

Door, Stone, Silk:

Discovering the Autobiographical Elements
Hidden in *Raw Silk* Metaphors

When reading Meena Alexander's book of poetry, *Raw Silk* (2004), prior to reading her memoir, *Fault Lines* (2003), many of the metaphors hidden in her poetry are left unacknowledged by the reader. Three specific metaphors that are dealt with throughout this thesis are based on the inanimate objects, door, stone and silk. These metaphors represent autobiographical aspects of Alexander's life. However without the knowledge of Alexander's autobiography these metaphors cannot be revealed to the reader. When reading *Fault Lines* the meanings of these metaphors come to light and open up a whole new interpretation of the poetry of *Raw Silk*.

Although door, stone and silk play a role in many of the poems of *Raw Silk*, the focus here will only deal with a few poems for each metaphor. Alexander uses doors as a metaphor in the poems "Lago Di Como," "Door" and "Porta Santa." In these poems doors represent the door leading into her grandfather's office where she was sexually abused, and also a gateway which is the more typical metaphor that a door represents. Stones are used as metaphors in the poems "Ghalib's Ghost," "Child, Stone, Sea," "Blue Lotus" and "Petroglyph." Alexander uses stones as a metaphor in a few different ways. One of these ways is to represent ideas and how those ideas turn into one's art. Another way stones are used is to represent the memories of abuse that Alexander has hidden from herself for most of her life. Silk plays a major role in this volume of poetry not only because it is part of the title of the book, but because it appears in so much of Alexander's work. The poems that silk plays a role in include "Raw Silk" and "Ancestors." Silk plays a similar role as stones, representing how ideas are ingested and turned into art, or in Alexander's case, poetry. Additionally silk also represents the barrier that stands in the way of Alexander recovering the memories of abuse.

Several critical essays have discussed autobiographical elements in Alexander's work, focusing, however, mainly on her fiction rather than her poetry. Several have noted how the protagonists of Alexander's novels share similar backgrounds and stories to their author. Kazim Ali, Erika Duncan and Daniela Gioseffi all have written essays dissecting the connections between Alexander and the characters she wrote about in *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road*, as well as in selected poems. Their overall findings are that the protagonists in the novels are similar to Alexander because they are searching for their transnational identities. Ali focuses on how Alexander uses "writing as an active practice of reconstruction" and how "[...] the unfolding of language will always contain both the said and the unsaid, despite any effort of the 'author'" (52). This makes sense in the context of *Raw Silk* because the volume was written as she was trying to recall painful memories of her past. This can be inferred from the chapter, "Lyric in a Time of Violence," where she discusses her childhood as well as how she wrote some of the poems in *Raw Silk* (*Fault Lines* 277-89). Ali feels that it was inevitable for Alexander's life to be prevalent in her work whether she did so consciously or not. On the other hand, Duncan simply makes connections between the protagonists and Alexander (23). Daniela Gioseffi's interview is different from the other essays because she focuses on poetry rather than fictional characters. Gioseffi questions Alexander about how and why she incorporates her experiences within her poetry, and this question leads to a discussion about a poem in *Raw Silk*, "Fragile Places." Regarding the woman in this poem, Alexander says, "I think I am that woman" (47). This comment, and the fact that she says "I think" hints at the fact that Alexander is not always conscious of how much prominence her life has in her poems, but once she is able to look back at them it becomes clearer.

Many authors of critical essays have focused their research on Alexander as a Diasporic writer and her search for identity, an emphasis that follows a similar theme to this thesis because it shows how Alexander's life and personality can be found in her work. The authors that have written about the Diasporic elements in Alexander's works include Lavina Shankar and Proma Tagore. Alexander's search for identity has been discussed by Anupama Jain, Nalini Iyer and Stella Oh. The fact that there would be so much scholarship focusing on Alexander as a Diasporic writer who seems to be "in search of a homeland" is not surprising considering Alexander has said in numerous interviews, as well as her memoir, that she has struggled with identity because of her constant movement within the world (*Fault Lines* 3). These authors share one common opinion which is that numerous elements have affected Alexander's sense of identity, and all of these elements surround the fact that she is an Indian American woman living in a predominantly white, male society. However, even within these essays the topic of autobiographical aspects within Alexander's works shines through at times. In Jain's analysis of Alexander's poem, "White Horseman Blues," she mentions that Alexander claims in the poem, "this is my autobiography" (164). She further explains how the poem relates Alexander's search for her transnational identity. In a way, the discussions of Diaspora and identity help to prove this thesis because they show how Alexander's life and experiences find their way into her work. In the analysis to follow, the focus deals with more specific elements of Alexander's history and how they are hidden—and can be found—in *Raw Silk*.

Out of the numerous essays dealing with identity and Diaspora, Roshni Rustomji's essay has particular interest because it is comprised of three parts, an introduction, an interview from the late 90's and an interview in 2006. What is most telling in this compilation is the difference between the two interviews. In the first interview Alexander says, "Sometimes I think that at the

heart of what I write is a struggle to define the self,” and goes on to discuss the challenges she has faced as an Indian American writer (91). However, the second interview focuses more on the present, and Alexander’s present self. It appears through this interview that Alexander’s focus is not on finding her identity, but becoming comfortable with it.

The fact that Alexander uses natural elements such as stones and silk to represent the violence in her childhood follows a theme that Wendy Anne Kopisch goes into great depth. Kopisch wrote an essay on the prevalence of nature in Alexander’s work, and more importantly the role nature plays alongside the violence within *Raw Silk* (177). The general idea of Kopisch’s essay is to show the role of nature in Alexander’s poetry, and how its role is affected by the violence in her life. Because Kopisch’s essay focuses primarily on the relationship between nature and violence, it only touches upon the surface of the depth of analysis that will follow. However it does include a similar theme.

The assumption that many people make regarding the poetry of *Raw Silk* is that it is primarily illustrating the tragedy of September 11th and violence as a whole (Iyer 141). However, if one is blinded by the obvious declarations in Alexander’s poetry, the sacrifice is great. The goal of this paper is not to discount the prevalence of war and global violence in *Raw Silk*, but rather to illustrate the depth that this poetry contains in relation to Alexander’s memoir.

As a whole, the scholarship focused on Meena Alexander hints at the fact that she uses her life to inspire her writing. What is different in this thesis is that the arguments here are more specific, less subtle and take some of the poems in *Raw Silk* on an analytical journey using Alexander’s memoir as a roadmap. The metaphors, door, stone and silk, bear autobiographical significance that can be used by the reader to understand the process that Alexander undergoes to rediscover lost memories, and how she comes to terms with them.

