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## Diasporic Women in Meena Alexander's Selected Works

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The writings of women of South Asian Diaspora lent their creative expression to focus on their experiences of migration, exile, diaspora, dislocation, self identity, multiculturalism and hybridity. They encountered anxiety, uncertainty in foreign land and struggled for social existence, psychologically and culturally. D.K.Pandey remarks "the writings of South Asian Women immigrant writers, focus on the issues of race, gender, sexuality, 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? Whenceforth I come? And the answers are a bitter sweet poignant experience of putting bits and pieces together to making a wholesome whole.'" (153)

The term diaspora was used in 1876 referring to refugees of the Irish feminine and it is widely assimilated in 1950s. Homi Bhabha says "diaspora is gathering of exile, immigrants and refugees in foreign culture and foreign land. Gathering of the past in ritual and revivals and that gathering in the present." The Indian Diaspora is the largest Diaspora in the world with its global presence and has long history in the past. With this in view it is divided into three stages ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient diaspora relates to workers, skilled men, and traders who explored new lands for work, money and adventures. In medieval times with advent of British colonialism laborers moved out of their country. In modern times, educated, intelligent and skilled Indians moved to USA and other European countries for economic and professional purposes. They moved away from their original center, nations, communities and families.

Usha Bande opines that there are three conditions that a women experience diaspora

first is when they move out of their motherland with their migrant parents and are brought up in a foreign land; second condition arises by virtue of their marriage they are uprooted from parents home and homeland; and third is when they decide to move to west for higher education and lucrative job. All these three conditions are experienced by Meena Alexander. She has to shift to Sudan at the age of five when her father got a job there. She went to England to get a Ph.d degree after her graduation. She met her husband and moved to USA where she is still living. Therefore all these three reasons moving and growing up in foreign land with migrant parents, higher education and marriage are responsible for Alexander's multiple migrations as a child, grownup and adult. Women in real life to whatever category they belong, experience dislocation, self identity, up rootedness, marginalization and cultural dissonance. Besides they face variety of oppressive conditions, gender and discriminatory practices inside and outside the society.

Meena Alexander experiences dislocation caught between two different and opposite cultures, so she tries to come to terms and find a new space for herself. The feelings of shame, anger, neglect, alienation, loneliness and disgust is rightly expressed in her article 'Is there an Asian American Aesthetics' when she remarks: "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 conscious". (26). The pain and disgust being a minority in a foreign land and loss of home and longing, for the past is reflected here. Meena Alexander's works are placed in the present day Indian diasporic communities of New York city and represents the life and experience of post colonial women with western accent. She tries to reflect her dislocated identity due to constant shifting of locations Alexander represents diasporic feminist vision that questions patriarchal narratives of nation and identity. Her novels 'Nampally Road' and 'Manhattan Music' but also her essays and poems present women's search for self identity in the present world.

Meena Alexander presents in her writing a series of continental crossings. She had to move with her parents in childhood to Sudan where her father worked and her grandparents stayed in Kerla. She studied at various geographical locations from Pune, Khartoum and Nottingham and taught in Delhi, Hyderabad and finally settled in New York. She faced complex different individual self experience, dislocation and sense of being an exile in foreign land physically, emotionally and linguistically. Realization of being a marginalized person in a total different perspective made her to raise her voice of dilemma living in New York as a third world immigrant women writer and "about the difficulty of living in space... without fixed ground rules". (Fault Lines - 4) She wanted to give meaning and shape to her life so searched

