

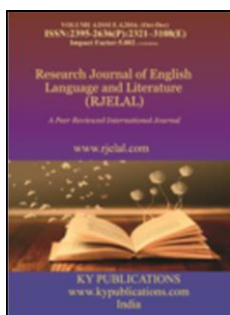


FEMALE SUBJECTS AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S SELECTED WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Discourses on diaspora most notably incorporate, together with many others, those of William Safran, Khachig Tölölyan and Robin Cohen. Most studies of the diaspora revolve around a host of diasporic aspects including questions of identity and the self, and selections made between marginal and multicultural constructions. In the literary field, these studies are discernible in the iconic works of Salman Rushdie, whose celebration of non-belonging lent diaspora a new form of vocabulary with which to explore its predilections. Parallel studies in these postcolonial areas of migration also soon led to the examination of the type of travel as perceived by women. This 'feminization' of the diaspora primarily obtains credibility from the fact that migration as a feminine act so far remains unfamiliar and that lending a voice to these voiceless narratives becomes a literary, social, and cultural necessity. This paper examines the works of diasporic writer Meena Alexander and investigates the means by which women of the Indian diaspora in the West cope with the shifting roles which they assign themselves and those granted by society, often wedged between continuing a shared, older tradition and making way for a new one.

Keywords: diaspora, female identity, migration, dislocation

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At present, the postcolonial literature theories and criticism abound with the writings of women of South Asian Diaspora who have been successful in giving expression to their creative urge by not only focusing on their experiences of migrancy but also exile, diaspora, dislocation, hybridism and multiculturalism. Encountering uncertainty and anxiety, these women struggle for cultural, physical, psychological and social existence. In the words of D.K. Pabby, "the writings of South Asian Women immigrant writers," focus on the issues "of race, gender, sexuality, cultural differences, multiple identities," and there "is inclusion of several texts of variegated cultural experiences and different narrative strategies,

making evocative use of the 'memory of the past'- 'the roots'- to grapple with the frequent existential self-questionings of – who am I? Whencefrom I come? –and the answers are a bitter – sweet poignant experience of putting bits and pieces together to make a wholesome whole" (153).

Usha Bande avers that there are three conditions as a consequence of which women experience diaspora-first is when they move out of their homeland with their migrant parents and thus are brought up in a foreign land; second condition arises by virtue of their marriage due to which they are uprooted both from their parental home as well as their homeland; and third is when they exercise their own choice to move to the West in search of

some lucrative job or for higher education. All these three conditions are there for Meena Alexander to experience diaspora. Alexander had to leave her country when she was only five years old as her father got a job with the Sudanese government. After her graduation, instead of returning to India with her parents, she moved to England to earn a Ph. D degree. Finally when she was teaching in her country, she met her husband and moved with him to US where she is still living. Therefore, all the three reasons-growing up in another land with migrant parents, higher education and marriage- are responsible for Meena Alexander's multiple migrations. Whatever the category, in real life women are caught between various psychological problems of the diaspora, such as dislocation, marginalization, unbelonging, and cultural dissonance which are common to men, in addition to a variety of oppressive conditions and discriminatory practices peculiar to gender both inside and outside the community (31).

Dislocation, for a woman, manifests itself in feelings of inadequacy which complicates the process of self definition. This is often the result of patriarchal prescriptions about what she should ideally be. This, in turn, is frequently at odds with what she actually is or wants to be. The divide that emerges then results in alienation characterized by loss of confidence and credibility, compartmentalization of life, and stunting of personal development. Added to this are feelings of meaninglessness and dislocation which eventually lead to a sense of powerlessness, self-estrangement and fractured consciousness (Dev, and Kallury 146). Diasporic women writers struggle with this significant subject of exilic identity in the existing postmodern world in a different manner than those of male writers and their viewpoint undoubtedly differ from their male counterparts. As Latha Rengachari examine:

In their aim at self-definition and the expression of their expatriate experiences, women from 1970s onwards chose to use literature. Literature became a means of establishing autonomous selfhood. Third world women sought to find words and

forms to fit their experiences and have chosen narrative strategies like the autobiography and the quest novel to do so. They use the autobiography to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of expatriation and self-definition. (35-36)

Women's positions in the colonial and postcolonial worlds are at all times a question for identity. Meena Alexander's works are situated in the present day's Indian diasporic communities of New York City and mirror life discourses and survival methods for postcolonial women under the whip of the Imperial tongue. She tries to define her homes and the multifarious transnational identities which have accompanied her constantly shifting locations. She was dislodged so many times that her place of identity was displaced. Alexander represents a diasporic feminist vision that questions patriarchal narratives of nation and identity. Not only her memoir *Fault Lines* and her novels *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music* focus on contemporary women but her poems as well as essays also brood over a woman's search for identity in the contemporary scenario.

