



## Diasporic experience in the novel of meena alexander

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### Abstract

On the literary map of Indian women writings, Meena Alexander appears to be leading woman poetess. Her poetry and trend setting novels and carefully constructed other literary articles have earned her literary fame of a serious and skillful author of the world in our modern age. In Indian writing she has established herself for her remarkable contribution to the development of art and ethos of novel writing techniques. Her poems create the cloned effects on our mind and heart for the varying Indian social values and present the microcosmic study of man-women relationship in the changed atmosphere of the modern times. Besides other things her poems deals with mostly, the urban city life in contact with nature and the socio-psycho attitudes of human mind caught in the crucible of tradition and change.

**Keywords:** alienation and identity, separation and loneliness, tradition and change, diaspora and displacement

### Introduction

Meena Alexander is one of the most brilliant and subtle writer who has described the meeting of Eastern and Western culture. She achieved the cohesive design of content and form in her psychological poems and novels and brings a thought provoking harmony over different streams of feeling and sensibility found in the different settings of human society. In her poems, we find a fine match between 'what is life?' and how it has to be lived? With natural make up among her poems, she commands a rich galaxy of characters both male and female, though articulates especially the feminine psyche from childhood to youth. She does not generate mute-characters, nor are their problems concerned with food, clothes and shelter. Instead, most of her protagonists are alienated from the world, from the society, from families and even from their own selves because they are not common people but the individuals made to stand against the general current of life and who fight and struggle against it to get the aspired world. An article entitled Diaspora mean expatriate, immigrant. The term diaspora was firstly recorded in 1876 referring to refugees of the Irish feminine and it is widely assimilated in 1950s.

1. Diaspora carries a sense of dislocation, displacement and find itself separated from their original roots.
2. According to Homi Bhabha diaspora is "gathering of exile, emigrants and refugees in foreign culture and foreign land. Gathering of the past in ritual and revivals and that gathering in the present.
3. In some conceptual consideration by Fred W. Riggs defines Diaspora as communities whose member lives informally outside, a homeland while maintaining active contact with it. The world informally excludes people having a formal status such as "soldiers, diplomats, missionaries, businessman, journalist, spies etc"(124) who are the agents of the state or non-state entities in the

homeland. Toloyan who lunched a journal Diaspora stated, "we use Diaspora provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and American dispersion name shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" The above definitions point to the distinguish meaning of a fruitful discussion of diaspora.

The Indian Diaspora is the largest Diaspora in the world with its global presence and a history that dates back to the Indian civilization. The Indian Diaspora can be divided into three phases ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient Diaspora refers laborers, crafts men and traders who explored new lands for work, wealth and adventures. In mediieval times, the British imperialism caused movement of the indentured laborers. In modern times, skilled, educated and intelligent Indians moved to the USA and other European countries for economic and professional reasons. They are decentred in the sense that they have moved away from their original centre nations, communities and affiliations. Gilroy writes, that 'the image of the ship living micro cultural, micro political system in motion effectively captures the trans-nationality and intercultural relations, the exchange of ideas and activism'(107). Diaspora is conditioned by the home shore they have left and the new shore they arrive at. Diasporic poets often face traumas of displacement and rootlessness. Nissim Ezekiel is a poet with cosmopolitan outlook and faith is synthesizing power of art. Bruce King remarks very aptly: A central concerns of Ezekiel's poems always has-been how, "in an era of scepticism and secularity one can live with a sense of grace, completeness, morality, truth and holiness."3 Meena Alexander is essentially a poet of countryside. And she reveals sincerity and intense concern for the plight of

expatriate and immigrant who prefer to settle in another country for some reason. The graphic description of river, clouds, birds, snow, starlight, seasons is full of detailed knowledge of country affairs. Here the thought becomes concrete and tangible:

