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Diasporic Location(s) and the Poetics of Self: Reflections on Meena Alexander's

Manhattan Music and Nampally Road

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Abstract

The diasporic literature discusses about the idea of homeland and about the multiple journeys of immigrants across the globe, thereby making up their identities. It is through these varied experiences of translocation, dislocations and re-locations that diasporic or migrant writers learn to live with multiple, often contradictory, notions of self and community. Meena Alexander, like other postcolonial diasporic writers, expresses herself through evoking histories and memories of

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displacement, thereby creating 'imaginary homelands'. Her writings transcend barriers of nationality and culture by focusing on the awareness and awakening amongst her female protagonists. *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road* are two fictional works with different locales, trying to establish identities of Sandhya and Mira respectively and at the same time discusses about their challenges as immigrants. The transformation brought in Sandhya and Mira are remarkable, because they develop a resistance against all odds and are capable to carve out their respective niches in respective places. The setting of the both the novels are different and articulate two different ideologies and approaches. The search and eventual finding of the Self must be praised, because it is ultimately this emergence of Self that gives the female protagonists an edge over all those immigrants who succumb to diasporic conditions.

Keywords: Identity, Diasporic Consciousness, Immigration, Dislocation, Hybridization, Memory, Fragmentation

The literature of the Diaspora involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys which are undertaken on account of compulsions or choices. It is through these varied experiences of translocation, dislocations and re-locations that diasporic or migrant writers learn to live with multiple, often contradictory, notions of self and community. Meena Alexander, like other postcolonial diasporic writers, expresses herself through evoking histories and memories of displacement, thereby creating 'imaginary homelands' like Salman Rushdie. South Asian women writers are largely categorized

as those who are either indigenous to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and those who are of South Asian descent but reside in the diasporas. The fiction these women write differs from their male counterparts in several ways, including their depiction of female characters (Sathupati, 1995). There are differences between British South Asian and Indian literature. The writings transcend barriers of nationality and culture by focusing on the awareness and awakening amongst their female protagonists. The writers assert their own definitions of femininity through the female protagonist(s) and more specifically through the representation of the New Woman.

The New Woman within different communities collectively dismissed traditional notions of womanhood and asserted a strong and confident image in their creativity. The New Woman has become the embodiment of escape, from restrictions within the home and questions of marriage and instead resurrects a belief in education allowing women to lead financially independent and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, this New Woman acquires and establishes for herself a distinct identity in the traditionally male-dominated society in which she lives. The theme of journey had previously structured the literature written by immigrants as the writers recounted the transformation of migration, its effects and problems. This continues to be central to South Asian women's writing, it gives structure and pattern to the narrative, but changes occur in its use. The journey of immigration has been closely followed by the journey into settlement and now the journey into self.

Unlike postcolonial literature, which explores the active sense of self eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the literature written by British South Asians establishes the inhibition of an active sense of self from both the cultures into which they are born and a desire for location within both. In short, this literature is an expression of hybridized identities. The diasporic women's writings that represent British South Asian New woman are forms of

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cultural hybridization that reflect the experiences and social positioning of the authors themselves, who have been born or brought up within Britain. In diasporic literature, the New Woman shows an inexorable awakening of identity in relation to western values of individuality and independence. They are shown to have the strength to assert their identity and self amidst conflict and their predicaments. The women's fate when they assert their identity leaves them outside the community to which they belong. Feelings of isolation, frustration and anger therefore pull them back. The women are cast in the mould of the New Woman; however, in the course of the novels they establish themselves not as autonomous but as depending on others for their survival.