~Door~

“I think of it as a dark doorway that lets me in: slides shut, then ruts open again. I fell through that door as a child.” (Fault Lines 259)

Although a door is often used as a metaphor in terms of the practical uses of a door, Alexander's use takes it to a more personal level. The 2003 edition of *Fault Lines*, in which Alexander appended a lengthy new section to the text originally published in 1993, brought a shocking discovery about Alexander's life. Her beloved grandfather Kuruvilla, whom she spoke so dearly of in the first edition of her memoir, sexually abused Alexander when she was a child. In the chapter, “Book of Childhood,” Alexander talks about the fears she lived with as a child, and how they have followed and haunted her for most of her life. At the center of these fears is the door that led to her grandfather's library, where the abuse took place. The chapter begins, “There was a dark door to grandfather's library...Breath stops when I think of that door” (301). As a child Alexander worked diligently to shove the memories of abuse deep into her subconscious. As an adult, these memories are coming back into her consciousness in bits and pieces. It makes sense that Alexander has a fear of this door because she is still having trouble grasping and coming to terms with what her grandfather did.

In a way, it is easier for her to face her fears of the door rather than to think of the actions that happened beyond that door. This is seen in the following paragraphs when she says:

A child in a white dress walked in the door, a while later a child walked out. Her eyes were burnt holes for the sun to shine through. I do not like to say I. I do not like to say I picked up my skirts and skipped into that doorway. For then I would be forced to say:

sometime later I came out. Memory knows but knowing cannot remember. She not I.
Not I, not I. (301)

Through these lines it is apparent that Alexander acknowledges the abuse, but is not ready to face it. Even later in the chapter Alexander gives small details to the events that had happened, but these details only hint at the abuse that occurred.

Alexander also tells the reader what she did following the abuse. On one particular day she went out to play with her cousin Koshy. However she was so ashamed of what had happened that she did not want to face her cousin. Alexander says, “I was the girl who fell through a dark door. Crawled on hands and knees through the orchid patch. Tore her silk dress of delicate shadow work on sharp stones, sticks [...] There were droplets of blood on my arms and thighs, from thorns and torn stalks, tiny jewels of disaster” (307). Unwilling to face her cousin, Alexander is physically hurt while hiding in the thicket. Eventually her cousin comes to her rescue and convinces her to play and catch butterflies with him.

Throughout *Raw Silk*, Alexander comes back to this door in several poems. These poems include “Lago Di Como,” “Door” and “Porta Santa.” Her use of this metaphor represents the abuse that happened beyond the dark door to her grandfather Kuruvilla's library, and a gateway from one place to the next. As the quote that begins this section suggests, Alexander fell through a door that caused her to be blinded from the memories of abuse. In the analysis of the poems that will follow, it becomes clear that Alexander climbs back up through that door and begins to face the memories that have haunted her life.

Without the preceding knowledge of Alexander's life, “Lago Di Como” is a seemingly peaceful poem with only a few bumps in the road. However, with the information from *Fault Lines* this poem transforms into Alexander's struggle to remember the abuse that she worked so

hard to forget. One of the major points about this poem that makes it difficult to interpret is Alexander's use of pronouns. "I" and "you" are used interchangeably. This is reminiscent of the point in the memoir when she does not want to say "I," which would acknowledge the fact that she had been abused. This conclusion can be made because the first half of the poem is told using "I," but the second half does not. Both the "I" and the "you" that the narrator is talking about represent Alexander.

In the second stanza the "I" in the poem is trying to get somewhere, but is unable to because a storm left debris in her way. Alexander specifically says, "Branches flood the path, / make me squint and crouch" (5-6). She then answers the question as to what she is squinting at when she says, "what I cannot peer through is memory" (7). This suggests that the storm is the memories of abuse that are resurfacing. She is trying to write about a happy home in the first stanza, but she is unable to because of the damage these memories are causing her. Alexander then points out some of the memories that she remembers. One of these memories is displayed when she says, "thighs stuck with petals, scratch marks scarcely visible," which reminds the reader of the "tiny jewels of disaster" that Alexander compares the scratches on her legs to in *Fault Lines* ("Lago di Como" 9).

Alexander brings the door into the poem exactly half way through. She says, "What floats into view / is a door I cannot go through" (10-11). The door not only signifies the door to her grandfather's library, but a passageway from not remembering to remembering. As a child, Alexander had to go through the door in order for the abuse to take place, and now as an adult she has to go through that door in order to remember. The line that follows this says, "But I want to go on and on until I reach you" (12). Alexander is not trying to connect with someone else when she says "I reach you." Instead, this is a play on words surrounding the fact that she does

not want to say “I” when discussing the abuse. Alexander wants to remember what had happened, and she no longer wants to keep these two parts of her separate. She wants the “I” and “you” to become one.

The last two stanzas represent the side of Alexander that does not want to acknowledge the abuse. Here, she reverts to talking about herself from a third person point of view, similar to how she does so in her memoir when discussing the abuse. The tone of the poem changes here as well. Instead of focusing on memory, she is focused on the present moment of simply combing her hair in front of the mirror. This shows the struggle that Alexander has to go through when trying to recall these painful memories.

The shortest poem in Alexander's *Raw Silk*, “Door,” may be one of the most complex in meanings and uses. The poem itself is comprised of three short lines, and it seems to simply act as a gateway from the poems about Italy to another set of poems. After all, in this section of seven poems it lies directly at the center, similar to the placement of the door in “Lago Di Como.” So it makes sense that this poem is used as a gateway. However this gateway is not a simple separation of two types of poems, but rather a separation in Alexander's way of thinking. The prime evidence for this is that all of the poems that refer to the childhood abuse are placed prior to “Door.” That being said, “Door” is the last poem in the volume that will be discussed in this paper since all poems placed after this one have little or no connection to this thesis. With this evidence in mind, Alexander has finally gone through the door that has haunted her, and is able to face the fears that have restricted her from gaining full recollection of the abuse. Perhaps she has finally been able to connect her “I” and “you.”