Alexander explores themes of memory, migration, Diaspora and displacement in her diasporic work. Her creative work lies at the intersection of post-colonial ethnic American, and women's studies. Like her life, which has included multiple border crossings, her poems crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries and generates interdisciplinary dialogues. Poetry has been widely published as the *New York Times* Magazines. Meena is a genuine diasporic voice expressing her own life's diasporic experiences in her poetry uprooting and exile, alienation and identity, migrant memories and traumas, separation and loneliness all the way from India to Sudan and USA. She christened Mary Elizabeth but she has been called "Meena" since her birth and in her teenage she officially changed her name from Marry to Meena. She states, "I felt I had changed my name to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden" in her autobiography *Fault Lines* (74). Representing her own multi-lingual nature. My analysis of Alexander's *Manhattan Music* will be informed by recent theories concerning the spatial construction of ethnic identity, for Alexander presents her characters as evolving not only through time, but also, perhaps primarily, through the traversing of space. The difficulties inherent in the process of crossing borders are succinctly captured by the fragment of a poem included in the novel that I have chosen for the title of this essay. "A bridge that seizes crossing" signifies the difficult road that an immigrant needs to take in order to achieve a degree of self-acceptance in the new cultural environment. Although the presentation of movement as a constitutive element of identity is also explored by ethnic writers in general and South Asian American writers in particular, what Alexander contributes to the discussion of ethnic identity is its connection to the space of artistic creation. Art in her novel not only serves as a reflection of the processes of immigration and acculturation, but also becomes a universal language, whose importance is stressed both by the thematic concerns of the novel and by its structure.

The novel tells the story of Sandhya, an Indian woman in her mid-thirties, who currently lives in Manhattan, having married a Jewish-American man whose fascination with India had led him to Nainatal, an Indian mountain resort, where the two met. Several years later and already a mother, Sandhya begins to feel the heavy burden of living in a country which she does not think of as her own. Her immigrant anxiety, coupled with the death of her beloved father back in India and her rejection by her Egyptian lover in America, leads Sandhya to a nervous breakdown and a suicide attempt. The story of immigrant trauma, not at all unfamiliar in the context of South Asian American fiction, is rendered by Alexander in a structurally complex way. She punctuates the story of Sandhya, narrated mostly in the third person, with slim chapters written in the first person from the perspective of Draupadi Dinkins, a conceptual artist whom Sandhya meets and befriends in New York City. By virtue of doing so, Alexander achieves several aims simultaneously. For one thing, this structural choice

enables her to pinpoint intersections and overlaps between various spaces both geographical and metaphorical that her narrative evokes in its discussion of ethnic identity. All of Draupadi's artistic projects focus on the issue of ethnicity and her choice to explore by means of art not only her own ethnic background but also that of other minority groups in the US makes Draupadi, and by inference Alexander, a spokesperson for universal dimensions of the experience of crossing borders. At the same time, the narrative fragmentation, achieved both through the structural division into chapters as well as through the non-linear, associational structure of each chapter, reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness, serves as a mirror of an immigrant's troubled mind. Ketu Katrak's comment that "[n]on-linear narrative structures" frequent in postcolonial literature serve to "recreate the simultaneities of spaces" (*Politics* 40) certainly pertains as well to Alexander's novel.

### Space and ethnic identity

The convergence between spatiality and the construction of identity has been theorized by scholars for several decades now, ever since the so-called spatial turn within the humanities. Currently, the prevalent scholarly opinion holds that identity does not only evolve along a temporal axis, but is spatially located as well. For example, Susan Friedman argues for "the centrality of space... to the locations of identity" (19). She understands identity in spatial terms as "a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges" (19). Hybrid identity, a particularly salient form of identity for ethnic subjects, is a result of "movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting" (Friedman 24). Thus, hybrid identity is frequently produced in borderlands or spaces in between cultures. Helena Grice connects the spatial theory of identity to the literary productions of Asian American women writers by claiming that space frequently acts as a metaphor for identity and that female writers tend to search for self through place (200). Analyzing Alexander's famous memoir *Fault Lines*, Grice posits that "Alexander's search is for her identity through an imaginative exploration of space" (217). Alexander's fictional characters are likewise preoccupied with issues of movement, border crossings, home and belonging as they bear upon the ever-changing sense of who one is and where one stands. As far as geographical landscapes are concerned, Alexander's novel moves back and forth between Manhattan and southern India, both places familiar to Sandhya, with Draupadi's account adding several more locations that diffuse the binary model of US-versus-India, found in much of South Asian American writing. The vast majority of literary texts by South Asian American writers tend to focus on two locations: the home country and the adopted country, which are presented in a hierarchical fashion, the latter visibly favored by the character or narrator. Characterizing the genre of Asian immigrant woman's novel in general, Inderpal Grewal posits that a characteristic feature of the genre is that it sets up "the binary oppositions between the United States as first world

