

## **LIFE ON THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY- A PERSPECTIVE ON MEENA ALEXANDER'S MANHATTAN MUSIC**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Meena Alexander, a South Asian immigrant writer as a poet and one of the finest thinkers of Asian American aesthetic. Born on February 17, 1951 in Allahabad, the holy city in India to George and Mary Alexander, Meena Alexander is the eldest of the three children. Her mother Mary is a quiet, traditional religious woman and her world centers around her domestic responsibilities as a wife and mother. Alexander left for Kartoum along with her parents when she was five years old. She had her schooling at Khartoum and she entered the University of Kartoum at the age of thirteen. She was a curious and intelligent child and by the time she was fifteen, her poems were translated into Arabic and published in Sudanese newspapers. When she was eighteen years old, the University of Nottingham in England awarded her a scholarship to pursue her Ph.D. After finishing her doctoral thesis she returned to India at the age of twenty-two to retain her Indian identity. She lectured in various Indian Universities, including University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and University of Hyderabad. Her first volume of poetry *The Birds Bright Ring* was published in 1976 in Calcutta. Later she migrated to New York and accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Minnesota. Presently, she is an Associate Professor of English and creative writing at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. She resides in New York with her husband David Lilyveld, son Adam Kuruvilla and daughter Svathi Marian.

**KEYWORDS:** Meena Alexander, Poet, Literature

### **INTRODUCTION**

Meena has produced substantial amount of poetry in five books in nine years. Her other volumes of poetry include *Stone Roofs*, *House of a Thousand Doors*, *The storm*, *A Poem in Five Parts*, *Images of Women and Female Experiences*. She is involved with issues like immigration, ethnicity, culture, race relations, exile, and Diasporic dislocation. Her Diasporic consciousness, pain and violence of dislocation are the issues of focus in her novels *Nampally Road* (1961), her autobiography *Fault Lines* (1993) and *Manhattan Music* (1977). 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 inhabit in the Diasporas. The women novelists differ from their male counterparts in several ways, including their depiction of female characters. There are differences between British South Asian and Indian literature. The writings surpass 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 protagonists and more specifically through the representation of the New Woman. The New Woman within different communities collectively dismissed traditional

concepts 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 revitalise a belief in education allowing women to lead financially independent and fulfilling lives. Besides, 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. The journey of immigration has been closely followed by the journey into settlement and now the journey into self. Contrast to postcolonial literature, which explores the active sense of self worn 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. The Diasporic women's writings that represent British South Asian New woman are forms of 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 inevitable 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.

Meena Alexander is different from all the contemporary writers of Diaspora and successfully carves out the role for herself in the Diasporic paradigm. The multiple diasporic dimensions she touches upon take her to a distinctive zenith of diasporic emplacement and 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 unique role as a trope for performance of immigrant identity. 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 novel 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 summons the key dilemmas faced by an ethnic immigrant self. Apart from the voice of Draupadi, the novel's story is narrated by an omniscient 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 re-collected 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 pondering 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, 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 ruminating 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 was 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 patchy 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 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 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 commotion and anxiety of the immigrants, but their response proves to be different to this similar situation. Meena Alexander skillfully 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 symbolize 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-dentity. 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 adhere to the old identity and a resistance to make transition made her to surpass from her difficulty appear concurrently. Sandhya’s whole demeanour changes at the closing lines of the novel. Sandhya 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 forte 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. The conclusion of this fictional works is that, it locates the protagonist in a different setting and at the same time try exploring her challenges as an immigrant. The transformation brought in the life of Sandhya is remarkable, because she develops a resistance against all odds and is capable to carve out her respective niche in respective places. The search and eventual finding of the Self must be praised, because it is ultimately this emergence of *Self* that gives the female protagonist an edge over all those immigrants who many a time succumb to diasporic conditions. Sandhya in different and unfamiliar locales start with a strange and fearsome note, but the end she reaches through the course of the novel marks a gradual development and evolution of her empowered being in unfamiliar settings. She provides 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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