Although the poem itself is used as a gateway, the content of the poem is used to confront the door to her grandfather's library. The first line of the poem states, “By your door a sweet

olive tree” (1). An olive branch is a typical metaphor for peace or good will. This shows the deception of the door because as a child Alexander had fooled herself into thinking that her grandfather's library was a place of refuge. The second line of the poem reflects this deception when it says, “a hole in its trunk:” (2). The hole implies a mysterious element. Although Alexander thought that the library was a place of peace, there is something missing from this picture. The last line of the poem says, “Swarm of bees in the lap of heaven!” (3). Bees may be seen as something positive since they produce sweet tasting honey, but one must not forget the painful, and sometimes deadly, stings that can be given from these bees. For the entire first edition of *Fault Lines* Alexander speaks with only high regard of her grandfather. She spends a good deal of time in his library because she finds a sense of comfort there; perhaps at the time she saw it as her “heaven.” However as the memories of abuse re-surface, she begins to feel the sting that her grandfather had inflicted upon her.

The poem “Porta Santa” seems to be a simple poem about a trip to Italy. However, Alexander connects Venice with Kerala when she says, “Then too I see Kerala with its boats and canals mirrored in the waters of Venice, the actual Venice and the other, invisible Venice” (Rustomji 93). Additionally, the title of this poem alone is an indication that it has something to do with her grandfather because it means holy door. The chapter “Book of Childhood” from *Fault Lines* can be used to better understand “Porta Santa.” The chapter begins, “There was a dark door to grandfather’s library” (*Fault Lines* 301). It then goes on to describe that the abuse had indeed happened in this location. In fact, Alexander consistently mentions this “dark door” whenever she discusses the abuse in her memoir. Later in this chapter Alexander describes a poor blind man who lived near her house. She uses this story to show her grandfather’s kindness toward the helpless man. The third part of the poem contains the information that ties “Porta

Santa” to her grandfather’s door, as well as to the story of the blind man. First Alexander says that Porta Santa is next to “the room where [she] could not sleep” (19). She goes even further to say that it was “beside the blind beggar covered in sackcloth” (21). These facts show that Alexander is not simply talking about Italy, but that she is talking about her own past. These facts lead to questions about Alexander’s feelings about the door of her past. The title of the poem, holy door, signifies that Alexander had made religious connections between the door and all that had gone on behind the other side of that door. This makes sense considering her grandfather often told Alexander stories from the bible when she was a child. This additionally shows the irony and hypocrisy of the situation her grandfather had put her in.

Alexander continuously returns to different ideas throughout her work. Cynthia Leenerts recognizes Alexander’s use of the door in various poems from her newest volume of poetry, *Quickly Changing Rivers*. Leenerts quotes the poem “Rites of Sense” in order to explain Alexander’s reaction to the door when she returned to India to take care of her mother:

The door’s a frame for something
I’m too scared to name:
a child, against a white wall,
hands jammed to her teeth, lips torn
breath staggering its hoarse silence. (209)

In this excerpt that Leenerts uses, she shows her readers that the door represents the abuse. She explains that the door is something Alexander is able to confront, whereas the actual picture is missing from the “frame.” It also mentions the “white wall,” which will be returned to later in this paper.

In addition to the door metaphor, Alexander uses “stones” in “Porta Santa” to represent memories from her childhood. In the first stanza Alexander says, “You brought rolls of bread so hot / they might have been stones from my childhood” (“Porta Santa” 1-2). In this excerpt the stones represent memories of her childhood. Alexander is reflecting on a current circumstance and connecting it to her past memories. She completes this part of the poem by saying, “I wept at stones / that stored so much light” (9-10). Once again Alexander is using “stones” to represent her memories but it is unclear whether she is talking about positive or negative memories. On one hand, her weeping could be from happiness, and the memories are full of light and hope. On the other hand the stones could reflect the abuse that was coming to light in her consciousness.

~Stone~

“...she picks up small stones and swallows them. She keeps doing this, over and over again. She cannot stop. Her belly swells, it hurts her. Each stone is a sentence coiled up, knotted with hard gum, something she cannot tell.” (*Fault Lines* 237)

It may seem odd that Alexander uses the word “stone” in almost a third of her poems included in this volume. However, a close reading of the chapters both named “Stone-Eating Girl” from *Fault Lines* reveals hidden truths behind what one might otherwise assume to be a small, inanimate, meaningless object. In fact, by applying the insight one gains through Alexander’s memoir, the simple “stone” becomes complex, tangible, and changes the poetry altogether. Some of the poems that can be interpreted differently are “Ghalib’s Ghost,” “Child, Stone, Sea” and “Blue Lotus.” Here, it is revealed that stones are ideas that an artist can take and change in order to create. In addition stones often refer to the childhood abuse that occurred.

In order to apply metaphors learned in *Fault Lines* to the poetry of *Raw Silk*, it is important to first learn about the autobiographical aspects of Alexander’s life that these metaphors represent. In the first “Stone-Eating Girl” chapter, Alexander introduces three interconnecting stories revolving around stones. The first deals with Alexander’s feeling of displacement when she was seven years old. After collecting “pupae” with her cousin Koshy, and watching their evolution to butterflies, Alexander begins questioning this process which leads to her questioning her own identity. She quickly becomes concerned that her consistent movement between Tiruvella and Khartoum makes her “like that ugly pupa,” constantly in between a settled identity (*Fault Lines* 78). Amidst this chaos Alexander says, “I dropped the thoughts in confusion, picked up a tiny round pebble, wiped it on my sleeve, and set it to my

tongue. Then, giving a little gulp, I swallowed hard...Swallowing that stone gave me a sense of comfort, of power even, I felt I was a child who could accomplish certain feats, sustain something hard and solid inside her" (78). At first, Alexander swallows the stone to cease the worry in her mind, but she gains more than just comfort. She feels empowered by the foreign substance in her body, and it brings her to the realization that she can accomplish things. The reader begins to get a sense that the stone symbolizes much more than what it actually is. Kazim Ali suggests that the meaning of this metaphor is obvious when he says, "If it seems like [the act of swallowing stones is] a transparent metaphor for the traumatic secret she carries, Alexander as a child feels empowered by the act" (Ali 56). Ali down plays the metaphor's significance because he interprets it as a given.

The story of Alexander's first encounter with the stone-eating girl is the second story of the three. When she first saw this girl, Alexander was instantly drawn to her. Chinna (Alexander's nanny) pulled Alexander away from the stone-eating girl and called the stone-eating girl "perachathe" or shameless. Alexander reflects on the connection between being shameless and eating stones by saying, "At times it has seemed to me that the price for being perachathe—shameless—was to have one's mouth filled with stones and perhaps the reparation was to perform, in the theater of cruelty that is our lives, all our lives together, choosing stones, filling one's mouth with them, ejecting them through the miraculous gut we call the imagination" (80). This line reveals that stones represent ideas, and Alexander is describing how ideas or words can be taken in, and re-imagined through her writing. She mentions several times throughout her memoir that her mother does not think that it is appropriate for a girl to be a writer, but writing is Alexander's way to express herself and to create art. In this instance, as

well as the previous one, stones are not only a metaphor for ideas taken in, but for what one can make of these ideas. For Alexander it is poetry.

