

## Deconstructing Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Meena Alexander's Selected Works

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### Abstract

*As a notable feminine voice in the field of diasporic literature, Meena Alexander assesses the experiences of migrants through careful assimilation of her own experiences of multiple dislocations. Primarily known for her poetic creations, this writer attempts to amalgamate a multitude of personal as well as social structures and frameworks that lead to the composition of a comprehensive diasporic consciousness also through her novels, essays and memoir. Literature of diaspora explores the impact of the composite process of uprooting and re-rooting the lead to a reconfiguration of the individual's identity. Her widely known works include the novels Nampally Road (1991) and Manhattan Music (1997), the memoir Fault Lines (1993), Shock of Arrival (1996), the collection of poetry Raw Silk (2004), Quickly Changing River (2008), Poetics of Dislocation (2009), In Praise of Fragments (2020) among others. The present research aims at delineating the diasporic individual engaged in a perpetual battle for self-definition and eventual assimilation. The study focusses primarily on Alexander's widely read memoir Fault Lines while also reflecting on the other major works of prose to determine the diasporic individual, while also attempting to address the question of gendered diaspora through the same.*

**Keywords:** Alienation; Delineation; Feminine Sensibilities; Gendered diaspora, Identity.

Although diaspora as a sub-genre of post-colonialism has been widely researched upon for long, women writers of diasporic literature have only recently gained cognizance allowing an opportunity to re-evaluate the phenomenon. It is becoming increasingly imperative to create a gendered perspective in all major fields of assessment and analysis. Women have gained a substantial voice in society as they demand a space of their own along with the ability to voice their dilemmas and eventually attain a position of equality through the process of consequent awareness. As Susan Friedman posits: "it is writing by women that takes gender as its focus that most clearly highlights the complexities of diaspora and reveals the omissions and hidden assumptions in debates about 'the new migrations'", stipulates the intricacies and substance of emphasising on women's writings concerning diaspora (Friedman, 3).

For this study, it was required to define diaspora in its various contexts, tracing its origins and levelling them with the contemporary times, along with its contextualization and differentiation from other forms of movement. The concept is defined in relation to gender conjectures and the inclusion of contemporary proclivities.

Meena Alexander has been researched as a poet of women in diaspora, assessing migrant sensibilities through a voice in verse. Gender-specific studies “attempt to balance precariously between honouring and breaking traditions while building expatriate lives” (Pandey, 2004:161). These studies provide the impulsion for further research on Meena Alexander as a writer of prose, assessing women characters who represent voices in diaspora.

Khachig Tololyan assesses the idea of a globalized world, he avers, “what has emerged in the past two decades, under the impact of new transnational, global forces, is the view that nation-states may not always be the most effective or legitimate units of collective organizations. (Tololyan, 1991: 4). Webster’s dictionary associates the term with a sense of dispersion which further interlaces with the idea of a centre that acts as a ‘home’ in relation to which the said displacement occurs. The diasporic population constructs “homes” that can be viewed partially as fiction and partially as imagined. Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* explains:

“Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (Rushdie, 1991)

The uprooting groups of people from their place of origin to search for more suitable circumstances significantly alters the individual’s idea of self and their conception as a group. Such instability renders its effect on the determination of identity and congruence with the original self that the migrant had been acquainted with since consciousness, resulting in a lack of sense of assimilation and eventual personal psychosocial conflict. While defining ancient and modern diaspora, it is imperative to assign its associations with the reasons for such a large-scale migration, motivated by economic, social, political, or personal reasons that lead to the immoderate displacement of the population.

With the colonial rule ending, the concept of migration turned towards being a voluntary movement where people made the choice based on various socio-economic aspects. Regardless of the motivations to migrate, such a substantial movement leads to an instability of space and identity, as the individual is unable to associate with the home or the host land. In the current times, migration and diaspora have become immensely popular as populations from different parts of the world are searching for improved conditions motivated by stable social structure or better economic prospects. Literature of diaspora becomes greatly important in understanding the sensibilities of people experiencing such dislocations and attempting eventual relocation. With the inculcation of the English language during the colonial and post-colonial periods, Indian writing in English in the genre of diaspora holds considerable significance as it articulates the various experiences and dispositions of the uprooted population to the readers of English literature. With the different kinds of diasporic movements, the creation of strong diasporic communities across the world assists in congregating Indian English diaspora writers as it allows them to deliberate, discuss and analyse their writings as an association.