All these and many other questions surface in the fictional, rather semi-autobiographical works of Meena Alexander. She is different from all the contemporary writers of diaspora and successfully carves out the niche for herself in the diasporic paradigm. The multiple diasporic dimensions she touches upon take her to a unique zenith of diasporic emplacement and are successful in creating the Identity, which she has always tried locating in various migrant situations and circumstances. Memory in the writings of Alexander assumes a distinctive role as a trope for performance of immigrant identity. Her writings are marked by a sense of intimate passions about the body. The body in her texts is more like a tool or a metaphor which becomes instrumental in identifying useful memory and its relation to the ever changing immigrant identity. The texts taken up in this chapter shall try expressing how memories are symptomatically connected with the body. Bergson in *Matter and Memory* have tried classifying

memories in two different kinds, one which is capable of denoting the automatic behavior by means of repetition, which he has termed as “habit memory”(233) and the other one denoting the unconscious survival of personal memory, known as “pure memory”(233). Since the body is a center of action, it acts as a privileged image and is able to provide the exercise of choice. It is through the act of remembering, that the body offers a mode of choice and action, which is very well executed in the writings of Meena Alexander. For her the past is never past, but is rather an active part which stimulates the present and the future respectively. If we observe the writings of Alexander theoretically, we see that her use of the female body for delineating the various dimensions of migration, be it memories or multiplicity of homes, individual or collectively recall the feminist urgency to express emotions and write through the body.

Alexander “feminizes” her writings; she is able to articulate through the body another language that writes itself in ceaseless displacements. Born in India to Syrian-Christian parents (a minority community), she herself has undergone multiple migrations to Sudan, Britain and the U.S. Traveling back and forth to India for annual visits back home in her earlier part of life has meant more than being connected with her extended family as is evidently expressed in her works, these frequent displacements and dislocations have assumed a crucial meaning to her own displaced self at odds with continually changing concepts of self, “home”, and identity.

In the novel *Manhattan Music*, the protagonist like Alexander tries exploring her immigrant self and also tries realizing the exact process of constant self-construction so as to preserve the self in an unfamiliar land. The text presents the story of Sandhya Rosenblum, who is an immigrant from India, married to a Jewish American Stephen Rosenblum. The setting of the novel wavers between Manhattan and India, and invokes the key dilemmas faced by an ethnic immigrant self. Apart from the voice of Draupadi, the novel’s story is narrated by an omniscient

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narrator who is commenting on the lives and thoughts of all the characters who are a part of this setting. Draupadi is a second generation Indian immigrant from the West Indies and is an independent performer, the “woman who was permitted everything” (*MM* 3). In contrast to the character of Sandhya which holds the rigid memory of her heritage, Draupadi is constructed with a memory of mixed and hazy heritage and culture.

The narrative style employed in the novel adopts a stream of consciousness technique and through the reflection of multiple voices appears to have a patterned structure with so many recollected narratives. Draupadi can be seen as the voice of Alexander who represents the varied notions of memory, ancestral history and communal sense of self. She is a guide to Sandhya who encourages her to make meaningful sense of one's past. The interesting thing to note about Draupadi's narratives is that it is begun by a literary epitaph reflecting the authorial intention and reflection simultaneously. For Sandhya, Draupadi “must have seemed the epitome of newness, all she might one day be [...] Sandhya asked her simple questions, the what, where, who kind of thing, and in response rhythms flowed out of [her]” (*MM* 3). Sandhya, whose “veins were etched with centuries of arranged marriages”, (*MM* 3) carries the heavy load of memories from her life in India.

Memory for Sandhya emerges out of nowhere and is powerful to drag her from the present to her past days in India. When she is introduced in the novel, she is seen sitting on a Central Park's bench. She is ruminating and trying to imagine a figure seated across from her in the other chair, but the maximum she could make out of this image is a formless thing, which is somewhat fashioned of mist. Suddenly the scene shifts from the Central Park of Manhattan to a

curtain less theatre. She remembers a scene from a puppet-show performance, which is narrating the story of Draupadi and her life of exile, of being “unhoused” and waiting, which she watched with her grandmother at the age of six. The memory then fades and she comes to the present reality where she is holding her green card and pondering over the expression which Stephen articulated. He promised Sandhya of happiness in America. Her anxiety and dissatisfaction seems to be apparent: “but nothing felt right. It was as if the sheet against which the figures danced was all askew, the puppeteer having neglected to pull it tight. Neither gestures nor words came out right” (MM 7). Both the memories, of the grandmother and of what Stephen said reveal the innate discrepancy of Sandhya’s life as an immigrant. She feels that her own performance as a puppet in the puppet show of her life is not up to the mark.