for a social and geographical space. In her memoir 'Fault Lines' she writes about ethnicity and writing of poetry. She asks herself, who am I? Where am I? When am I?. These are questions a diasporic writers face. Here Meena is striving to find a vision of herself, identity and existence to pose before the world by asking herself many 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, though. 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 shows that such self interrogation leads to difficulties in living in an alien world. Alexander presents the dislocated self who faces cultural conflicts due to constant travelling, shifting of places on personal and professional level. She exhibits the anguish of dislocation and the split between body and mind. To relate her relation to homeland .Alexander delineates a genealogy through mother and daughter connections. 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——lacing her I cannot picture what I might be.' (6-7). Alexander discusses about her great paternal grandmother she writes——'it is in me still, her voice, her bearing'. Kozencheri, Vellammechi, grandmother Mariamma, my appa' mother who loved to scold me for running around in the sun "(Fault Lines-44). Alexander's mother believes in tradition and brought up her children with firm assertion that the right place for a women is at home. Alexander well understood that her grandmother Kunju a busy social worker spared little time for her child i. e Alexander's mother.

Alexander in west faced questions regarding her own rights within academic world and recalls her meeting with the dean of the university where she studied:

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 chapter 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, India. (114) This shows existence of gender discrimination and pressure in academic institutions. Asian Americans grapple with violence, disorder and injustice and

they are bartered in capitalist society.

In her another work of fiction 'Nampally Road' Alexander tries to examine the subalter status given to women in male dominated society. There are many female characters like Dr.Durgabai, Maitreyi, Mira Kannadical, Rosamma etc who strive hard to fight against patriarchy. In this novel, the women characters are strong, assertive and don't allow society to victimize them. They face all odds to raise their voice against unjust authority. In her famous novel 'Manhattan Music' Alexander portrays Sandhya as a protagonist who reflects the identity of women who gradually break away with the traditional role made of an Indian woman by resistance. Common cultural practices like arrange marriages or societal role accorded to women. Then such women who have a chance to travel as an immigrant try to live in a fantas world of violence and loneliness. Sometimes they come at a crossword and make a new beginning of life. The novel ends on a hopeful note with Sandhya returning to the city after a period of rest with her cousin Sakhi at New Jersey. Sandhya at last negotiated and reconciled to her new life, Sandhya is "no longer fearful". Coming to terms 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). Sandhya realized at the end that she adjusted in America. In these two novels 'Manhattan Music' and 'Nampally Road' with different settings but deals with problems of immigrants. Alexander tries to establish identities of the protagonists Sandhya and Mira. Both these novels explore the search of real place and real self. Both try hard to search for identity and discover their real self. This discovery allows them to edge over immigrant problems. Sandhya and Mira in different and alien locales begin on a strange and fearsome note but at the end marks a gradual development and evolution of their empowered being in unfamiliar settings.

In one of her poem titled 'Poem by the Well side' in *The shock of Arrival* there is a grotesque grandmother with bitter herbs in her teeth. In the middle of night the old woman yells for the poet. 'Meena, Meena my daughter' (40). The 'well' in the poem symbolizes the miseries and sufferings of Indian women. As a child, the author was told that women who got pregnant out of wedlock would jump or be pushed into the well. When grown up the poet remembers the old woman. Alexander questions: 'will water pour from the well? Will a stream of water take a root make a table, a pitcher, a bowl, bread?' (41) It means something positive comes out of this image linked to violence and death? Towards the end of poem, the old woman informs Meena that: 'by the wellside, our dreams, drop their clothes and flee' (42) we find the author appears to brood over the existence of Indian women and their unfulfilled dreams but could be liberated only by wellside from the constraints.

reflects that author feels that women of older generation have no option but to jump in to the well or having dreams of other lives.

In another essay 'Translating Violence' Alexander reveals that all colonized countries have experienced the hierarchical structure that she calls 'a colonial sense of maintaining power, of keeping order' (82) to the role and status of women in society. In this essay the author goes back to 1970s after returning to India from England she witnessed rise of feminism as a result of it women voiced against traditional views. While Gandhi in South Africa experimented with non-violence and cut the hair of women was blamed for provoking men. Alexander feels that women are marginalized in Indian society and when added with violence and disorder it results in marginalization of female existence. One can find similarly dislocated life amidst the violence of patriarchy in India and the racism, gender discrimination and dislocated people, who are exposed to in an foreign land becomes obvious.

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