



Diasporic Reality, Dislocation and Rebirth: A Critical Study of the Novel *Manhattan Music* by Meena Alexander

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Abstract:

Manhattan Music by Meena Alexander explores the themes of diasporic reality, dislocation, and rebirth. The paper examines how Meena Alexander's novel explores the diasporic experience and how the effect of dislocation influencing the nature of the characters. The objectives of the study are to study the diasporic experience as depicted in the novel, *Manhattan Music*, to analyse the theme of dislocation in Meena Alexander's novel, to analyse the characters from the multicultural setting of the novel, to examine the novel critically in the postcolonial perspectives. The paper analyses the diasporic reality faced by the characters in the novel *Manhattan Music* dislocated from their homeland. In the host land they not only felt alienation and rootlessness, they were trying to improve their life in new land which indicated the rebirth of self the immigrants, that is an urgent need to go with the flow.

Keywords: Diasporic reality, dislocation, rebirth, *Manhattan Music*, Meena Alexander.

Introduction

Meena Alexander is a significant diasporic writer in Indian English writing. She was born in Allahabad in 1951 and was raised in Kerala and Sudan, educated in England and a resident of New York City, died in 2018. She had written many poems, novels, short stories and memoirs. Her volume of poetry, *Illiterate Heart* was the PEN Open Book winner in 2002. She was distinguished Professor of English and Women Studies at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her famous works include poetry, *House of Thousand Doors* (1988), *River and Bridge* (1996), *The shock of Arrival: Reflections of Postcolonial Experience* (an anthology containing lyrical essays and poetry), *Raw Silk*, *Quickly Changing River*, *Birthplace of Buried Stone* and the latest collection *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018), memoir *Fault Lines* (1993), play *In the Middle Earth* (1997). Meena Alexander published two novels, *Nampally Road* (1992) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). Her works explore the theme of migration, memory, trauma, identity, the complexities of postcolonial and diasporic experience. I selected her novel, *Manhattan Music*, for my research work. Meena Alexander is a genuine diasporic voice expressing her own life's diasporic experience in her works like dislocation, alienation, migration memories and traumas. Alexander employs many such instances of cultural conflicts that immigrants come across in a foreign land. Draupadi, Sandhya, Jay, Rashid, and Sakhi, being the immigrants in the American States, mainly experience the cultural glitches during their residence on the foreign ground. The 'homelands' people reconstruct tend to be fictive communities, part real and part imagined.

The term diaspora was firstly recorded in 1876 referring to refugees of the Irish feminine and it is widely assimilated in 1950s. Diaspora carries a sense of dislocation, displacement and find itself separated from their original roots. According to Homi Bhabha diaspora is "gathering of exile, emigrants and refugees in foreign culture and foreign land, gathering of the past in ritual and revivals that gathering in the present. In some conceptual consideration by Fred W. Riggs

defines Diaspora as communities whose member lives informally outside, a homeland while maintaining active contact with it. The world informally excludes people having a formal status such as "soldiers, diplomats, missionaries, businessman, journalist, spies etc"(124) who are the agents of the state or non-state entities in the homeland. The Indian Diaspora is the largest Diaspora in the world with its global presence and a history that dates back to the Indian civilization. The Indian Diaspora can be divided into three phases: ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient Diaspora refers labourers, crafts men and traders who explored new lands for work, wealth and adventures. In medieval times, the British imperialism caused movement of the indentured labourers. In modern times, skilled, educated and intelligent Indians moved to the USA and other European countries for economic and professional reasons. They are decentred in the sense that they have moved away from their original centre nations, communities and affiliations. Gilroy writes that 'the image of the ship living micro cultural, micro political system in motion effectively captures the trans-nationality and intercultural relations, the exchange of ideas and activism'(107). Diaspora is conditioned by the home shore they have left and the new shore they arrive at. Immigrants live through the commonality of experiences whether social, economic, political, or religious as their 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.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows.

1. To study the diasporic experience as depicted in the novel, *Manhattan Music*.

2. To analyse the theme of dislocation in Meena Alexander's novel.
3. To analyse the characters from the multicultural setting of the novel.
4. To examine the novel critically in the postcolonial perspectives.