Sandhya’s life with Stephen in America is not a smooth ride to the future. She is repeatedly haunted by her memories. When Stephen takes her to visit Ellis Island, she is uncomfortable: “It was as if he were proposing a past she might enter, but her flesh resisted” (MM 38). Sandhya feels a need to resist any notions of a past, and she displays her resistance through the body. Although Stephen takes pride in the widely publicized renovation of the immigration facilities on the island, Sandhya is perhaps reminded of her own condition of feeling fractured as a new immigrant in America. The fragmentary architectural design using broken things like stove-pipe, toilet bowl, and many other discarded items invokes a sense of reconstructing a past of sufferings. Her reluctance to enter the boat filled with tourists and her apparent distance bothers Stephen but he fails to decipher/understand the sense of discomfort Sandhya is undergoing. This invocation to the past and the resistance which Sandhya explicates during her visit to Ellis Island points to the fact about past which is imposed, compulsory and deterministic in nature. What appears to be freedom for Stephen becomes a chokehold for

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Sandhya which restricts her by reminding her of her fragmentary past. Though Stephen tries hard to console and encourage Sandhya to become part of the immigrant surroundings, but he fails to reach Sandhya emotionally. It appears that: "For the first time in their years together her sense of lostness had seeped into his own soul, dissolving the clear walls he had constructed to make himself feel at home" (MM 37).

Sandhya's initial attraction to Stephen was based on the promise of freedom and relief from the sad memories that she had after her break-up with Gautam. Held and charmed by Stephen's delicacy and innocence initially, she gradually begins to feel an emotional distance between them. She feels isolated in her experiences as a new immigrant in America "bartering sense for memory, her inner life so sensual, unstable" (MM 39). The initial promise of Stephen's world frustrates Sandhya as she finds Stephen emotionally absent from it. Though Stephen seems to be a loving and caring husband, something seems missing for Sandhya. She feels discontented with her married life and finds herself engrossed in her own fancies and unknown passions. This lack and absence of feeling and emotions gets itself intensely explicated when Sandhya develops an intense relationship with Rashid el-Obeid, who is an Egyptian Scholar and the ex-boyfriend of Draupadi. Both Sandhya and Rashid are immigrants to this new land of Manhattan and are seen to be dealing with almost similar turbulence and anxiety of the immigrants, but their response proves to be different to this similar situation. The author i.e. Meena Alexander dexterously tries portraying this affair of these two migrants in quest for the meaning of their complex identities.

In the course of the novel, Sandhya hosts a dinner party, which brings forth the other characters of the novel in a bright light and at the same time, it gives us an insight to know more

about them, and their thinking and thought processes regarding the political and cultural views on migration, memory and identity. There is Jay, Sakhi, Draupadi, Stephen and Rashid who meticulously express themselves through direct and indirect views regarding the perception of their individual cultural identities. Draupadi appears to epitomize the Emersonian ideal perfectly and says: “Be like the roses, cut off the past, frisk it, skin it, live in the present!” (MM 62). Since Draupadi belonged to a mixed heritage, she never felt an emotional need to associate herself to her past; Sandhya on the other hand was continuously haunted by the past and was always in a state of flux with her emotions and feelings. Sandhya’s cousin Jay too understands the burdensome effects of the memories and past relations. He had a broken piece of glass from Gautam’s spectacles which was “burning a hole in his pocket” (MM 63). The glass represents Sandhya’s past with Gautam and Jay felt uncomfortable while deciding whether to hand it over to Sandhya, or to keep it to himself. Jay however, had a belief, not as strong as Sandhya had, but at least he had the essence of understanding the relevance of memories, which affected the present and one’s future too, as they had an impact on the overall identity of an individual. The dispersal from a known country to an unknown land arouses interrogations of I-identity. This takes us to the concept of *new mestiza* of Anzaldua with which she means creating an interstitial and supple space that comes out of the borderlands, disrupting binaries (such as Indian/Other) and problematizing the discourses of foreignness through its tolerance for ambiguity. In her article entitled “La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a new Consciousness”, Anzaldua articulates in respect of I-identity that:

As a *Mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my

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own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective tured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.” (102)

This creature made up of multiple interrogations and new meanings is useful in understanding and exploring the various dimensions and parameters of migration and integration respectively. In this understanding, a hyphenated identity is seen to emerge which is a blend of two different identifications. These two different identifications in the immigrant identity is seen to be constantly shifting and changing; in the observance of Avtar Brah, when she remarks about the intersections of diasporas and the resulting hybrid identities because of this identification. She opines fluidity and movement are defining features of these immigrant identities.

The last part of the novel presents the idea that the wounds of migration have started healing. For a woman like Sandhya the difficulties were numerous but her attempts do not go in vain. Sandhya's "clinging to the old identity" goes in accord with Makarand Paranjape's expression of diasporic self when he articulates that for an immigrant, "clinging to the old identity and a resistance to making a transition" (61) appear concurrently. Sandhya's whole demeanour changes for the readers as we progress towards the closing lines of the novel. We

find that she gets up from the bench at Central Park, slips her sandals on and moves quickly towards the 'waiting city'. The use of the word 'waiting' expresses that, the wounds on an immigrant's identity have started healing and a new world with immense possibilities is lying before to be explored elucidating the idea that the immigrant has succeeded in creating a niche for herself far from the cultural roots of the homeland.

Thus, *Manhattan Music*, with female characters – Sandhya Rosenblum and Draupadi express and explore various dimensions of immigrant identity which is fragmented and hybrid. The scars of migration are seen to be healing. The immigrant undergoes a transformation of the diasporic self underpinning the idea of seizing the borders.

Meena Alexander writing from a postcolonial feminist standpoint tries to put forward the physical as well as the psychological violence through her other novel entitled *Nampally Road*. The 1992 novel of Alexander is again a search and exploration of identity in a new land, but this time, the land is not Manhattan but India. The story of the novel is set in Hyderabad of the late seventies when Meena herself was teaching at the Golden Threshold on Nampally road. Forming the backdrop is one dark page in Hyderabad's history, the gang rape of a young woman Rameeza Be by policemen in the Nallikunta police station and the murder of her husband in 1976 which brought three quarters of the city under curfew. It is through the exploration of Rameeza Be's experience of brutality at the hands of the Indian police; Alexander seems to be questioning the modern nation-state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. The violence done in the society not only affects the victim physically but people especially women concerned are even psychologically affected. The story is a simple one but the affect of violence it leaves on the readers is worth marking out. The story of *Nampally Road* is the story of Mira Kannadical and

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how she witnesses so many turmoils and upheavals all around her. She is a graduate from England and has returned to her native place Hyderabad. She is a teacher and is teaching Wordsworth, but her attention is seen to be distracted by the turmoil in streets around her. The city is going through tough times where a woman is raped in police custody and her husband is killed brutally. To top it all, the culprits of this action are the policemen of the city who are appointed by the government to maintain law and order. To cover up their crimes they have put the woman Rameeza Be in police custody, all kinds of violence are done to her. And to paper it over the misery and abuses of power, the chief minister of state, Limca Gowda is organizing a massive festival to celebrate his despotic regime as a shining light of progress. Mira is finally shown to have a realisation that it is the big political lies which are the dark side of Romantic myth-making. The violence done to Rameeza Be makes Mira long for something beyond political action that she can do to fathom their suffering and ease their pain. The violence has left such an indelible affect and impact on Rameeza that when she is provided with pen and paper to express herself, she shakily proceeds to draw a pyramid of stones- which Mira believes is the very same image that has been haunting her own nightmares of late: stones of human flesh forming a pyramid, with water rising all around. The novel tackles a number of serious and complex themes without reaching any neat conclusions. The portrayal of women characters and the violence faced by them on psychological planes show how Meena Alexander has tried doing justice to the themes she has undertaken in the novel. For all the power of Alexander's portrayal of the harsh world her heroine inhabits, there is a tentative, refreshingly modest quality about this book that moves one to respect its honesty even when its pace at times falters, and focus is

blurred. Set in the 1970s when Indira Gandhi's crackdown on dissent seemed to many the most alarming threat on the subcontinent's political horizon. The novel, no doubt, transcends the specifics of its time and place by probing and investigating beneath the levels of politics, economics and ideology to touch something far more basic. The situation portrayed in Alexander's *Nampally Road* is torn by religious factionalism as bloody as anything since the murderous days following its independence, serves as a grim reminder of the forces that threaten not only a writer's imagination but life itself.

