso por Sus Labios* (1983 and 2000), Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983), and anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back*: *Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1984), which included third-world women's testimonies from different locations.

6. For detailed analysis of commodification of third-world women's writing in post-1990s' west, see Grewal, *Transnational America* (2005); Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Introduction" in *Going Global* (2002); and Indrani Mitra and Madhu Mitra, "The Discourse of Liberal Feminism and Third-world Women's Texts" (1991).

7. See Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), which is cited by Alexander in the revised edition of *Fault Lines* (281).

8. For more in-depth critiques of global feminism as an offshoot of liberal western feminism that emerged alongside the rise of neoliberal multiculturalism in the west—and discussion of transnational feminism as an alternative to global feminism—see Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's "Introduction" in *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994); Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* (2000); Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Introduction" in *Going Global* (2000); and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003).

Works Cited

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 104, no. 3, 2002, pp. 783-790.

Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. "The Politics of Pity and the Individual Heroine Syndrome: Mukhtaran Mai and Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan." *Performing Islam*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 151-171, https://doi.org/10.1386/pi.4.2.151_1. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*. Routledge, 2000.

Albright, Richard S. and Kulbaga, Theresa A. "Comment & Response: A Comment on 'Pleasurable Pedagogies: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the Rhetoric of Empathy.'" *College English*, vol. 71, no. 5, 2009, pp. 539-541, https://doi.org/10.58680/ce20097145. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Alexander, Meena. *Fault Lines*: *A Memoir*. 1993. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, second edition, 2003.

Amireh, Amal and Lisa Suhair Majaj, eds. *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third-world Women Writers*. Garland Publishing Inc., 2000.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

Anzaldúa, Gloria and AnaLouise Keating, eds. *This Bridge We Call Home*: *Radical Visions for Transformation*. Routledge, 2002.

Baig, Assed. "Malala Yousafzai and the White Saviour Complex." *HuffPost UK*, 15 July 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/assed-baig/malala-yousafzai-white-saviour_b_3592165.html. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Behdad, Ali, and Juliet Williams. "Neo-Orientalism." *Globalizing American Studies*, edited by Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 283-299, https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226185088.003.0011. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury*: *Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton UP, 1995.

Butler, Pamela and Jigna Desai. "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-31. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338745. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990. First published by India: Kali for Women, 1989. 233-253.

Chowdhury, Elora, and Liz Philipose, eds. *Dissident Friendships: Feminism, Imperialism, and Transnational Solidarity*. University of Illinois Press, 2016.

Dabashi, Hamid. *Brown Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press, 2011.

Donadey, Anne and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh. "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*." *Signs*, vol. 33, no. 3, Spring 2008, pp. 623-646. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/523709. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Fatima, Saba, Kristie Dotson, Ranjoo Seodu Herr, Serene J. Khader, and Stella Nyanzi. "Contested Terrains of *Women of Color* and *Third-world Women*." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 3, Summer 2017, pp. 731-742.

Froio, Nicole, and Constanza Marambio. "Dissident Friendships." New Socialist, 25 August 2020, https://newsocialist.org.uk/dissident-friendships/. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell UP, 2001.

—. *Autobiographics*: *a feminist theory of women's self-representation*. Cornell UP, 1994.

Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neo-Liberalisms*. Duke UP, 2005.

—. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Duke UP, 1996.

Grewal, Inderpal and Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. U of Minnesota P, 1994.

Hesford, Wendy S. and Wendy Kozol. *Just Advocacy*: *Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminism, and the Politics of Representation*. Rutgers UP, 2005.

Javdani, Sadaf. "The Commodification of Trauma." *New Socialist*, 17 August 2022, https://newsocialist.org.uk/transmissions/the-commodification-of-trauma/. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. 1986. Verso Books, 2016.

John, Mary E. *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories*. U of California P, 2021.

Kandyoti, Deniz. "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey." *Women, Islam, and the State*. Ed. Deniz Kandyoti. Macmillan Academic and Professional Limited, 1991. 22-47.

—. "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, March 1991, pp. 429-443.

Kulbaga, Theresa A. "Pleasurable Pedagogies: 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' and the Rhetoric of Empathy." *College English*, vol. 70, no. 5, 2008, pp. 506–21. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472286. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Crossing Press, 1982.

—. *The Cancer Journals*. Spinsters, Ink, 1980.

Mahmood, Saba. "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror." *Women Studies on the Edge*. Ed. Joan W. Scott. Duke UP, 2008. 81-114.

Moraga, Cherríe. *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*. 1983. Second ed., South End Press, 2000.

Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 1981. Fourth ed., SUNY Press, 2015.

Menchú, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright. 1984. Second ed., Verso, 2010.

Mitra, Indrani, and Madhu Mitra. "The Discourse of Liberal Feminism and Third-World Women's Texts: Some Issues of Pedagogy." *College Literature*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, pp. 55–63. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111918. Accessed 7 July 2025.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP, 2003.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, and Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third-world Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Kitchen Table Press, 1981.

Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Random House, 2003.

Nair, Yasmin. "No, No, Nanette: Hannah Gadsby, Trauma, and Comedy as Emotional Manipulation." *Evergreen Review*, Spring/Summer 2019, https://evergreenreview.com/read/your-laughter-is-my-trauma/. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-world Feminism*. Routledge, 1997.

Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.* Duke UP, 2007.

—. "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA*, vol. 2 no. 1, 2012, p. 49-66. *Project MUSE*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/phi.2012.a486621. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Rasheed, Adnan. "The Taliban's Letter to Malala Yousafzai." *The Daily Beast*, 17 July 2013, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-talibans-letter-to-malalayousafzai/. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Ryder, Phyllis Mentzell. "Beyond Critique: Global Activism and the Case of Malala Yousafzai." *Literacy in Composition Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 175-187, https://doi.org/10.21623/1.3.1.14. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Sadaf, Shazia. "I Am Malala: Human Rights and the Politics of Production, Marketing and Reception of the Post-9/11 Memoir." *Interventions*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2017, pp. 855-871, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2017.1347053. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 2014.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. U of Wisconsin P, 1998.

Smith, Sidonie. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and The Fictions of Self-Representation*. Indiana UP, 1987.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. Macmillan, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Thomas, Elsa Ashish, and Rashid Narain Shukul. "Framing of Malala Yousafzai: a comparative analysis of news coverage in Western and Pakistani mainstream English print and alternative media." *Media Asia*, vol. 42, no. 3-4, 2016, pp. 225-241, https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2016.1142248. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Walters, Rosie. "'Shot Pakistani girl': The limitations of girls education discourses in UK newspaper coverage of Malala Yousafzai." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2016, pp. 650-670, 3 https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116631274. Accessed 25 June 2025.

Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. The U of Chicago P, 2007.

Yousafzai, Malala, and Christina Lamb. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. Little, Brown and Company, 2013.