Alexander's interest in the stone-eating girl leads to a hearsay account of how she came to be eating stones. Upon meeting a social worker who was visiting her mother and grandfather, Alexander hears a story of the "stone-eating girl's" past: "In order to construct the new railway line, government officials had evicted the stone-eating girl from the hut where she lived. Hearing that, during the Nationalist movement to get rid of the British, satyagrahis protested by sitting in one place and refusing to eat, the girl took it upon herself to do likewise. It was then that in sheer hunger she started cramming mud in her mouth, then stones, and when the stones rolled round on her tongue, they satisfied some hunger she did not even know had possessed her" (85). The hunger that Alexander mentions is not one that can be satiated by food, but is something much bigger. Alexander favors this story because she had a similar feeling the first time she swallowed a stone. She had hungered to be someone, not just a "dark incipient thing" (77).

Among the authors that have written about Alexander's work, Cynthia Leenerts spends a good deal of time discussing the importance of stones and the stone-eating girl, as well as the connections these two things have with the abuse. Leenerts reflects on the purpose of the stone-eating girl when she says, "her presence manages to suggest Alexander's controlled process of giving voice to what she had earlier swallowed" (208). She even goes as far as to say that "the stone-eating girl serves as Alexander's childhood double, a silent witness who teaches her how to cope" (208). In the collaborative essay by Basu and Leenerts, the connection between the stone-eating girl and the abuse is put bluntly, "Alexander's own connection with [the stone-eating] girl highlights her own repressed history of sexual abuse, trauma, and buried shame"

(Basu & Leenerts 11). These references all suggest that it is not far fetched to assume that the stone-eating girl (as well as stones) represent the sexual abuse.

In the new section, “Book of Childhood,” added to the memoir on republication in 2003, Alexander describes how she dealt with, and eventually forgets the abuse that plagued her childhood. Throughout this entire section it is hard to discern Alexander’s age during any of the events she describes from her childhood. The only clarity given to the reader is Alexander’s age upon the death of her grandfather (*Fault Lines* 265). Other than that, the only role that age plays is that she was a child. This shows that Alexander writes about her childhood as a whole, and that a timeline of the abuse cannot be accurately portrayed.

The chapter “Stone-Eating Girl” relays Alexander’s reaction to the story of how God asked Abraham to kill his only son, Isaac. She makes a connection between this story and the situation she is in with her grandfather. Ali acknowledges the significance of this story, describing the rage Alexander has for her grandfather both regarding the story of Abraham, as well as when her grandfather eventually passes away (Ali 67). Unable to control her emotions, a crying Alexander is found by her mother. However, Alexander does not tell her mother that she is upset because of the traumatic memories of abuse. Her memoir goes on to describes a dream she had later that night in which the stone-eating girl comes to her with chicken wings, but her description of the girl leads the reader to believe that she is actually talking about herself, especially since she had just previously seen herself in a “nest” of sheets. In this context, stones take on a similar yet evolved meaning: “When she opened her mouth no words came, just sharp hot sounds like stones rattling. She had picked up stones from the well-side and popped them into her mouth. She swallowed the stones even though it hurt her insides. The stones made words for things she couldn’t say” (295). Because of the order of events, it can be assumed that

this is where the memories of abuse are pushed out of her consciousness. Instead she uses poetry to deal with her emotions without actually facing the reality of the situation.

By implementing this knowledge learned from *Fault Lines*, the reader can see the deeper meanings that stones represent in *Raw Silk*, and most of the ways Alexander uses “stones” can be challenged and changed. The poem “Ghalib’s Ghost” has elements similar to those in the second “Stone-Eating Girl.” The first similarity is that Alexander claims to have been a partridge when she was young. Like the chicken-winged stone-eating girl, the young Alexander “was [a] partridge, the one with speckled wings / poking here and there with her beak, gobbling stones” (3-4). This can be interpreted in two different ways. The first way is simply to reveal the wide-eyed wonderment of children. The second is more complex than this however. This poem illustrates how Alexander, as a child, was finding ways to forget the abuse.

The second similarity deals with how she repressed the memories of abuse. Although Ghalib was a famous Urdu poet, the name actually means dominant, which can be used to describe Alexander’s grandfather. The poem continues describing “paintings [with] eyes, lips, thighs torn out” (9). These paintings symbolize the memories of abuse that Alexander had changed, altering them to remove the painful memories. Later in the poem she compares the way she hid the memories by saying, “I had to take my glasses off for that sack I was forced / to pull over my head...” (11-12). This quote symbolizes how Alexander used a thirst for knowledge, and the application of this knowledge to cover up the memories that were too painful to deal with. The use of the word “gobbling” is reminiscent of the stone-eating girl’s hunger, the “hunger she did not even know had possessed her” (*Fault Lines* 77). Alexander shared the stone-eating girl's hunger both for knowledge and freedom. The difference between the two is

that Alexander's desire for freedom was mental rather than physical, searching for an escape from the painful memories that her grandfather caused.

The next poem in *Raw Silk* in which stones play a major metaphorical role is "Child, Stone, Sea." This poem brings up issues of race and segregation, and uses stones as a central focus, leading the reader to see how Alexander's life plays a major role in this poem. The first part of the poem (out of three) describes a child who goes to Alexander from the sea. Holding a stone "he says 'Here is your jawbone'" (3). In this quote, the stone is a metaphor for what could have happened. The stone was not actually used to hit her jaw, but the implication is that this act has happened in the past. Directly after this, Alexander brings the reader back to a new location, "I sit on a bench marked WHITES ONLY" (7). The racial segregation is evident, and since it follows the mention of the stone they have to be connected. Within the context of the entire book, Alexander is referring to the racial barriers that have interfered with her life, and she also is speaking for others who have felt the effects of racism all over the world. Stones are not only used to show the negative verbal attacks that she had to endure, but as a reminder to all who have been hurt both emotionally and physically.