site of freedom and ‘Asia’ as third world site of repression” (63). Draupadi speaks of her origins in the following way: “I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from slaves, pride of Kala Pani, sister to the Middle Passage. Also part Asian-American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood: railroads in the West, the pineapple and sugarcane fields” (47). However, the novel does not make it clear whether this statement is a truthful account of Draupadi’s origins; it is equally possible that this mix of ethnicities is actually an act of artistic creation. With her whether real or imagined mixedblood origins, Draupadi creates herself as a symbol of America, a composite that it is of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. She evokes in her account major ethnic groups that migrated or were forced to migrate to America from outside the continent: black slaves, Europeans and Asians; at the same time, she leaves out from the mosaic Native Americans or Latinos/as, whom she may view as original inhabitants of the land. “[T]he fragments of her past, real and imagined, swarming into her art” (53) are used by Draupadi as artistic material. Draupadi, a symbol of immigrant America, a person who feels at ease with the multiple strands of her heritage, functions in the novel as Sandhya’s alter ego, the “almost... double” (49) of the anxious immigrant. The multiplicity of geographical landscapes the novel is set in or otherwise evokes including North America, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean serves to show the linkage between various ethnic groups inhabiting the North American continent. It likewise suggests that it is impossible to limit the discussion of the experience of migration to one ethnic group or one location only. On the contrary, the novel explores global interconnections between lands and people without erasing the specific histories of these ethnic groups. Many of the connections that “Alexander weaves into her narrative” include “social and political incidents from India and America, for example, Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad, the threat of Muslim fundamentalism in Manhattan, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a Sri Lanka suicide bomber, racism towards Indians in New Jersey, Christian fundamentalism... and the immigrant issues of New York City” (Moka-Dias 3). Talking about Alexander’s writing in general, Rajini Srikanth terms the writer’s position a “globalism of outrage” (88), which she understands to mean the author’s preoccupation with both local and global issues, a sensitivity that Linda McDowell in a different context calls “global localism” (38). Srikanth explains Alexander’s interest in both local and global injustices in the following way: “a literature born in the United States... must of necessity evoke other locations” (87) for in the global world what happens in one place affects and is affected by events occurring elsewhere. Alexander herself, in an interview by Lopamudra Basu, corroborates her interests in matters both local and global when she says that in her work “place is layered on place to make a palimpsest of sense” (Alexander, “The Poet” 32). Art, Violence and Ethnic Identity in Meena Alexander’s *Manhattan Music* 153.

### **Ethnicity and Art**

*Manhattan Music*, however, does not focus solely on geographical landscapes and the roles they play in the representation of migration, but it also explores more