The literature of the Indian Diaspora is characterised by a sense of dislocation, alienation, instability, the crisis of identity, nostalgia, and a desire to reconnect with one’s homeland. Indian diasporic writers can be further divided into

first-generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants, the former belonging to a group that spent a substantial amount of time in their native land and then trying to assimilate into the foreign spaces. Whereas, second-generation immigrants face distinct challenges as they struggle to create an understanding of their native land which they have never experienced. J. Senthamarai, M.R. Chandran, and J. Hemalatha in their paper “Generational Differences of Indian Diaspora Writers” argue that writers belonging to these separate generations must be studied individually as they are characterised by several situational and ideological differences such as:

- The perception - the worldview and its impact will be differently understood and reflected.
- Reality vs imagination - the existence and the essential of the home country is more real for the first generation whereas it is only imaginary for the second generation.
- Parallel lives and identity – first-generation Diasporas tend to live in a parallel world or parallel home- home country and the host country whereas the home remains only one- the host country to the second generation of Diasporas.
- Socio-political conditions – first-generation Diasporas are direct victims of the socio-political differences and adapting to the host country.
- Culture shock- aspects such as food pattern, culture, lifestyle, habits manners, functions and festivals, and communication style create a sense of ‘being lost’ in their host country. (53)

Immigrants live through the commonality of experiences whether social, economic, political, or religious as they reposition between location, dislocation, and relocation. The expatriates experience a constant state of unbelonging due to the shifting dynamic of ‘home’ and an instability pertaining to identity. The inability to move back to the homeland haunts them due to the need to write. Such writings act as a means to negotiate identity Abha Pandey in her book *Indian Diasporic Writings* assesses the Diasporic text as being a means to anatomize the sense of unsettlement and alienation, she avers:

“Diasporic writings are concerned with the writer’s or his/her community’s attachment to the homeland, but this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to their current place of abode. Some of the Indian Diasporic writers have turned their attention to India to assess and understand the nature of their relationship with the land of their ancestors.” (121)

Female diaspora as a concept includes the multiple dissociations that they go through while attempting to content with marginalization of multiple fronts while battling with being the suppressed gender. Women writers of the Indian Diaspora assess and amalgamate these scattered sentiments leading to the fabrication of diverse feminine identity and consciousness. The question of gender is approached by Meena Alexander in her works including two novels *Nampally Road* (1991), *Manhattan Music* (1997) and her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993) among other works of prose and poetry. Her study on the consciousness of diasporic subjects specifically focuses on women in diverse conditions as her poems and prose works are constructed on autobiographical notions. Having lived in multiple countries from her childhood to becoming a mother, Alexander’s life story expresses the quest towards self-definition and the recognition of herself as an individual separate from the roles assigned to women by society. Writing then becomes

a strong medium of expression for authors of diaspora such as Alexander who formulate the self through an amalgamation of memories and experiences from childhood and early years.

Writers of the Indian Diaspora literature majorly include Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Manjula Padmanabhan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Meena Alexander, Anita Nair, Anjana Appachana, Sameena Ali, Raja Rao, Anita Rao Badami, Anurag Mathur among others. Writers of the Indian diaspora occupy a substantial place in the last decade as large groups of people approximately 25 million, moved to other countries for better socio-political conditions, and economic and professional growth. Migration Studies have emphasised numerous aspects and consequences of such a large-scale movement on a social, economic, political, and cultural plane but these studies have not done justice to the feminine experience, their sensibilities, and the impact on their lives as they face the thrust of patriarchy along with that of migrant faced alienation and dislocation in general. Women have been seen as supine beings as their experiences are generalised and overlooked, due to which migrant literature focussed only on the experiences of males and their families as a whole.