The violence is portrayed through the story of Rameeza who was a woman of little stature. The physical violence done to this innocent woman leads to psychological violence and fear in the minds of the local inhabitants. Their agitation makes them powerful enough to organize small groups. These groups attack the Gowliguda police station, thereby making Rameeza escape the hell. Curfew is imposed on the city, so as to control the situation. Once the city gets back to its normal state, the birthday celebrations of the then chief minister Limca Gowda starts. On the day of celebration once again these groups create havoc so as to disrupt the entire celebration and show their anger. All the efforts for birthday celebrations are collapsed. Mira, the protagonist too was attending the celebration when people start running to save their lives after the turmoil takes place at the chief minister's birthday celebrations; she witnesses a surprising thing that a pool of water is burning, there she is reminded of Nagarjuna's saying that if fire is lit in water no one can extinguish it. The people took revenge in the form of violence for the rape of innocent Rameeza and murder of her husband by messing up the chief minister's birthday celebrations.

The observation which can be made through all this is that violence of any kind leads to violence only. An innocent woman becomes the victim of some policemen, she was raped, was tortured

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physically and mentally. It is a shame that the preservers of law and order, the policemen actually became the law breakers thereby making the whole city suffer and burn for no reason. It was a pleasure seeking activity for them to rape a woman and kill her husband, but this was violence done not only to a single woman, but it was a psychological and mental violence done to all the women folk of the country who came to know about this incident. Violence begets violence and that is what happens in Meena Alexander's novel *Nampally Road*. The dimensions may differ but the violence against women is appearing to increase day by day as we are claiming to progress. This progress is nothing but a digression, a country where woman is treated just like a commodity, with no voice of her own, and where all kinds of violence are done to her without any reason, the only being a woman, where the law and order itself is in the garb of culprit, and where the justice is dead, shows that dooms day is not so far.

Nampally Road is just another novel depicting the painful voices of woman folk. Stories, characters and plot may differ, but the clutches of violence are so strong that justice seems to be a far off decision. When will an awakening take place so that people may realise what exactly a woman is? The novel not only focuses on the consciousness of the rape victim but tries putting forward the idea as demonstrated by Gayatri Spivak regarding Subalterns. It demonstrates the analysis of the subaltern and speech in the representation of Rameeza's experience. The text brings forward the difficulty, in fact the impossibility of articulating traumatic experience for the rape victim and the difficulty of a writer in representing this in any factual or fictional narrative. But this feature should also be marked that the novel though beginning with bleak representation

of political repression ends with a hope of transformation. The ending of the novel shows a celebration of “the utopian moment of ethical singularity between women of different religions, classes and educational backgrounds” (PTM 226).

The conclusion which can be very well drawn from a reading of both these fictional works is that, they both locate women in two different settings and at the same time try exploring their challenges as an immigrant. The transformation brought in Sandhya and Mira are remarkable, because they develop a resistance against all odds and are capable to carve out their respective niches in respective places. Since the setting of the both the novels are different, they articulate two different ideologies and approaches. The search and eventual finding of the Self must be praised, because it is ultimately this emergence of *Self* that gives the female protagonists an edge over all those immigrants who many a time succumb to diasporic conditions. Sandhya and Mira in different and unfamiliar locales start with a strange and fearsome note, but the end they reach through the course of the novel mark a gradual development and evolution of their empowered Being in unfamiliar settings. They provide a sense of hope and an inspiration to all those immigrants who find themselves puzzled and confused regarding their respective identities in unfamiliar milieus.

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