Meena Alexander experiences dislocation finding herself caught between a flux of opposing cultures and constructing worlds, therefore, she tries to negotiate a new space for herself. The feeling of isolation, alienation, dislocation, shame, anger, neglect, desperation and disgust is expressed very aptly by Alexander in her article "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics" when she states: "In India, no one would ask me if I were Asian American or Asian. Here we are part of a minority and the vision of being 'unsolved' comes into our consciousness" (26-27). This feeling of pain, betrayal and distress arises from the loss of the home and the wistful longing for the past.

Alexander mirrors in her works a series of continental crossings. Beginning from her childhood and adolescent years which were divided culturally and linguistically between Sudan, her father's working place, and her grandparents home in Kerala; her schools stretching from Pune and Khartoum, to Nottingham; and her teaching career extending from Delhi to Hyderabad and finally to

New York; her complex individual self experiences dislocation and exile geographically, linguistically and even by the politics of her sexuality, with its marginalized gender identity. It is through her writings that Alexander tries to voice her dilemma of living in New York as a Third World immigrant woman writer and “about being born into a female body. . . about the difficulty of living in space . . . without fixed ground rules” (*Fault Lines* 4). In order to give meaning and shape to her life, Alexander invariably searches for a social and geographical space. As Vanaja states, “Her works are expositions of the complexities of a dislocated self and of female existence, which confronts ‘power’ both patriarchal and political in daily life” (28).

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, we come across a perplexed Meena who is striving to figure out what angle of vision about herself, about her existence, to put forth before the humanity, asking herself several questions:

What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? How many different gazes would that need? And what to do with the crookedness of flesh, thrown back at the eyes? The more I thought about it, the less sense any of it seemed to make. . . . That’s it, I thought. That’s all I am, a migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, and in the chill wind of autumn, tossing back and forth, worrying myself sick. (1-2)

It is in such interrogation that one is able to find out answers to the existential difficulties. Here, Meena the author and protagonist, ascertains that in her writings she had to surpass the excessive pomposities of sounds that hit upon the eardrums without making any solemn impact on the readers, to something more serious anchored in one’s life experiences of a woman. Alexander portrays here the dislocated self who is wedged at the crossroads of different cultural arenas. In addition, the author intentionally distances herself from the confines of regional territories and exhibits a travelling identity revealing the anguish of dislocation and the split between body and mind.

To position herself in relation to a “homeland”, Alexander delineates a genealogy through connections between mothers and daughters. She thinks about the moment when she and her sisters were endowed with their “first home” by her mother’s “large belly” (*Fault Lines* 24). She delineates and traces her own family history in order to counter feelings of dislocation of a woman who has been “uprooted so many times” (3). The strong mother-daughter bonding is conveyed by her in the following words: “Ever since I can remember, amma and I have been raveled together in net after net of time. . . . Lacking her I cannot picture what I might be” (6-7).

Alexander also discusses at length the four generation of women in her family: her two grandmothers, her aunts and her mother, then herself and her cousins and the fourth generation represented by her daughter. About her paternal grandmother she writes “It is in me still, her voice, her bearing: Kozencheri veliammechi, grandmother Mariamma, my appa’s mother who loved to scold me for running around in the sun” (*Fault Lines* 44). Surprisingly, on attaining adulthood, Alexander desires “to lie with her in her great four-poster bed, learn the trick of silence, of female invisibility. How else could women protect themselves” (106). Alexander’s maternal grandmother Kunju who had died an untimely death was “a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had a tradition and a history” and who made Alexander realize that she is “a dusty tattered thing, . . . a woman with no fixed place, a creature struggling to make herself up in a new world”(15). Alexander’s tradition-bound mother brought her children up with the firm conviction that the right place for a woman is at home. Alexander could understand the reason for her mother being “so stern about a woman’s place in the world” as her grandmother Kunju’s busy public life as a social worker and a freedom fighter offered her very little time to set apart for her only child, i.e. Alexander’s mother. When Alexander is busy with her new job and her mother comes to New York to take care of her newborn son Adam, the author is reminded of her mother’s advice which was given to her in her growing years: “if you have children, always remember that your role is to be there at

their side, at home. It would be wrong for you to take a job. Remember that, Meena, a woman's place is at home, by her family"(14). After the birth of her daughter Svati Mariam, Alexander is apprehensive and ponders "What will she make of me, her South Indian mother?"(171).