When asked in an interview with Susie Tharu titled “Almost Literally Making Ground: A Conversation with Meena Alexander”, whether she sees herself writing as a woman, Alexander avers:

“I write because I don’t know what I am. As to whether I know I am a woman as I write: I probably often do. For to be a woman today, is not to know what oneself is, even more acutely than for a man. And not to know this is to be blind in a certain sense, is to be crude and struggling in another. I try again and again to sort out a form for my words, a form that makes sense to others.” (Tharu 74)

May Joseph describes Alexander’s writing to be “kaleidoscopic tales in a larger narrative of global migrations and perpetual displacement”, that add to other fragments of the displaced migrant female struggling to reach self-definition (Joseph 253). Her works assess present-day experiences of women in diaspora, attempting to define their home, identity, surroundings, and relationships as a whole while struggling with the forces of patriarchy that they bring along with them to the foreign land. Her major works namely the two novels *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music* along with the memoir *Fault Lines* accentuate diasporic women’s position in contemporary times. In Fanon’s words, the diasporic community is a group of “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless...” (Fanon 176). As an outcome of such dissociations, she found solace and a sense of familiarity through her works and the female characters constructed by her along with the autobiographical elements instilled in her works of prose and verse. Sandhya Rao Mehta in her essay, “Revisiting Gendered Spaces in the Diaspora” suggests:

“The distinction between diaspora as fact or process marks the point at which feminist studies could enter the debate and allow it to move beyond its concerns with race and ethnicity, linking the experience of travel with those individual, feminine voices which could not be meaningfully associated with earlier definitions. Linked with the rising activism of feminist work in the developing world, this focus on individual experiences of travel, migration, and belonging assumed a more gendered perspective.” (4)

Alexander’s first novel *Nampally Road* narrates the journey of Mira who has been fabricated in autobiographical terms by reminiscing her past memories and the

multiple journeys undertaken as a child growing up in different countries. Mira moves to England for her research as a young woman but is unable to resonate with her surroundings as a migrant woman even though she spares no effort to learn the ways of the foreign culture. Ultimately, she moves back to her home country, expecting to come home to familiarity and a sense of association. Mira feels dismayed upon her arrival as she witnesses utter chaos, violence, inequality and discrimination in the society which shatters the image of an idealised homeland. She discerns the rampant inequality faced by women in the patriarchal set-up where women are treated as mere objects and are devoid of any rights or the possibility of an individual stand. The novel brings forward various other female characters who seek to attain an equal space in the community, witnessing which Mira understands her purpose that was to help towards the emancipation of women. Looking at the rape victim Rameeza, she felt that “her suffering had a language we did not yet understand” (79), she could not speak to her but she wanted “to look at her, feel those eyes again, understand her pain” (80). The novel takes a sharp turn with this incident and gives the true purpose and path towards finding an identity for the protagonist which she had been searching for in other aspects. Mira reflects, “I wish I could give up my own useless life in some way that could help her. I wish I could return to the hut and the wounded woman on the bed” (82). The novel also introduces Durgabai, who is also called “little mother” also called “little mother”, portrayed as a strong woman who takes responsibility for the entire downtrodden community. A doctor by profession, little mother treats the poor without charging money and acts as their godmother while also teaching them about their rights and claims in a suppressing environment. Alexander expresses her feminist perspective through these characters and portrays her view of women being capable and deserving of equality in all spheres if they come together and act as a unit. The novel allows Mira to seek her true identity which lies in helping other women around her and alleviating their pain through joint efforts, she rightly quotes Nagarjuna, “If fire is lit in water, who can extinguish it?” (1).