Abha Pandey in her book *Indian Diasporic Writings* assesses the Diasporic text as being a means to anatomise 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. Meena Alexander approaches the question of gender 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. In Fanon's words, the diasporic community is a group of “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, 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)

In her novel, *Manhattan Music*, Meena Alexander depicts the story of an Indian immigrant, Sandhya Rosenblum in her thirties living in New York City with her husband Stephen, a Jewish American. Sandhya struggles with her sense of identity and is torn between her Indian roots and her new American life. Sandhya is haunted by the traumatic loss of her Indian lover, Gautam, who died in police custody. This mental trauma and grief shape her sense of dislocation and alienation in Manhattan. She faced the complexities of diasporic life, the challenges of interracial marriage and cultural dislocation. Sandhya in early stages fails to become ‘Sandy’ as her husband Stephen wants her to be and unable integrate herself with the American way of living. She remains an introvert and hardly shares her emotions. She is unable to forget her past; her lover died miserably in India. Sandhya struggles hard to settle into her new life as an Indian wife with a Jewish American husband. The feeling of homelessness and memories torments her. Both physical relocation and inner frustration show her inability to express herself. She has experienced alienation both in Manhattan and India. Sandhya feels her situation unbearable and attempts suicide, but when she recovers from its shock, she experiences the rebirth of herself. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*, to be “unhomed is not to be homeless” (Bhabha 1994, p.9). When the realisation of being unhomed strikes one, “the world shrinks and then expands enormously. The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha 1994, p. 11). Sandhya finds solace when she returns to Kerala, her homeland, to meet her father, Varki. She finds meaning in her life by helping her father in the hospital. Her immigrant’s anxiety rising from the death of her father and her rejection of her Egyptian lover in America breaks down her and leads her to suicide attempt. The trauma in the

lives of immigrant is familiar in the context of South Asian American fiction. The significant character in the novel is Draupadi Dinkins, a conceptual artist whom Sandhya meets and befriends in New York City. Draupadi speaks of her origins in this way: “I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from slaved people, pride of Kala Pani, sister to the middle passage. Also, part of Asian -American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood: railroads in the West, the pineapple and sugarcane fields” (47). Meena Alexander shows that the mix of ethnicity is actually an act of artistic creation. Draupadi is the symbol of the mixture of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. The multiplicity of geographical landscapes evokes the novel’s multicultural setting. North America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean show the mixture of various ethnic groups who are living on the North American continent. The novel explores the global interconnection with lands, people and multicultural groups. Draupadi Dinkins, the alter ego of Sandhya, also experiences alienation in America despite her multicultural ancestry. She blackens the Barbie doll with kajal, the black paste that is used in South Asia as a cosmetic to decorate one’s eyes. She also ties over the doll’s mouth with a strip of her mother’s saree and seals its eyes with wax. This is symbolic of the condition of women in the alien soil. Unlike Sandhya, she refuses to confine herself to a small world expected of women. In fact, her disappointments make her more resolute in handling failures. She, too, longs for the world that promises equality devoid of racism. Alexander makes Manhattan Music more vivid, complex, multicultural and interesting by introducing one more dislocated character, Rashid el Obeid, an Egyptian scholar who is pursuing his post-doc research at Columbia. The relationship between Rashid and Draupadi goes for a toss as Rashid is busy with his terroristic activities secretly. This also indicates that migration and nomadism nurtures temporality in man-woman relationship. Consequently, Draupadi experiences loss and alienation in the host country. Alexander examines the forming and parting of water waves and the migratory water birds that symbolise the dislocated status of Draupadi. Alexander is tracing

the trauma of the young generation who gather in pub to distress themselves. The land of promises, thus, becomes the land of compromises as the young Indians are without family and home. They shrug off their trauma displacement by consuming sedatives. The social and cultural gatherings in their homeland are not evident in the host nation. They have nobody share their emotions and ideas; as a result, they go to pub where they can see a huge crowd of Indians, where they can at least 'feel at home'. The casual relationship between Draupadi and Rinaldo reaches the trauma between man- woman relationships. This domestic trauma results into the abortion of foetus which Draupadi does unwillingly because Rinaldo is already a married person who cannot accept her as his wife. They are unable to give the child a home. Draupadi undergoes this trauma very seriously. In the part entitled, "Staying" the narrator showcases the issues of acculturation and assimilation of the dislocated people with the host nation and its culture. This is a sort of rehabilitation after facing a series of traumas in the alien land. The narrative closes with Sandhya returning home to stay with her husband, Stephen and Dora and settles happily with her newly found 'self' in Manhattan Island. Draupadi Dinkins after undergoing the trauma of loss of her love and the foetus finds her space in performance art in which she performs an array of femininities which she has experienced herself in her real life. Eventually, the females in the narrative change the map and they draw their own almanac and routes of journey towards their uncertain future in the transnational domain. Manhattan Music concludes with Draupadi busily performing her visual art in the celebrations of Diwali festival, creating another niche India in Manhattan Island. Diwali festival symbolises happiness, light, joy and sweetness in human life and relationships. The Dismantled and out of tune music of the dislocated and fragmented Diaspora subjects conclude in happy Manhattan music. The migrants adapt and assimilate with the American life but they feel stretched thin, as if they should be in two places at once. Manhattan Music is book that frequently changes the focus, place, time, voice and style which reinforce the themes of space, location, migration

