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# Emergent Feminism Reframing Diasporic Identities in Meena Alexander's Manhattan Music

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**ABSTRACT:** The Indian diaspora plays a significant part in reflecting the complications of diasporic gestures in literature. It aims to examine the relegation and the nostalgia for the motherland and disaffection caused by relegation or disturbance as well as conflict between generations and artistic identity. Diasporic and immigrant women writers of India tend to portray the dilemmas related to the changes, the generational differences among the people and metamorphosis of their identities during relegation. The inner self of outcast and alienation supplements the diasporic writers of immigration to seek recuperation in their writings and institute an endless place in English Diaspora literature. Being a canonized litterateur, Meena Alexander in her work *Manhattan Music* manages to give a fairly credible representation of the Indian emigrant gestures, yet it's within the gaps and surpluses in the narratives that her enterprises westernized assumptions allowing a postcolonial reading. Surrounded by the complex layers of the migratory and diasporic narrative, Meena Alexander navigates the focal point between social, physical and psychological points of her world. Meena Alexander not only establishes a relationship with India but makes her a tenant of the global lineage. In this way, she attempts to forge a diasporic subjectivity. The present study involves a reading of Alexander's *Manhattan Music* where she redefines the indigenous women identity in distant worlds and addresses about emergent feminism serving the adaptability and agency of women in surrounds of social and cultural bouleversement.

**KEYWORDS:** Immigrant experience, diasporic identities, feminism, diasporic subjectivity etc.

"Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. (Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*)

Women have both sustained and interrogated the patriarchal pressures and the works of women litterateurs' disport resistance and subversion. Though the society took some time to furnish the women their due position and the law too was unhurried in this attempt, but tardily and steadily people's opinions started converting itself for a progressive change. Women's documents have always been engaged in changing the age-old traditions. With all its variety and marginality, it has been moving toward self-assertion and redefinitions, and also moving through the forum raising self-expression and self-questioning attitudes. This writing has projected indispensable structures and meanings and alchemized complaint and chaos into enabling structures. It has assayed to dissolve contrariness and move towards pluralistic meanings. The texts written by women challenge the new authorities amongst other ways, by developing an aesthetic that canonized does not lessen discontinuity, forfeit, or marginality but it dramatizes and clarifies it.

Feminist scholars have tried to validate and dissect diasporic processes related to migration and mobility, labour force participation, generalities of home, transmissions of artistic traditions and morals, cultural products as well as political rallying. In this viewpoint of migration and identity formation in feminist perspective, Teresa de Lauretis' quote proves to be true, in which she explicates:

The female subject is a site of differences, differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic or sub (cultural), but all of these together and often enough at odds with one another... these differences not only constitute each woman's consciousness and subjective limits but all together define the female subject... these differences... cannot be again collapsed into a fixed, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image. (Teresa de Lauretis)

Alexander tries exploring her emigrant self among 'the international and trans-artistic rudiments' and also tries realizing the exact process of endless self-construction so as to save the self in an unaccustomed land. The theme of journey had

preliminarily structured the literature written by emigrants as the writers reported the metamorphosis of migration, its goods and problems. This continues to be central to South Asian women's writing, it gives structure and pattern to the narrative, but changes come down in its use. The journey of immigration has been nearly followed by the travel into agreement and later the journey into self. Stuart Hall has veritably remarked in this respect: "Migrant communities bear the imprint of diaspora, hybridization and difference in their very constitution". And it's under these sub-headings that the quintessence of South Asian diasporic Women writings actually emerges, thereby marking and exploring chromatic paradigms and confines altogether.

The female characters show a proclamation of their rights as human beings and fight for fair treatment. Women writers either document in English in India, or writing in the British diaspora, present with sapience, the dilemmas women are facing. Liberal and unconventional ways of life are asked to avoid those problems within traditional society where self-conscious and individualistic women frequently face suffering caused by broken relationships. While there is important substantiation of the alienation of vision and extremity of self- image, there is also an emphasis on an essential tone. The characters command a strong sense of self-identity.

Women are frequently projected in Indian women's fabrication as trapped in the orders of wife, mother and daughter. These women are typically depicted as victims of social and political injustice, atrocity and exploitation. The 'New Indian woman' also features dynamically in the works of Indian litterateurs abroad. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal have demonstrated dissatisfaction with the artistic and gender roles assigned to Indian women through the issues raised in their stories and the protagonist's identities, eliciting their internal disquiet. The new women in their writings are not elevated on a pedestal as goddesses, but are depicted with their human blights. Their predicaments are shown as a solemnity of passage as they pass through processes that emblemize metamorphoses from weakness to strength and from restriction to freedom.