Alexander wrestles with questions regarding her own legitimacy within academia and recalls her encounter with the dean of the University where she worked:

He glanced at me. I was sitting there, quite proper in my Kashmir silk sari, erect at the edge of the chair. His eyes shifted to the titles of chapters listed in the table of contents. There was a gap there, a split second. I shivered, not because I was cold- it was early fall and quite warm still- but because I suddenly saw something. There was no way the man who sat in front of me could put together my body with any sense of the life of the mind. I had fallen under the Cartesian blade. 'Yes, yes,' he muttered, looking at the chapters with names like Wordsworth and Coleridge littering them. 'Yes, yes.' I stood up. The trouble was what I was, quite literally: female, Indian. (114)

These lines highlight the inequalities present within academic institutions and the pressures with which women of colour deal with.

Married and in America, Alexander speaks of her experience as being at once violent and sudden: "My two worlds, present and past are torn apart, and I was the fault, the crack that marked the dislocation" (15). Successive journeys have only confirmed this sense of non-belonging, an experience which asserts her overriding predicament of being an exile. While her childhood diaries evoke the trauma of being a girl child ("If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me? 'Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?"), this is only further reinforced in the American world of the twentieth century (102). Gender and race combine to create a dramatic impact even in the academic situation, as exemplified by Alexander who narrates an anecdote revolving around persisting notions of femininity and power: "Not so

long ago, I was giving a reading, wearing a silk sari as I always do at these things. . . . A man comes up to me after the reading. He was one of the poets there, and says, 'You really took my breath away.' . . . 'Yes, really, you look so . . .' He stops. 'Well, you know, dressed in a sari and all that. But your words are fierce. Where do they come from?'" (188).

Alexander's work of fiction *Nampally Road* critically examines the subaltern status accorded to women in patriarchy. Here in this novel, the author presents a host of memorable female characters like Mira Kannadical, Dr. Durgabai, Maitreyi, Rosamma etc. who fight the evils of patriarchy. Alexander's women characters are strong and assertive and they question and challenge all forms of unjust authority, which victimize women. Reviewing *Nampally Road*, Inderpal Grewal comments that Alexander's "range of women is impressive. . . . The novel's complex representation of India in the Indira Gandhi era, combined with the issue of inclusion and empowerment through affiliations on the basis of gender and class in both India and the U.S., effectively dismantles simplistic colonial constructs of the monolithic Third World woman as victim"(228).

Sandhya, the protagonist in *Manhattan Music*, reflects the identity of women who however slowly or through temperamental fits of rage, break through the traditional role model of an Indian woman first through resistance to common cultural practices like arranged marriages, or societal notions of the feminine, then through immigration or travel. Such women go further and further into a fantasy world of violence and loneliness. Sometimes they come to new crossroads from where they may make fresh beginnings. The novel concludes on a hopeful, though mellow note, with Sandhya returning to the city after a period of rest with her cousin Sakhi at New Jersey. Negotiating with, and reconciling to her new life, Sandhya is "no longer fearful" (227) and realizes: "There was a place for her here, though what it might be she could never have spelled out. And she, who had never trusted words very much, knew she would live out her life in America" (228). The closing lines of *Manhattan Music* display the protagonist's adjustment in the American city: "For a moment longer she stood at the edge of Central

Park. Then slipping sandals onto feet still damp with lake water, Sandhya Rosenblum walked quickly into the waiting city”(228). Erica Duncan states that like Sandhya, the author was also coming home and “A certain period in Meena’s own waiting was over, as something in her had come home to Sandhya, to a frail but ever-sturdier housing in that time between the dawn and dusk, at last” (28).

Alexander’s *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road* are her two fictional works with different settings, where the author is striving to establish identities of the protagonists Sandhya and Mira respectively and simultaneously talks about their challenges as immigrants. Both these novels are a search of a woman to explore her real place and her real ‘self’. The quest and eventual discovery of the Self should be commended, for the reason that it is finally this emergence of ‘Self’ that gives the female protagonists an edge over all those immigrants who surrender to diasporic conditions. Sandhya and Mira in different and alien locales begin on a strange and fearsome note, but the end they arrive at in the course of the novel marks a gradual development and evolution of their empowered being in unfamiliar settings. They offer a sense of optimism and an inspiration to all those immigrants who find themselves perplexed and at a complete loss concerning their individual identities in unfamiliar milieus.

