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Diasporic Consciousness in Meena Alexander's Writings

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Abstract: *The concept of diasporic consciousness insightfully discusses issues such as migration, struggle for identity, and settlement of migrants across the borders of the homeland, alienation and loneliness, etc. In particular, diasporic literature explores the self-identity, socio-cultural values, and socio-political autonomy of individuals in a foreign land. The Indian diasporic literature, surprisingly enough, describes the pains of immigration, their traumatic experiences, and the struggle for cultural assimilation in the host-land. This paper is concerned with the reflection of diasporic consciousness in the writings of Meena Alexander (1951-2018). She was one of the most influential Indian English poets. The focus is on her poetry and novels, which explore the relationship between Indian culture and foreign culture, as well as the relationship between memory and present reality. Meena Alexander appears as a prominent female poet on the literary map of Indian women's writing. Her poems and trend-setting novels and other carefully crafted literary works have earned her literary reputation as a serious and skilled writer. She has earned a name for herself for her remarkable contribution to the development of the art in Indian writing. This paper will explain how Meena Alexander, in her writings, is trying to present the problems of Indians living abroad to the world through terms used in diasporic literature, such as identity crisis, multiculturalism, alienation and loneliness etc.*

Keywords: *Diaspora, displacement, alienation, identity, loneliness, Culture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mary Alexander, originally from Travancore, India, welcomed Meena Alexander into the world on February 17, 1951, in Allahabad. Her mother was a housewife, while her father worked as a meteorologist for the Indian government. Numerous poetry collections, literacy memoirs, essays, fiction, and literacy critiques have been written by her. She has published many poetry collections and her collection titled *Illiterate Heart* has won her the PEN Open Book Award in the year 2002. Among her best-known works are the volume of poetry *literate heart* (2002), and published volume of essays and poems on the theme of migration and memory called the *Shock of Arrival: Reflections of poet colonial experience* (2006) among her famous novel's are *Nampally Road* (1991) *Manhattan Music* (1997), and her autobiographical memories '*Fault Lines*' it was chosen by publisher weekly as one of the best books of the year in 1993. Her writing is sensual and multilingual, and she approaches her work with benevolence, even though she deals with such difficult and terrible issues.

Mena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas," said Maxine Hong Kingston. We can hear her voice both close to home and far away. Therefore, diaspora is a process of narrative cultural history that occurs when people choose to reside in a nation that is remote from their place of origin. It is made up of many intricate and varied threads that are frequently troublesome yet have ever-expanding consequences.

II. DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN MEENA ALEXANDER WRITINGS

Meena Alexander is recognized as a distinctive postcolonial writer due to her focus on the notion of homeland in the context of diaspora or dispersion among peoples formerly dominated by Western powers. Her personal migration from East to West following India's independence after World War II has influenced this underlying theme in her work. Meena Alexander's life and work are characterized by multiple, transitory, departures and arrivals that are evident in her writing. She is a poly displaced or multi-situated poet. Alexander's displacement, which culminated in the tension of multiple civilizations, resulted in "many souls, many voices in one dark body" (Alexander, 1996:1). It is therefore not surprising that she, like many other influential South Asian diasporic writers, exemplifies multiplicity in an era of migratory flux. Her trauma of migration makes her appear as a prominent voice of the female psyche. With her ancestral home in Kerala, Alexander received several awards and her writing is undoubtedly a reflection of her inner self. She is one of the leading and talented diasporic poets from South Asia. She expresses her own lived diasporic experiences in her poetry. She is known to have a rich multilingual and multicultural experience. Her poetry revolves around uprooting and alienation, migration and trauma, separation and loneliness - from India to Sudan and the USA.

Meena Alexander is great in her *Fault Lines* depicting herself as a "woman torn by multiple migrations, uprooted many times (who could have added) *Nothing but nothing*" (*Fault Lines*, 2). She deliberately dissociates herself from the limitations of regional territories and embraces a travelling identity revealing the anguish of displacement and the split between body and mind. From the lens of a migrant minority, Alexander (1993) dwells upon this issue in her memoir *Fault Lines* and depicts its poignant impact on her psyche:

*Why did I leave India? Why did I feel as if there
still were a part of my story that had to be forged through
departure? I am tormented by the question. All I knew
was that something had broken loose from inside me, was
all molten. (Fault Lines, 129)*

Meena Alexander is a part of global culture. She knows how it looks, feels, tests and sound; how it creates and split identity. Alexander not only recreates personal memories of childhood, family and India but also signifies the fusion of internal and external clash between the self and whole world as shown in the following lines;

*"Where I did come from? How did I become what I am? How shall I start to write myself. Configure my "I" as other.
Image this life I lead, here, now, in America? What could I ever be but a mass of falt, a fault mass."*

Here she negotiates vital issue such as cultural consciousness, awaking about identity crisis, sense of belonging, ethnicity and racism whenever she attempt to locate herself within a fractured space between India and America.

In Alexander's work, the components of personality and history are synthesized by the imagination. She writes her poems because they start as a disturbance, a jostling in the spirit, and she searches for that accidental, transient significance, so

precious, so few. Alexander states in her book, *Fault Lines*, that "I felt I had changed my name to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden," which is more of an act of liberation than rebellion (Meena, 74).

The collection *Raw Silk* by Meena Alexander was published in 2004. This autobiographical collection of poems ruminates on the aftermath of 9/11 and the oppressions that people face. "Raw Silk demonstrates the rare blend of an acute, absolutely modern astuteness with a sensuality that is, in itself, a radical way of processing information. In its profound and polyglot sense of world citizenship gained through the indelible experience of exile, Meena Alexander has written what is not at all paradoxically a book that's quintessentially a New Yorker's. This is poetry which earns the reader's trust, even, or especially, when the paths it takes in its explorations of the writer's worlds and of the forms poetry can make of them are unexpected." (Marilyn, 2004). Meena Alexander poems convey the fragmented experience of the traveller for whom home is both everywhere and nowhere. Her poems are well composed and with minimum of words. She evokes layers of meaning. For her poetry has important role to play in modern violence world. She considers poetry as a social concern. In an interview with Ruth Maxey in *Kenyon Review*, she argues, "In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some ways to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist" (Maxey Feb. 2005).

Alexander, in the poem "Cosmopolitan," discusses her identity dilemma and the unforgettable past that haunts her split consciousness. She poses three questions that are rife with dubious investigation:

Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?

If I could would I return to Kashi?

And might the queen of trumps intercede for me? (4)

The first question refers to a possible quest for identification and the loss of one's "self." The answer to the second inquiry is structurally implausible. It is not just a doubt but a hopeful longing, but it is not a realistic step toward 'Kashi' to discover the original color. The image of 'Kashi' represents the paradise in the east, the last shelter for those seeking 'moksha,' and a place to restore one's old belief, religion, and perspective. And the third question reveals that the individual, who is dislocated, residing in a position of in-betweenness with double consciousness, is looking for an intercessor to save her from the peril of losing her identity. (Gaspar, 2013:25).

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that her works are marked by a sense of loss, exile and dislocation. Diaspora literature is the literature of migrants, who express their experiences and feelings of displacement, the loss of social structures such as nation, race, ethnicity, culture, language, etc. They experience identity crisis, feelings of alienation, nostalgia, loss and emptiness. They experience social isolation, cultural shock and stress. Therefore, in diasporic literature we encounter themes of emptiness, despair, disillusionment, homesickness, racism and discrimination.

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