Preconceived odds and ends of epicene individualities are the main cause of antagonism in South Asian women writings. The conception of 'woman' in these writings signifies certain places and actions and therefore, the protagonists find their lives mandated by gender identifications. This generates the contagious frustration and dissatisfaction. The women are displeased with their present situation. During the interrogation of their own characters; the history, the present and the future grow important. Supposing of the history of immigration allows the women to escape in extravagant and nostalgia of the past. The present is dominated by fear, query and confusion while the future becomes daunting.

Manhattan Music presents the story of Sandhya Rosenblum, who is a settler from India, married to a Jewish American Stephen Rosenblum. The setting of the novel wavers between Manhattan and India and invokes the crucial dilemmas faced by an ethnical in-migrant self. Apart from the voice of Draupadi, the novel's story is recited by a human narrator who's opining on the lives and studies of all the characters who are a part of this setting. Draupadi is an alternate generation Indian emigrant from the West Indies and is an independent performer, the "woman who was permitted everything" (Manhattan Music, 3). In unlikeness 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. Draupadi can be seen as the voice of Alexander who represents the varied sundries of memory, ancestral history and collaborative sense of self. She's an escort to Sandhya who encourages her to make meaningful sense of one's history. The intriguing thing to note about Draupadi's narratives is that it has begun by an erudite epitaph reflecting the authorial intention and reflection together. For instance, the very first chapter in the select work entitled 'Overture: Monsoon Flood' starts with the epitaph from Meghadutam by Kalidasa: "Know her to be my second life, alone, speaking little" (Manhattan Music 1).

Sandhya is seen to be agonized by remembrances of a different kind of life and different people, whom she was familiar to when she was in India. The bonds are too strong to be severed. A regard of Sandhya's reflection processes in the words of her friend Draupadi who also happens to be one of the narrative voices in the novel. She says:

Sandhya's people, on the other hand, seemed never to have budged from the Indian subcontinent. Her veins were etched by centuries of arranged marriages, dark blue blood pouring through. She could point to a plot of land bounded by granite walls and name ancestors who had owned that land for generations. By fields swollen by monsoon flood she imagined her great-grandmother afloat in a black canoe. Then too she remembered the cemeteries where her grandparents were buried, the houses that had held them, the rites under which they were married. But memory swelling like black water threatened to drown her. (Manhattan Music, 4)



Memory for Sandhya emerges out of nowhere and is puissant to drag her from the present to her erstwhile days in India. She remembers a scene from a puppet- show performance, which is chronicling the story of Draupadi and her life of exile, of being “unhoused” and staying like a stranger. This was seen by her with her grandmother at the age of six and that has been an inerasable memory. The memory besides fades and she comes to the present reality where she's holding her green card and pondering 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 as the puppeteer having neglected to pull it tight. Neither gestures nor words came out right” (Manhattan Music, 7). Both the anamneses, of the grandmother and of what Stephen said reveal the ingrain distinction of Sandhya’s life as an emigrant. She feels that her own performance as a puppet in the puppet show of her life is not low to the mark.

The protagonist and other characters in the new Manhattan Music are trying to settle down in the new land of America by getting alleviation of survival from their history and memory, which in some way or the other is making up their subjectivity and Identity in the foreign land. It's an established fact in the diasporic environment that the culture in which one is born, and the gender to which one belongs to, plays a vital part in the conformation of an identity. This identity undergoes multitudinous phases of conformation and distortion. It tries to detect itself in the new artistic set up far from familiar borders.

Meena Alexander develops this idea in the novel through Sandhya and articulates the phases of conformation and distortion of an indigenous identity. Similar charting out of narrative makes Manhattan Music, numerous times, autobiographical in nature. She elaborates the problems of being, in a foreign land. It's a tormenting experience, because locating oneself in a new place and getting used to it, needs time and circumstances, for the food of Identity, far from the measures of the motherland.

Sandhya’s story in Manhattan Music ends with her recovery from a failed suicide attempt which forces her to reassess how she has lived her life, both in India, the land of her birth and in America, the land to which she has migrated. The recovery from the failed self-destruction attempt appears to be illustrated in the narrative as reframing new individualities. In this way, Sandhya’s life begins to internalize the sense of feminist modesty and independence, investing in her the spirit to seize the borders paving way for emergent feminist identity.

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