Meena Alexander's works assess the journey of women in diaspora with the amalgamation of post-colonial, Indo-American, and feminist studies through her characters and poetic voice. Her works like that of her own life and the characters portrayed by her, transverse physical and metaphorical boundaries in an attempt to create multiplicities of identity and voice. Having travelled across nations including Sudan, America, and India among other nations, Alexander carries with her multitudes of experiences due to multiple migrations. The novel becomes a narrative of protest and the ability of commoners to rise up against injustice, while Mira felt that returning to Hyderabad “could give me a way out” (30), she soon realises that the true state of unsettlement and tumult her homeland is in. Anannya Bhattarjee in her article “The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie”, states the image of the ideal woman denoted through Indian femininity, she avers: “the image of Indian womanhood and her role in the family [is] based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant glorious pasts” (30). Such stipulated roles for women are challenged by Alexander in this text as the women rise up against injustice and voice their concerns, being an active part in the battle for social and gender-based equality.

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander expresses the hardships that a migrant woman goes through, as she discusses her life in her homeland, moving to different countries, and her attempt at figuring out her innate identity. The autobiography takes the readers on a journey where she is seen facing numerous struggles, alienation, otherness, and racism, which she expresses in her writing. She recalls various

memories and weaves together the journey of a struggling woman migrant as she “depended on poems, irruptions of the imaginary to make an internal history” (125). The writer uses memory as the primary source of composition to allow the text to move back and forth in time, not following a linear path of narration. Reshmi Dutt in her work titled, “Forging States of Belonging: Migrant Memory, Nation, and Subjectivity in Meena Alexander’s Memoir *Fault Lines*” states:

“Alexander provides the ambivalence in the double narrative movement between location and dislocation, longing and belonging, and most importantly remembering and forgetting, as she rewrites and reclaims herself into the text of her new nation. For her, rewriting demands retracing. In the act of retracing and forgetting she recovers the past. Hence, she locates “the dark soil of self” on the very site of her ancestral home.” (45)

The memoir makes use of memories primarily from Alexander’s childhood, assessing her experiences as a young girl born in India and moving to an unknown country at a young age, she writes, “I turned five on the Arabian Sea, my first ocean crossing. For the next thirteen years my childhood crisscrossed the continents” (6). The section titled “The Stone Eating Girl”, provides an insight specifically into the patriarchal and gender conjugations faced as a woman and as migrants. The section narrates the ways in which young Meena developed an affiliation with this figure of the stone-eating girl who becomes a symbol of rebellion and subjugation of patriarchal notions, while she is described by Chinna as a “shameless thing” as she was “making an exhibition of herself” and is denied an identity of her own (79). Such images and memories fill young Alexander’s mind as the people around her teach the proper ways in which a woman or a girl must conduct herself in society to be deemed respectable. The theme of marriage and the inevitability of a woman leaving her paternal home is carried throughout Alexander’s works as a substantial motif. She expresses the importance of marriage and specifically arranged marriage to be a dominant aspect in the Indian culture, having immense social relevance. She observes, “For a woman, marriage makes a gash. It tears you from your original home... once married you are part and parcel of your husband’s household” (*Fault Lines* 23). The narrator also writes about the role of motherhood in a woman’s life that makes her feel complete, as directed by the rules of the society as “Women’s natural instinct for reproduction, the maternal instinct, which is supposed to be the base line of all her behaviour, her ultimate *raison d’etre*” (Coward 18). Alexander continues to question her existence in the world as a woman, she contemplates, “Was this what a woman’s life had to be?” (*Fault Lines* 163).

It may be contended that Meena Alexander’s female characters subvert the pre-constructed images and ideals set for women in society and successfully assert themselves as they venture into the wider arena of the world granted to them by traversing national boundaries. Such narratives allow women to shift from the traditional roles thrust upon women and allow themselves to be open to change and assert themselves in an unassailable manner through the nuances of diaspora. This paper assesses the protagonists in the light of differing circumstances, and the means through which they choose a quest toward self-definition through three works of prose namely *Nampally Road* (1991), *Fault Lines* (1993) and *Manhattan Music* (1997) written by Meena Alexander. The findings suggest that gender, ethnicity and culture play a major role in the creation of an individual’s identity and definition of the self. The creation of homes brings the notion of associating the primary responsibility with the woman in the diasporic family.

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