and memories. Draupadi is the fourth-generation immigrant of mixed descents in America. Her great-grandmother was Indian and had migrated to Trinidad as a bonded labourer. After the independence of India from colonial rule, she did not return to her motherland. Her succeeding generations underwent inter-cultural marriages and finally, they settled in America. Despite bearing the influence of American as well as her parents' native cultures, Draupadi associates herself with India and finds her ethnic belonging in Indian culture. Her attempts of being the part of Indian ethnoscape formulated by Indian immigrants in Manhattan and her acquaintance of Mahabharata, the Indian epic are suggestive of her close association with Indian ethnicity. At several instances in the narrative, Draupadi expresses her knowledge of the epic to which even many Indians might not be acquainted. In *Manhattan Music*, the writer emphasises this idea by portraying Sandhya's inner conflict in her adopted country at first and later her awakening to the truth that we all have several "homes" or as Homi Bhabha suggests we have to "desire for social solidarity: I am looking for the join...I want to join...I want to join" (Bhabha 1994, p.18). Sandhya is at times confused whether to consider Tiruvella, where her parents lived, her home or New York, where she has been living with Stephen. Sakhi, Sandhya's cousin, can cope with this problem by indulging herself in social work and organizing meeting in Columbia University, Sandhya feels that she has entered a new country where she requires no "green card or another sign of belonging" (211). Sakhi feels that Sandhya should be exposed to the difficulties of immigrant, both men and women, made to realise that she is not only person to face the problem of an identity crisis in America. Alexander provides samples of cultural differences in her novel *Manhattan Music*. Sosa, Sandhya's mother, and Muriel, Stephen's mother, are different in their attitude to the marriage of their children. As a typical Indian mother, Sosa tries to find a better suitor for her daughter, Sandhya. She wants Sandhya to "keep up the family lines" (24) which is the duty of the children. She finds two young men, the Kuriokose boy, an MBA from Stanford, and the public-school-trained

Kandathil lad, for her daughter. Her desperate effort is juxtaposed against the casual attitude of Muriel, who considers “his (Stephen’s) life is his own” (35). Moreover, differences in the culture prevent the people of the respective countries from understanding the sensibilities of the other. Sosa, on seeing six month old Dora, Sandhya’s daughter, sleeping separately shouts at her daughter for not doing her duty as a mother. However, children in Western countries sleep in rooms of their own, as a matter of course. Asian American writings are primarily concerned with the portrayal of the sensibilities of Asians who have migrated to America under various circumstances. Memories of the homeland and the conscious attempts of the individuals to live in the past characterise the works of Asian American writers. The novelist suggests that her attempted suicide is an affirmative act because in doing so she kills the part of herself. In an interview, Meena Alexander reveals the relevance of the name of Sandhya, which means twilight in Sanskrit. She gives the name to express the in-betweenness through the character. Sandhya’s name is symbolic of her precarious position poised between two cultures, able to fit neither here nor there. The main sections of the text are the six chapters titled “Sitting”, “Stirring”, “Going”, “Stoning”, “Turning” and “Staying”. The grammatical form of the gerund used in each of these one -verb titles is indicative of a certain movement or incompleteness of the action. Manhattan Music introduces Sandhya in the initial pages with a part of the narrative captioned; “Sitting” which highlights that Sandhya is sitting in the Central Park with ‘a staying put’ position wherein she experiences her cultural drift as she is feeling lonely. Alexander introduces her in a park and not in a home which also indicates that Sandhya is without the warmth of a home and she is in a public place with a pool of memories of her home and of the past. She remembers her first visit to America with her husband Stephen after her marriage when the immigration officer welcomes the couple, “Welcome to America. Be happy here” (7) indicates shift in space. Hence, the titles may be understood as corresponding to the protagonist’s development - protagonist, from the anxiety of immigration through her