In a poem titled “Poem by the Wellside” in *The Shock of Arrival*, there is a grotesque grandmother figure, with bitter herbs in her teeth making “a necklace of grief” (41). In the middle of the night the scary old hag yells for the poet: “Meena! / Meena, my daughter”(40). The reference to the well in the poem reminds the poet of the miseries and sufferings of Indian women, because when the author was a child she was told that young women who had become pregnant out of wedlock would jump, or be pushed, into the wells (205). In her memoir, and in *The Shock of Arrival*, the writer evokes a line of women, from whom she is descended and whom she calls “well-jumped women” (*Fault Lines* 107), women who jumped over the well, instead of falling into it. The old woman in the poem, described as an “old hag” (40), terrorizes her in a way, but Meena resolves not to give up: “I

will not turn to her / I will not perish” (40). The immigrant poet reprimands the fierce old woman who invites her into the murky depths of the well. Alexander questions if something good will surface from this haunting image of the well: “will water pour from the well? / Will a stream of water take root, / make a table, a pitcher, a bowl, bread?” (41). In other words, will something positive come out of this image linked to violence and death? Towards the end of the poem, the old woman informs Meena that:

by the wellside,
our dreams
drop their clothes
and flee. (42)

Here the author appears to meditate on the existence of Indian women, on how their dreams are sometimes unfulfilled, and on how only by the wellside they could be liberated from the constraints of tradition. The well that seems to claim her and attract her is threatening because sheltering oneself in tradition, in one’s past and one’s origins, is for the poet a serious situation that makes her oblivious of the present. As she explains in *The Shock of Arrival*, as a child the well fascinated her, and she would try to have a glimpse of the face of a fallen woman in the well, but all she could see was her own reflection in its water. Looking at herself into the dark waters of the well therefore equals searching for her own self, her own uncertain and fragmented identity. As she describes in *Fault Lines*, this revolving to one’s roots, can turn you into a woman who chokes on her own flesh (161). The grotesque body that Alexander referred to in *Fault Lines* is also present in this poem, right at the beginning where she writes: “body, you’re a stranger here / I dare not touch the scars / of stippled flesh” (*The Shock of Arrival* 40), where ‘here’ could certainly be construed as North America, which is her present location. This poem possibly also illustrates the differences the author feels towards older generations of Indian women, who did not have an option except for jumping into the well or having visions of other lives. Further on in an essay called “Erupting Words”, Meena Alexander writes that in that poem: “to reach the grandmother figure, I had to lose body, touch death” (48). In another poem,

"Boating", she visualizes that the boat in which she is making a journey with her family capsizes, and her grandmother holds on to her, preventing her from drowning (43-5). As they come out of the water together, as in a sort of rebirth, they cannot come unstuck. As Alexander comments in *The Shock of Arrival*, what connects her to her grandmother – and therefore to her ancestors and to her homeland – is her mother tongue, Malayalam, regardless of all the differences she might feel with older generations of Indian women (38). In order to have a resolution, however, it seems that the author has to pass through some form of rebirth, that she has to give away notions of a fixed past and build herself anew.

In another essay named "Translating Violence" included in *The Shock of Arrival*, she also mulls over how countries that have experienced colonization, like India, seem to apply the same hierarchical structure, what she calls "a colonial sense of maintaining power, of keeping order" (82), to the role of women in society. In this essay the author recollects how in the 1970s, when she came back to India after her years in England, there was a rising feminism that counteracted more traditional views on women, exemplified by the priggishness of Gandhi, who during his experiments with non-violence in community living in South Africa cut the hair of young women, blamed for provoking the men. According to Alexander, women already feel marginal and when this is coupled with situations of violent disorder, it brings about a fragmentation of the patriarchal mode and of the marginalization of female existence. This can be used to make sense of a dislocated life, and the connection between the violence of patriarchy and the kind of racism dislocated people are exposed to in the new country becomes obvious.

More and more women writers are taking positions in examining the injustices of race and class as well as politicizing concerns of gender within their communities. Latha Rengachari and E. Manickam have rightly said that Meena Alexander's "work underscores the increasingly obvious fact that the so-called Third World migrant writer is one of the richest gifts with which our age of multiculturalism has blessed us" (105).

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