metaphorical realms of art, violence and ethnic identity. Unlike other South Asian American writers delving into border crossings, Alexander situates the experience of migration and the construction of a viable ethnic identity against the backdrop of art. Artistic creativity, especially in its visual and conceptual forms, is imbued in Alexander’s narrative with the power to express the precarious position of an ethnic individual and give voice to the history of racial oppression. It is also shown to have the capacity to aid an individual in the process of coming to terms with who she is and where she fits within the fabric of American multiculturalism. From the very beginning of her artistic career, Alexander’s Draupadi has created art with a heavy political agenda. The teenage Draupadi’s first artistic, or quasi-artistic, enterprise results from her desertion by her first boyfriend at the insistence of his racist father. As a reaction to such an insult, Draupadi takes a Barbie doll, smears it black with *kajal*, a traditional kohl-like cosmetic used in Asia to darken the eyelids and eyelashes, ties a piece of pink cloth torn from her mother’s sari around the doll’s lips and seals her eyes with wax (92). Although this act is essentially a method of coming to terms with her personal loss and anger, it signals at the same time certain areas of interest that the adult Draupadi will keep exploring in her art, namely ethnicity and gender as two primary markers of identity that lead to one’s subjection to the regulatory mechanisms of and exploitation by various ideologies. The Barbie doll’s function as a symbol of mainstream ideals of female beauty is addressed here by the adolescent’s use of ethnically marked *kajal* and sari. What Draupadi’s first artistic project shows is that women whose bodies differ whether due to physical features, mannerisms, dress or make-up from what is considered conventionally attractive are deemed unworthy of (male) attention. The fact that both the doll’s lips and eyes are covered may testify to the powerlessness and voicelessness of women who do not comply with the mainstream’s ideals of femininity: following Draupadi’s artistic intervention the doll can neither “see” nor “speak,” she is deprived both of voice and of sight to stand for a redundant addition to the world the young woman feels herself to be.

### **Conclusion**

Alexander’s fictional characters likewise struggle with the limitations that language imposes on communication. As Katrak puts it, language is especially important for women as it can serve as “a coping mechanism” (*Politics* 207) in situations of powerlessness. What happens then when language generates more problems than it solves, as in the case of Sandhya, who is not convinced that “varied languages... made one better equipped for life in a world of multiple anchorages such as New York presented” (Alexander, *Manhattan* 68)? Alexander suggests that in such cases another, extra-linguistic mode of expression must be found. For example, the heroine in her first novel *Nampally Road* discards English for the sake of “a communal dream language that allows women to express themselves, and escape from the boundaries of Western definitions” (Davé 110). In *Manhattan Music* this special language, a “dream language” that enables the characters to communicate their feelings freely, is the language of art. As Mehta claims, art

“provides an emotional outlet to vent frustrations or anguish faced by the immigrants in this novel. Art is like a mirror reflecting multiple identities of the (immigrant) artist. The versatility of art in this novel reflects on the adaptive, dynamic, and even fluid quality of the immigrants living in America” (234). The role of art is emphasized in the novel’s structure. As has already been pointed out, the main sections of *Manhattan Music* are interspersed with brief chapters, a mere few pages long, narrated by Draupadi Dinkins and one chapter narrated by Jay, Sandhya’s cousin, a photographer-turned-poet. These artist-narrated chapters, starting with the Overture and ending with the Coda give the novel a structure resembling that of a musical composition, with Draupadi’s chapters playing the role of leitmotif. Music, it must be remembered, is also evoked in the title of the novel and seems always to be playing in the background, even though it is not paid as much attention to as other forms of art, including performance, photography or poetry. The title of the novel may also refer to the sounds of the streets, which Sandhya interprets as “curious, atonal music” (78), or it may denote the people who live in Manhattan and form the human mosaic of New York, comparable to the components of a musical composition. The somewhat overoptimistic lesson that Sandhya learns at the end of the novel is that although people, like instruments, sound different, they all have a place and a role to play within the composition of New York and America as such. The apparent naivety of such a conclusion stems from the fact that Sandhya has never fallen victim to racial oppression and her struggle has been of an inner, rather than outer, character. In view of that, the utopian vision of New York as a place welcoming to all is what helps her accept herself as a rightful member of America. As argued in this essay, Meena Alexander in *Manhattan Music* deploys several interwoven discourses to express the multivalent experience of border crossings.

For one thing, she frames her account of Sandhya’s fraught identity in spatial terms, showing literal movement through space, from India to America, to be a crucial factor bearing upon the construction of identity. To complicate and enrich her portrayal of immigrant sensibility Alexander opens up the metaphorical space of artistic creation, which serves as a mirror of the anxious immigrant’s troubled mind. Art also functions in the novel as a political tool used to raise people’s awareness about the history of racial oppression and to forge coalitions among various groups of people of color. Finally, art is presented as a form of language which is universal in its accessibility to all and which enables an expression of an unrestricted range of meanings. To conclude, the novel thus seems to show that “a bridge that seizes crossing” can after all be crossed through art.

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