nervous breakdown to a sense of relative security. At the end of the novel, an optimistic lesson is that Sandhya learns to live as a rightful member of America. Unlike other South Asian American writers delving into border crossings, Alexander situates the experience of migration and the construction of a viable ethnic identity against the backdrop of art. Artistic creativity, especially in its visual and conceptual forms, is imbued in Alexander's narrative with the power to express the precarious position of an ethnic individual and give voice to the history of racial oppression. It is also shown to have the capacity to aid an individual in the process of coming to terms with who she is and where she fits within the fabric of American multiculturalism. From the very beginning of her artistic career, Alexander's Draupadi has created art with a heavy political agenda. In *Manhattan Music*, this special language, a "dream language" that enables the characters to communicate their feelings freely, is the language of art. As Mehta claims, art "provides an emotional outlet to vent frustrations or anguish faced by the immigrants in this novel. Art is like a mirror reflecting multiple identities of the (immigrant) artist. The versatility of art in this novel reflects on the adaptive, dynamic, and even fluid quality of the immigrants living in America" (234). The role of art is emphasised in the novel's structure. As has already been pointed out, the main sections of *Manhattan Music* are interspersed with brief chapters, a mere few pages long, narrated by Draupadi Dinkins and one chapter narrated by Jay, Sandhya's cousin, a photographer-turned-poet. These artist-narrated chapters, starting with the Overture and ending with the Coda, give the novel a structure resembling that of a musical composition, with Draupadi's chapters playing the role of leitmotif. Music, it must be remembered, is also evoked in the title of the novel and seems always to be playing in the background, even though it is not paid as much attention to as other forms of art, including performance, photography or poetry. The title of the novel may also refer to the sounds of the streets, which Sandhya interprets as "curious, atonal music" (78), or it may denote the people who live in Manhattan and form the human mosaic of New York, comparable to the

components of a musical composition. The somewhat overoptimistic lesson that Sandhya learns at the end of the novel is that although people, like instruments, sound different, they all have a place and a role to play within the composition of New York and America as such. The apparent naivety of such a conclusion stems from the fact that Sandhya has never fallen victim to racial oppression, and her struggle has been of an inner, rather than outer, character. In view of that, the utopian vision of New York as a place welcoming to all is what helps her accept herself as a rightful member of America. As argued in this essay, Meena Alexander in *Manhattan Music* deploys several interwoven discourses to express the multivalent experience of border crossings.

For one thing, she frames her account of Sandhya's fraught identity in spatial terms, showing literal movement through space, from India to America, to be a crucial factor bearing upon the construction of identity. To complicate and enrich her portrayal of immigrant sensibility, Alexander opens up the metaphorical space of artistic creation, which serves as a mirror of the anxious immigrant's troubled mind. Art also functions in the novel as a political tool used to raise people's awareness about the history of racial oppression and to forge coalitions among various groups of people of colour. Art is presented as a form of language which is universal in its accessibility to all and which enables an expression of an unrestricted range of meanings. The novel thus seems to show that "a bridge that seizes crossing" can after all be crossed through art. The convergence between spatiality and the construction of identity has been theorised by scholars for several decades now, ever since the so-called spatial turn within the humanities. Currently, the prevalent scholarly opinion holds that identity does not only evolve along a temporal axis, but is spatially located as well. For example, Susan Friedman argues for "the centrality of space... to the locations of identity" (19). She understands identity in spatial terms as "a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges" (19). Hybrid identity, a

particularly salient form of identity for ethnic subjects, is a result of “movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materialises a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting” (Friedman 24). Thus, hybrid identity is frequently produced in borderlands or spaces in between cultures. Helena Grice connects the spatial theory of identity to the literary productions of Asian American women writers by claiming that space frequently acts as a metaphor for identity and that female writers tend to search for self through place (200).