In addition, a note is added at the end of the volume that describes the location of the bench that Alexander wrote about. The bench is located in a park in Durban, South Africa, which is named for "a young woman with AIDS who was brutally murdered" (92). This reference implies the connection between violence against a race and violence against sexual outcasts, and how Alexander connects her personal experiences with violence in general. In the collaborative essay which opens the book, *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*, Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts explain, "Alexander's poetry often employs the lyric and gives voice to personal experiences recaptured through the workings of memory.

Yet, this intensely personal exploration also impinges on many very public and political concerns. Thus, Alexander's poetic work exemplifies the refashioning of the lyric as a genre which while it embraces the deeply personal experiences, functions as a form in the public sphere" (7). This quotation acknowledges the inclusion of Alexander's "personal exploration" in her poetry, and further shows how this leads Alexander to connect her personal violence with global violence.

Similarly to "Ghalib's Ghost," in "Child, Stone, Sea" a bird is mentioned and plays a central role in terms of the analysis. The last line of the first part of this poem says, "a bird with no beak is singing to me" (8). This line is reminiscent of the stone-eating girl because in *Fault Lines* Alexander tells about a dream when the stone-eating girl comes to her as a bird (295). Additionally, the fact that the bird has no beak directly correlates with how the stone-eating girl could not talk because her beak was filled with stones. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander describes the role that the stone-eating girl plays in her life. She says, "Whenever I work at something hard, she comes to me, the stone-eating girl. It makes no difference whether it's a poem or rice and sambar, cucumber sandwiches, a torn hem, or a paper that must be graded" (80). During the challenges that Alexander faced, the stone-eating girl was constantly present. The third part of the poem uses the word "satyagrahi," which returns the reader to *Fault Lines* and the stone-eating girl because in the above-mentioned story the stone-eating girl was inspired to fast by the acts of the satyagrahi (85).

The second part of the poem is similar to the first in the sense that Alexander returns to the child. In this instance the child says, "'Here is your grandfather's thighbone'" ("Child, Stone, Sea" 11). The difference between the first and second parts lie in this line because Alexander is no longer talking about race, and is instead talking about the abuse. The stone is

placed on her knee and is said to be a thighbone because it represents repressed memories that are coming into Alexander's consciousness. This connection can be made because in *Fault Lines* Alexander recalls her grandfather's hand on her thigh, and the discomfort this brought to her. In the poem, Alexander is given her "grandfather's thighbone" in order to show how she is taking the control back. Not only can her grandfather no longer touch *her* thigh, but by taking possession of his she regains control of her own life. Alexander also mentions "torn cotton" hinting at violence. This is brought up again in the third part where she says, "The sun's throat is torn cotton" ("Child, Stone, Sea" 25). This leads the reader to make the connection between the first and second parts of the poem.

Towards the end of the poem Alexander makes a reference to the biblical story about Abraham, which she also mentions in her memoir (*Fault Lines* 293). She says, "he carries the child on his back" ("Child, Stone, Sea" 32). In the poem the man holding the child was recently released from prison, and it seems that he is simply trying to protect the boy. However, in *Fault Lines* Alexander describes the story of Abraham by explaining that god had asked him to take his only son and sacrifice him (293). This sacrifice was not to show that Abraham did not love his only son, but to prove his devotion to God; not to mention the fact that in the biblical story God ends up relieving Abraham of this obligation, and saving Isaac from death. This story made such a huge impact on Alexander because from the perspective of a little girl she made a connection between Abraham and her grandfather, and Isaac and herself. First she reflects on Abraham's appearance when she says, "He looked oddly familiar. I felt I had known him all my natural life" (293). She elaborates on this fact when she says, "So if Abraham was seventy-five, grandfather Kuruvilla's age, how quick could he run? Surely Isaac could escape? And why didn't Sarah go out there to help her only child, her Isaac?" (294). At this point Alexander is

indirectly addressing the abuse, and why she cannot escape it. She is also questioning her own passive actions along with the passive actions of her mother. The poem ends with, “I walk through the walls /of my room into the sea” (35-36). Here she is reflecting how the story of Abraham led her to forget the abuse by drowning out the memories. This analogy makes perfect sense considering that her reactions to the story of Abraham occurred during a voyage across the sea.

The poem “Blue Lotus” uses stones as a metaphor for the memories repressed as well. Prior to the beginning of the poem there is a quote from Wallace Stevens, “It is not enough to cover the rocks with leaves.” I think that this quote helps to set up part of the poem’s purpose, which is to show how the memories of abuse have come to light. Although Alexander had spent her entire life covering the rocks/memories within her subconscious, it was not enough to keep them at bay forever. Alexander describes how she begins to recall these memories at the beginning of the poem:

Twilight, I stroll through stubble fields
clouds lift, the hope of a mountain.
What was distinct turns to mist,
what was fitful burns the heart. (1-4)

The phrase “stubble fields” refers to a field of crops that has been harvested, leaving the field bare except for the short stalks left of the plants. Her use of “stubble fields” represents how she cleared out unnecessary memories so that it would be easier to sift through the memories that were left. The clouds are used to show the veil that has blinded her from the truth of the abuse, which is represented by the mountains. Alexander is hoping to recover these memories from her subconscious, but the clouds are in her way. It is becoming clearer that rocks, which are in their

essence interchangeable with stones, are used by Alexander as a metaphor for the abuse. On the third line Alexander is pointing out how her life used to be clear, but since the memories have begun to come back to her, her life is no longer clear. The memories return to her in bits, and hurt her in the fourth line. This directly correlates with the part in *Fault Lines* where Alexander explains how the abuse is brought to the surface of her recollection (240). In both sources Alexander explains how memories resurfaced in fragments, causing her to work towards a painful enlightenment. After a stanza listing several poets who have influenced Alexander, she ends the poem, “now stones have tongues. / Sibilant scattering, / stormy grace!” (70-72). Once she can recall these memories, she is free to write about them in poems such as this one. In addition, Alexander has formed this poem to start and end on the same topic, bringing it full circle; the leaves have cleared from the rocks. These lines show that Alexander remembers the abuse that her grandfather put her through, and that she can now write about it.

The poem “Petroglyph” is comprised of eight parts. One of the most important connections that this poem has to Alexander’s life is the title. A petroglyph is a picture engraved on a rock or stone; in other words, it is permanent. In fact, scientists have discovered petroglyphs that go back as far as the 3rd century, and therefore have been hidden for many years (Pyle n. pag.). Alexander’s memories of abuse are like petroglyphs. They are permanently etched in her subconscious, and although they have been hidden from her for most of her life, she has painfully re-discovered them. In her memoir Alexander uses the analogy of making a petroglyph in terms of the pain that her grandfather caused her. She says, “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...”

