

## **GENDER AND RACIAL IDENTITY IN THE SELECT WORKS OF MEENA ALEXANDER**

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**Abstract:** The 1990 has been a witness to tremendous growth in the field of postcolonial literature and theory as well as in the field of US ethnic studies which includes Asian American and more specifically South Asian American studies. This was also the period which saw the development of transnational feminist studies. In South Asian diasporic women's writing there is a perceptible zest for presuming the inherited traditional ethnic culture, nurturing essence of alienation from mainstream culture and clinging to the culture of voluntarily abandoned homeland. Thus, these women writers face double burden of the diasporic destiny. They face hostile racialism and displacement in alien countries and at the same time they suffer at the hands of patriarchal society. They also face the borders that their bodies create – racial as well as sexual borders. Meena Alexander is an acclaimed South Asian writer, a woman born in one continent, educated in another, living in the third continent and speaking many tongues. Her creative work lies at the intersection of postcolonial, ethnic American and women's studies. Her works grapple with the issues of the mixed legacies of colonialism, language, violence and trauma and the question of gender identity.

**Keywords:** South Asian American, Diasporic, Ethnic, Racial, Identity, Gender.

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I am a poet writing in America. But American poet?... An Asian American poet then?... A woman poet, a woman poet of colour, a south Indian woman who makes up lines in English... A Third World Woman poet...?(193)

- Meena Alexander in *Fault Lines*

I begin my paper with a quote by Meena Alexander in her autobiography *Fault Lines*. The very quote is suggestive of the trauma Alexander was undergoing both as an immigrant as well as a woman.

The increasing interest of the 1960s in the personal voice and the feminist assertion of women's experiences in the women literature have greatly revolutionised the concept of identity. In the immigrant discourse, a whole lot of rewriting is done in the making and unmaking of identity. The very process of shaping identities has to be historicised for they point to events that are both visible and invisible.

Meena Alexander is a South Asian American, internationally acclaimed writer and scholar. She was born in Allahabad India, to Mary and George Alexander. Alexander's parents left for Sudan, when she was five years old, and then to England for her education and finally settled in America, where she is established as a reputed academic and writer. It is because of these travels that her writing spans many a space and time. Her literary career began early at the tender age of ten, when she began writing poetry, and while her poetry might be her best – known work, her works span a variety of literary genres. She has published seven volumes of poetry, two novels: *Namphally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997), a collection of both prose and poetry, *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, and her autobiography *Fault Lines*.

Like many other prominent South Asian American writers, Alexander can be viewed as the epitome of mobility in an age of migrant flows. Her global travels spanning several continents have greatly shaped her literary aesthetics. At the same time, however, at the heart of her works lies an intense meditation on place and particularly on what it means to live in multicultural America as a postcolonial female subject. Since Alexander was well aware that she was not a native of America, she strives to earn her right to become an American writer through the act of writing which she conceives as a right of passage.

She explains this in *The Shock of Arrival :Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*. She writes : *Still, my existence was so marginal in the new world in which I found myself that I felt that having this book out in the world might give me the right to be in America.*(63).

But the question of identity in the case of woman writers attains complexity for the simple reason that she has to counter double marginalisation at the hands of both white men and women alike and indigenous patriarchy . Thus a subjective perspective of events, both individual and social, renders a new and refreshing dimension to this writing. Marginalised as the weaker sex and the lesser individual, the women writer has to contend with the linguistic and cultural position accorded to her in a patriarchal society. She has to reposition herself through a restructuring of language that has hitherto been the sole monopoly of the males. Keenly aware of these painful tensions, Meena Alexander turned to her own physicality to discover the roots of fresh imaginative knowledge . besides this, part of her knowledge came from the inexplicable bond to other women and cycles of generations.

Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* is a gradual unfolding of imagination. It is distinguished by a peculiar mode of experiencing and recording reality. This personal narrative derives its power and charm from the heightened awareness of the interaction between the self and the world. Through it Alexander highlights the challenges faced by immigrants . She tries to forge a sense of identity, despite a past full of moves and changes . She takes us from her childhood in Tiruvella in the South of India and Khartoum in Sudan to her present home in Manhattan. She poignantly describes the wealth of experiences and events that shaped her life and writing, learning places and returning to them in memory. This work revolves around the theme of establishing one's self, an identity independent of one's surroundings. In fact, the very title , *Fault Lines*, is actually a term used by geologists to describe cracks in the earth. Alexander uses the term to suggest the uprooting she has faced in her life, being born in one country, brought up in another and finally settled in some other country. In it she writes: *I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing to nothing.*(3)

Alexander's works also examine her engagement with gender politics from the bag of mixed legacies of colonialism, cross border culture, transnational identity crises and trauma. In *Manhattan Music*, Alexander explores the issues of female sexuality in the newly emerging patriarchies of South Asian communities. She also suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. Further , Alexander aims to re-write the American literary tradition in a way that includes racial Others without collapsing their difference or celebrating it in a multicultural fashion and thus ghettoizing their cultural productions. In negotiating her ethnic identity in the United States, Alexander does not subscribe to the notion of the US as a melting pot, into which ethnic minorities must relinquish their ethnicity to adopt American identity. Like most of the South Asian writers, she chooses to retain the particularities of her ethnic identity even when there is pressure to conform to a definite standard. According to Roshni Rustomji-Kerns: *South Asian American literature, like the literatures of the other non-dominating ethnic, racial, or cultural groups in America, contributes to as well as complicates and changes the complexion, the tradition, and the mythologies of American literature*(2). She describes her identity as a US citizen as fragile because in a desperate move to settle down in a foreign soil, in an alien geography and in a multicultural ramification, she oscillates between the home abandoned in India and the home adopted in America.

In her works like *Manhattan Music* and *Namphally Road* , she traces her growth as a child, woman, wife, mother and writer over borders and across multiple cultures. She has revisited the cities, towns, villages she had lived in since birth. She journeys back and forth in time, recollects her childhood experiences. It is this theme of alienation or sense of not belonging anywhere that has become the major obsession of Alexander. She is always travelling and feels a stranger wherever she goes and is living on the margin in alien lands amongst alien people.

This relationship between geography and writing raises not only the issue of a particular aesthetics, but also that of the positioning and status of South Asian intellectuals in the US, and especially symbolic capital that diaspora carries within the American academy. Alexander's elite background and class

privilege belie her self-construction as a tragically split diasporic individual and minority subject exposed to patterns of racialization in America, placing her squarely within the structures of power and academic privilege of her host country.

For Alexander, English language becomes her tool to forge ahead and seize the truths of body and mind. She dares to tear off the fine skin of the English language to express her otherness and to appropriate its rhythm and vitality in order to foreground the subaltern tension between words and reality. She decides to change her name from Mary Elizabeth to Meena, when writing becomes a matter of perpetuating life and voicing her identity. In her own words, “sometimes I think I write to evade the names they have given me”.(73) At another place she writes: *there is a violence in the very language, American English, that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned. After all, for such as we are the territories are not free.*(199)

Alexander narrates her experience of arrival in America in terms of dislocation and racialization and thus views writing as a mechanism of coping with displacement. In America, she becomes the target of racist and sexist slurs on the streets of New York city and is often asked to explain her identity and justify her presence in the US. According to her, these issues did not plague her in India, as she was never asked to reveal her identity based on ethnic and social divides. It is this ethnicity that sets her apart from both white Americans and other Asian Americans. The impact of Alexander’s geographical displacement on her literary output is evident in her use of the rhetoric of physical and psychological fragmentation. She makes use of such metaphors as compass, collage, fault lines etc., to map a geography of dislocation, which reflects her search for self-definition in the context of multiple identifications.

Through her privileged and racialized position in the US, then, Alexander tests the boundary between inclusion and exclusion. The fact that she navigates easily between ethnic, national, diasporic and transnational categories should not be construed merely as a mark of academic privilege, but rather as a strategy that prevents analysis of her location as simply South Asian diasporic, Asian American or American which would overlook her shared experience with other ethnic groups and the gaps between national constituencies and literary traditions, where she strategically situates herself.

Thus, Meena Alexander’s works are highly introspective and psychoanalytical, the process of growing up and the establishment of her identity are delineated in the most spontaneous manner. Further, this process of self creation for her has numerous facets, creating an identity despite a patchwork past, fighting against definitions demanded by greater society, and also fighting against traditions and definitions enforced within the community.

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