Alexander’s fictional characters are likewise preoccupied with issues of movement, border crossings, home and belonging as they bear upon the ever-changing sense of who one is and where one stands. As far as geographical landscapes are concerned, Alexander’s novel moves back and forth between Manhattan and southern India, both places familiar to Sandhya, with Draupadi’s account adding several more locations that diffuse the binary model of US-versus-India, found in much of South Asian American Writing. The vast majority of literary texts by South Asian American writers tend to focus on two locations: the home country and the adopted country, which are presented in a hierarchical fashion, the latter visibly favoured by the character or narrator. Characterizing the genre of Asian immigrant woman’s novel in general, Inderpal Grewal posits that a characteristic feature of the genre is that it sets up “the binary oppositions between the United States as first world site of freedom and ‘Asia’ as third world site of repression” (63). Draupadi speaks of her origins in the following way: “I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from enslaved people, pride of Kala Pani, sister to the Middle Passage. Also part Asian-American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood: railroads in the West, the pineapple and sugarcane fields” (47). However, the novel does not make it clear whether this statement is a truthful account of Draupadi’s origins; it is equally possible that this mix of ethnicities is actually an act of artistic creation. With her whether real or imagined mixed blood origins, Draupadi creates herself as a symbol of America, a composite

that it is of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. She evokes in her account major ethnic groups that migrated or were forced to migrate to America from outside the continent: enslaved Black people, Europeans and Asians; at the same time, she leaves out from the mosaic Native Americans or Latinos/as, whom she may view as original inhabitants of the land. “[T]he fragments of her past, real and imagined, swarming into her art” (53) are used by Draupadi as artistic material. Draupadi, a symbol of immigrant America, a person who feels at ease with the multiple strands of her heritage, functions in the novel as Sandhya’s alter ego, the “almost... double” (49) of the anxious immigrant. The multiplicity of geographical landscapes the novel is set in or otherwise evokes including North America, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean serves to show the linkage between various ethnic groups inhabiting the North American continent. It likewise suggests that it is impossible to limit the discussion of the experience of migration to one ethnic group or one location only. On the contrary, the novel explores global interconnections between lands and people without erasing the specific histories of these ethnic groups. Many of the connections that “Alexander weaves into her narrative” include “social and political incidents from India and America, for example, Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad, the threat of Muslim fundamentalism in Manhattan, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a Sri Lanka suicide bomber, racism towards Indians in New Jersey, Christian fundamentalism... and the immigrant issues of New York City” (Moka-Dias 3). Talking about Alexander’s writing in general, Rajini Srikanth terms the writer’s position a “globalism of outrage” (88), which she understands to mean the author’s preoccupation with both local and global issues, a sensitivity that Linda McDowell in a different context calls “global localism” (38). Srikanth explains Alexander’s interest in both local and global injustices in the following way: “a literature born in the United States... must of necessity evoke other locations” (87) for in the global world what happens in one place affects and is affected by events occurring elsewhere. Alexander herself, in an interview by Lopamudra Basu, corroborates her interests

in matters both local and global when she says that in her work “place is layered on place to make a palimpsest of sense” (Alexander, “The Poet” 32). Art, Violence and Ethnic Identity in Meena Alexander’s *Manhattan Music* 153. The conflict of interest in the lives of immigrants is basically caused by their stubbornness to cling to the past on the one hand and their refusal to acclimate themselves to the new environment on the other. Alexander endorses that the sense of exile is caused among immigrants, especially Indian immigrants, by their relocation to America, the land of boundless freedom, from their homeland that emphasises rigid rules. Most of them undergo some extremely distressing experience, at some stage in their life, which sets in motion self-reflection, capable of guiding them to resolve the self-contradictions and arrive at a sense of solidarity which may be called a rebirth of self and identity. Though ‘rebirth’ is predominantly an Indian concept as part of the cyclic process of existence - Birth - Death - Rebirth, it yields easily to a more general application of the cyclic process of our life on earth, passing from ignorance through experience to an awareness of the purpose of existence. Applied to the Indian diaspora, they stand in prospect of shedding their exploitation of the alien land for self-aggrandisement and developing a sense of genuine belonging to the country of their adoption; a home outside home. Sandhya’s problem of transforming herself to suit the adopted country is shared by many immigrants. Globalisation has, however, removed the boundaries of almost all countries and settling in a foreign country is not uncommon today. In this context, the idea of motherland as the only place that gives a sense of belonging is to be reconsidered.

Conclusion

Alexander’s novel *Manhattan Music* is a positive assertion of the great potential of diasporic life. The immigrant is no longer to feel rootless and alienated in the foreign land and instead focus on improvement of life and living. She rejects the belief that one stands in danger of losing one’s identity and would be forced to merge into the melting pot of the American

civilisation. Though America is not free of ethnic discrimination, the American society's belief in democracy and the constitutional guarantee of equality holds the greatest prospect of self-esteem and self-actualisation for all settlers in America. By centring on female subjectivity, she challenges the conventional ideas of victimhood and contributes to a broader understanding of women's resilience in the face of adversity.

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