(242). In terms of the poem, the third part provides specific evidence linking it to the memories of abuse that Alexander writes about in *Fault Lines*.

In the memoir, when Alexander discusses her feelings when she first began to remember the details of the abuse she says, “What foundations did my house stand on? What sort of architect was I if the lowest beams were shredded? If the stones were mouldering, fit to fall apart. What was the worth of words?” (241). Alexander uses stones as memories in this quote. Because the memories of abuse are new to her, she begins to question the memories that she has always had. This quotation also suggests that the new memories that Alexander is beginning to remember are causing her “house” to lose its base. In the poem she references this when she says, “A house was afloat on that river...” (46). This is similar to someone losing one’s footing. The foundation that Alexander had built her life upon is now crumbling beneath her because these memories are coming to light. In addition, it is seen in the preceding analysis that Alexander “drowned” out the memories of abuse when she was young, so in terms of this poem the river symbolizes the lies she had told herself in order to forget the abuse. Alexander is also losing confidence in her writing because she questions her memories, which leads to her questioning the “worth of words.”

Later in the third section Alexander makes a reference that is also seen in “Ghalib’s Ghost.” In “Petroglyph” she says, “...a child, her face covered with a hat of wool so red, darkness fled from it” (47-8). Similar to the “sack” mentioned in “Ghalib’s Ghost,” this wool hat represents how Alexander had shielded her consciousness from the truth, or the “darkness.” This reference leads into a more obvious declaration of the abuse, and her rage at her grandfather.

Two additional connections are seen in the third section of the poem when Alexander mentions the “knucklebone” and the “bookshelf.” During a dream-like sequence in *Fault Lines*

Alexander talks about being a curious child. She was examining her naked body in the mirror. She then says, "Grandfather Kuruvilla [was] standing with his sleeve on the window bars. His hand was on the window and he was holding on to the bars and holding so tight that his knuckles were cut in stone" (275). In "Petroglyph" she declares, "I hate your knucklebone!" (55). The outward rage she portrays in this line reveals that Alexander acknowledges the abuse. Although it may seem that the abuse had not occurred yet since her grandfather was just peeping, it can be assumed that it had because in the dream-sequence she says, "At the base of the dress is a tear that the tailor mended the other day. It came when she crawled in the orchid patch with her silk dress on" (*Fault Lines* 276). Then later in the memoir she describes her actions following the abuse, "I was the girl who fell through a dark door. Crawled on hands and knees through the orchid patch. Tore her silk dress of delicate shadow work on sharp stones, sticks..." (307). This shows that her grandfather had in fact already abused her. She goes on to say, "She sees Kant on his bookshelf" ("Petroglyph" 56). Although the abuse is implied throughout the 2003 addition to *Fault Lines*, Alexander seldom mentions specific images of the sexual abuse. One of these images is when she says, "His library with the theology books and books of Gandhi and Marx and Lenin. The teak desk where I had to lie down as he touched my body. The white wall where I pressed myself back trying to escape" (240). Alexander connects her grandfather's books with the abuse because these books were the only things she could look at to avoid confronting the terror that was directly in front of her. On one hand these books brought her solace in the moments of abuse, but on the other hand the memory of them brings Alexander back to that desk, against that white wall (the same white wall mentioned above).

Once again, Leenerts uses *Quickly Changing Rivers* similarly to how *Raw Silk* is used here. She too connects the books in Alexander's grandfather's library with the abuse in terms of the poem, "Black River, Walled Garden":

Who could I tell about the library?
What grandfather did with fingers, lips, thighs,
within sight of Bibles, encyclopedias, dictionaries.
O books with seeing eyes!
I blacked it all away. (209)

This displays the shame Alexander felt. Alexander personifies the book as if they bore witness to the abuse. Leenerts describes how this poem takes the memories further than how she does so in *Raw Silk* (209). She felt that both the memoir and *Raw Silk* were stepping stones leading to *Quickly Changing Rivers*. This shows how *Raw Silk* was used by Alexander as the actual process of remembering, rather than how she finally writes about it consciously in *Quickly Changing Rivers*.

"Petroglyph" section IV contains a correlation with the sea voyage and implies the abuse was happening when she left. She says, "When I was a child I saw the sea burn" (57). This line is also seen at the beginning of "Stone-Eating Girl" when Alexander begins to describe her trip across the Arabian Sea (*Fault Lines* 291). The implication that the abuse was happening prior to the sea voyage can be made because directly before she says she "saw the sea burn" in "Petroglyph" is where she references the knucklebone and Kant (55-56).

What becomes apparent with the added knowledge gained from *Fault Lines* is that stones represent different aspects of Alexander's life. What also becomes apparent is that Alexander often uses her stone-metaphor to talk about the memories of abuse. Because Alexander does not

directly explain that she was abused in *Raw Silk*, it is only after reading *Fault Lines* and learning about Alexander's history, that it is seen that this subject matter is dealt with in her poetry.

~Silk~

“It seems to me now that my inner life is akin to a species of shadow work, the real stuff of consciousness hidden under a transparent surface, as a bird beak or rosebud or leaf is tucked under the surface of silk, drawn out by the quick needle.” (Fault Lines 272)

Silk has a dual purpose in *Raw Silk*. One purpose is to represent the final product of all of the memories and ideas that an artist takes in. Kopsisch compares Alexander’s poetry to silk when she says, ““Meena Alexander’s newest collection [...] shares some of the qualities of silk: strong, vivid, resilient, marked with slubs, like the violence that is part of the texture of our cruel and anxious age”” (181). Kopsisch recognizes the connection between silk and poetry, and she explains how silk not only has positive attributes but has evidence of the journey it took, just like Alexander’s poetry.

Similar to how Alexander uses swallowing and regurgitating stones, Alexander uses the process of making silk to show the beauty that can come out of this digestive process. The act of making silk begins with silkworms. They feed on mulberry leaves and eject silk strands, almost like how a spider makes a web. These strands are collected and woven into garments. The transformation that the mulberry leaves go through is astronomical and the results are limitless. This illustrates how art can be created from very little, but turns into a number of different things. The second purpose of silk is ironic in comparison to the first. As the introductory quote suggests, silk can be used to cover something without fully concealing it. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander explains that shadow work is a sewing technique where “the silk was worked in under the fabric so that only a trace of the color showed through the limpid surface [...] The missing parts are hidden under the skin of cotton or silk. All that is missing casts a shadow” (269-70).

Like the shadow work, the memories of abuse are hidden just below Alexander's consciousness. The memories are the missing parts that have cast their shadow on Alexander. Only a thin layer of silk lies between the hidden memories and Alexander's recollection of them. In the poems "Raw Silk" and "Ancestors" Alexander uses silk to represent these two contradictory acts. She also is able to work through the memories of abuse as if they were mulberry leaves waiting to be turned into various garments.

The fact that the poem "Raw Silk" shares its name with the title of this volume bears significance on the weight that this poem holds. The poem deals with two different subjects that are dealt with interchangeably. Alexander goes back and forth between her personal life and the tragedy of war. It seems like she is in the midst of an internal struggle, trying to find a balance between her own problems and the problems that war is causing. This is most likely due to the fact that Alexander began her struggle towards remembering her past during the summer right before 9/11, and this struggle took a great deal of time to work through (*Fault Lines* 238). In fact, Alexander began the 2003 addition "in the months immediately after September 11, 2001" (229). This poem exemplifies Alexander's emotions as she was writing the addition. She had to struggle with the painful memories of abuse while simultaneously dealing with the negative impact that the terrorist attack caused her. In addition, the violence that Alexander experienced in her own life led her to speak on behalf of others.

The poem begins with Alexander's past. This section connects to the memoir because Alexander explains that when she was preparing for her wedding, her mother told her stories of her own. Her mother describes how she felt when she first saw her wedding sari, and how it glowed in the mirror's reflection, surrounded by the monsoon clouds outside of her window. Alexander begins to wonder about her maternal grandmother's wedding sari. She recalls that her

mother had kept it traditionally wrapped in muslin and stored in the rosewood chest that was part of her grandmother's wedding dowry. Unfortunately, Alexander finds out at this point that her mother had sold the wedding sari, which upsets her (220-1).

The beginning of "Raw Silk" connects to the above-mentioned story. She immediately begins talking about silk when she says, "Where is the silk from your grandmother's sari? / Raw silk / Brought all the way from Varanasi" (2-4). Alexander is reflecting upon her feelings regarding her grandmother's sari which she will never see again. However she does not directly relay her feelings to the reader. She follows this statement with an image of war, "...the town was literally blazing: / guns, grenades, blisters of smoke / on marketplace and mosque" (8-10). This image comes from the first protest that Alexander took part in. The French poetry that Alexander quotes following this image in the poem is the same quote that follows her description of the protest in the memoir (*Fault Lines* 118).

Alexander returns to her life in the poem when she transitions into the stories her mother told her. This also brings the topic back to silk, and the process of making silk:

grandmother coaxed mulberries
from monsoon soil, clouds ran riot,
silkworms coiled under the skin of leaves,
berries dripped free,
the courtyard was a sea of blood. (15-19)

This excerpt shows the connection that Alexander makes between silk and her grandmother. If mulberries are the source of mulberry leaves and therefore the ideas and memories that will be ingested, then what Alexander is saying here is that her grandmother helped plant the seeds that would bloom into these ideas. The quote also connects with the abuse in terms of the process

Alexander went through to recall the painful memories. Silkworms are needed in order to produce silk, so when she says “Silkworms coiled under the skin of leaves” she is referring to the fact that she is having trouble producing anything from her memories. Where the leaves represent the substance needed to produce silk, the berries on the tree are unnecessary in this process. They represent the memories that Alexander had used to cover up the more painful memories. As she is trying to recall the abuse, the false memories fall to the ground and help to clear her vision from the truth. Although the “Mulberry stains connect to abuse,” they connect to “blood” as well illustrating Alexander’s consistency in connecting her own traumatic experiences with the experiences of others (Leenerts 208).

Later in the poem, Alexander confronts the abuse first from a third person point of view, and then directly. This is seen in the lines, “a girl child pinned to a bed / as ancient hands cut at her” and “Should I cast it all away / be the girl who can’t remember?” (39-40, 43-44). This is reminiscent of how Alexander has dealt with these memories in the previous poems; she talks about the actual abuse as if it is happening to someone else. Alexander is still conflicted with confronting the abuse her grandfather caused her. It seems that the second couplet brings Alexander a step closer to this confrontation. She can almost see these memories, but they are still just shadow work, hidden behind a thin layer of silk.

The memories of abuse are mentioned throughout the rest of the poem. Alexander questions the memories when she says, “Could I have uttered what I didn’t know-- / when silk comes out of the silkworm’s hole / it is the color of colostrum” (45-7). Many of the times that Alexander brings up the abuse she uses the color red, whereas in this line she describes how silk comes out as a milky color. This, connected to the line before it, shows how she is still uncertain as to what actually happened. Following this, Alexander begins to explore the possibility of

remembering her past fully. She recognizes the fact that there are memories that she cannot remember, and compares these memories to the silkworms: “Amma there are silkworms / dancing in the firament” (51-2). This recognition is the first step to actually remembering the memories.

There is a point in “Raw Silk” where Alexander thinks that the repressed memories are about to reveal themselves to her. She calls herself “the mother of worms” which acknowledges the fact that she knows that she has the power to take control (54). Thinking that she is about to see the truth she says, “...the mother of worms / doffs her veil” (54-5). It has been seen numerous times in Alexander’s poetry that she felt that she shielded her eyes in order to forget the truth. Here, this is the first time she suggests that she is removing this veil. However, before she is able to see beyond this veil the memory disappears. In addition, a veil is partially transparent, similar to the silk used in shadow work. The poem ends with this disappearance:

When I open the drawer

to search for silk

I touch smoke

raw silk turned to smoke in the night’s throat. (59-62)

Even though the memory was there, represented as “raw silk,” it transforms into smoke before she can fully grasp it.

In “Ancestors” Alexander describes two people that one would have to assume to be relatives of hers. The mention of silk is brief, but it is important nonetheless. The poem begins with a description of the two as they are “bicycling into the sun” (1). The physical descriptions show that they are of Indian descent because the male is wearing a dhoti, and the female is wearing a sari. What is odd about this section is that Alexander describes a briefcase that the

man is holding which says “Lyric,” and the woman is carrying a “backpack / that is filled with scraps / of torn silk” (6-8). The fact that both the briefcase and the backpack have something unique about them is interesting because it means that there has to be more significance to them than one may assume.

The relatives that Alexander is describing exemplify two different aspects to who Alexander thinks she is. On the one hand she is a poet, and she uses the “Lyric” to create her art. On the other hand she has this backpack filled with torn silk. The silk represents her past which she is questioning because the memories of abuse are beginning to show themselves. The silk also represents her wishes to be able to tear up the barrier standing in her way from remembering.

In the third stanza the woman on the bicycle drops a fan into “sky blue water” (11). Similar to the veil mentioned in “Raw Silk,” the fan was most likely being used in the same fashion. When the fan falls, it represents how she can now see the truth. Once the fan is gone she says, “something of great price / is torn from her” (16-17). Because she can see the truth, her seemingly pleasant past is turned upside down. Alexander lost a great deal with the realization of what happened to her. To name a few things, her love and respect for her grandfather, her sense of desire and love, and the way she viewed herself. As this is happening to the woman, the man “cannot see or hear” (20). This shows how the other side of Alexander, the poet, cannot come to terms with what happened. In many of the poems that have been discussed, Alexander has written about how she has a hard time writing about the abuse. This is just another extension to how Alexander uses “I” and “you,” except in this poem she has created two different characters.

At the end of this poem the tone changes and becomes darker. It says: "Soon as the poet had it / they will be pecked to death / by a partridge. Soon they will drop / into dark water" (21-4). It may seem like Alexander is talking about the two people being "pecked to death," but this is not the case. First, it is important to point out that in "Ghalib's Ghost" Alexander calls herself a partridge, so this partridge is the same one. When she says "soon as the poet had it" she is referring to the fact that the man on the bicycle regained his sight and hearing (21). When the poet side of her catches a glimpse of the abuse she tries to kill those memories and stop them from coming to light. It is not that the people are dying and dropping into the dark water, but the memories.

~Conclusion~

In the interview between Alexander and Lopamudra Basu, it is discussed how Alexander uses poetry as a response to tragic events, and how it is an artist's responsibility to use his or her art in such a way (33). Being abused by her grandfather was definitely a tragic event, and in a more public sense, the tragedy of 9/11 affected Alexander to the point where she was forced to look at all of the tragedies that have happened across the world. It might have been painful to revisit these memories in her work, but Alexander felt that it was her responsibility. In concern with the large scale of events, Alexander is able to be blunt about their effects in her poetry, but because the abuse is so personal she had to find a way to write about it without exposing herself too much. Being an artist, Alexander is able to reflect on these memories in her poetry by using seemingly meaningless words as metaphors.

In an interview with Joseph May, Alexander discusses how her childhood plays a major role in her work. She says, "Childhood for me is the ground of much of what I write...so that childhood is continually returned to and reinvented..." (256). The metaphors that Alexander uses in *Raw Silk* are directly linked to her childhood, but it is not that simple. She uses these metaphors to face the abuse at her own pace, without having to be confronted by it head on. Through these metaphors she not only reinvents her childhood, but clarifies events that happened in her life that have lain dormant for many years.

It is only natural for an artist to use her life to inspire the works she creates, and most of the scholarship on Alexander proves just that. The articles on Diaspora and identity show how Alexander's multiple locations have affected her work. The analyses of the novels describe how the protagonists share many similar traits to Alexander. Iyer describes Alexander's novel, "Manhattan Music," illustrating the similarities that Sandhya Rosenblum (the protagonist) has to

Alexander, especially her Indian descent, her marriage to a Jewish man, and her return to India to nurse her father through ill health (142-3). Iyer's article, as well as others, suggest that these characters (as well as the story lines) are well thought out, and the details are meticulously planned to have a purpose. However the difference between writing a novel and writing poetry is that a novel has to be planned out in order for it to make sense; whereas poetry is more associational, and less narrative-driven than fiction.

In *Fault Lines* Alexander describes how and why she writes poetry. Directly after 9/11 she was working on the addition to her memoir, but it became too difficult for her to write in this form. She said:

I cannot keep up prose anymore. I turn to my first love, poetry...It seems to me that the lyric poem is a form of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem I have to enter into a dream state. But at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense location to reflect on the world. (*Fault Lines* 284)

Alexander uses her poetry as an act of reflection. She lets her mind enter a "dream state" where she can let her feelings flow freely. What she does not do is meticulously plan her poems. They are natural and relay any concerns she may have with the world and her own life.

Door, stone and silk are items that have had great significance in Alexander's life, even though they may seem insignificant to others. Because of this they have gained meanings for Alexander greater than their actual purposes, and they have found a place in Alexander's poetry to represent memories that may be too difficult for Alexander to confront directly. Of course these three metaphors all have multiple meanings because for them to have only one meaning

would suggest planning on Alexander's part. Instead, door, stone and silk transformed into metaphors naturally because of the parts they played in Alexander's life.

A door can be construed as a gateway, whether it is physical, mental or emotional. In her poetry Alexander uses a door in this way, showing the reader how she wants to leave her state of denial and transcend into a state of complete disclosure. However, a door has greater significance because of the fear and trepidation she has of the door leading to her grandfather's library. It transforms from a simple gateway into a representation of the abuse that occurred beyond that door. Confronting the abuse directly would have been too difficult for Alexander, so her subconscious mind led her to remember the abuse in steps. The first step was confronting the door that has haunted her for all of her life.

Stones take on a dual meaning as well. Alexander makes it very clear in her memoir that stones can be interpreted as ideas and experiences one takes in and transforms into art. However, one cannot ignore the context in which stones are used. It has become clear that stones are often used in relation to the abuse. Alexander may have turned many of her "stones" into poetry, but as a child the stones she swallowed that represented the abuse took years to digest. Now, decades after the abuse actually took place, stones finally "have tongues," and Alexander can reflect on the painful memories that have found their way back into her consciousness ("Blue Lotus" 70).

The final metaphor, silk, represents more than just a textile. The process of making silk is similar to the process of eating stones. However, silk represents the finished product of this process instead of the first step. In other words, silk, to Alexander, is her poetry. The mulberry leaves go through a complex process and eventually turn into beautiful garments, similar to how

the stones turn into poetry. Silk is also used to illustrate the veil that has shielded Alexander's consciousness from the memories that were too hard to remember.

Meena Alexander's poetry in *Raw Silk* reflects her most basic human responses to tragic events and tragic memories that she is forced to reflect on. Like raw silk, Alexander's poems are unprocessed, meaning that they are unfiltered. Alexander does not alter her emotions for the sake of the poem, but rather lets her emotions become the poem.

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