

**PREVALENT THEME OF DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND DISLOCATION IN
MEENA ALEXANDER'S POETRY**

Parvaiz Ahmad Bhat

Research Scholar in English at Vikram University, Ujjain

ABSTRACT

Meena Alexander is one of important poets of the world. She has written a good number of poems. Most of her poems deal with the issue of diasporic consciousness and dislocation. She herself has suffered a lot as being diasporic. She has not left any stone unturned in exploring the basic elements of diaspora. She feels the pain of an outsider in an alien land. Like other diasporic writers she has delineated every character in a phenomenal way. So far this paper is concerned it is deals with the depiction of diasporic consciousness and dislocation in her poetry.

Key words: Diaspora, Dislocation, alienation, artistic, eminent.

Meena Alexander is a prominent poet and one of the finest thinkers of Asian American aesthetics. She has published many volumes of poetry and been widely anthologized in journals. Meena Alexander is also a popular memoirist, fiction writer and academic. Currently she is an eminent Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. A Few writers of Meena Alexander's generation may claim her rich multicultural and multilingual experience. Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, raised in Kerala and Khartoum, educated in Sudan and Nottingham, UK, worked in Delhi and Hyderabad, India and finally settled in New York. She has received several honors, including an Altruss International Award (1973), the New York State Foundation for the Arts Poetry Award (1999), and a PEN Open Book Award (2002, for *Illiterate Heart*).

Border crossings, both physical and psychological have molded Alexander's personality, vision and writing. Alexander in *Fault Lines* has portrayed herself as —a woman cracked by multiple migrations, uprooted so many times (who could) connect nothing with nothing^{ll} (3) and is rightly known as a significant voice of feminism. With her strong cultural roots in Kerala and mother

tongue Malayalam language, rich colonial language English, and in addition literary influences of Das, Mahapatra, Desai and Rich, she has earned a respectable place among South Asian writers in English. Out of the trauma of multiple dislocations and multitude of experiences related to it, Alexander's diasporic consciousness awakened. Further her multiple dislocations which resulted in confrontation with multiple cultures has transformed her into —many souls, many voices in one dark body (2). Alexander in *The Shock of Arrival* elaborates Du Bois —concept of double consciousness when she explains her creative process: —It is from the consciousness of unselfing that I create my work (128). This consciousness reflects itself literally in Alexander's hyphenated identities; —everything that comes to me is hyphenated: a woman-poet, a woman- poet-of-color, a south-Indian woman-poet-of-color (127). Alexander constructs her multi-faceted hybrid identity through the process of uniting a splendidly nourished variety of literary genres like memoir, fiction, poetry, essays and also personal notes. Alexander reflects her multicultural life experience among diverse ethnic and religious communities belonging to four continents, in her post-colonial literary production, which are the outcome of her colonial and cultural wounds. Alexander herself admits that —it is the pain of no one knowing my name that drives me to write (182). She discusses issues of location and dislocation, nostalgia, trauma of migrant memories, separation, alienation and loneliness in her works. Themes involving Romanticism and Feminism have continued to claim Alexander's critical attention in her writings. Alexander also associates people and places, the past and the present, and ponders over their significance. Every border crossing provoked her imagination and forced her to fabricate, to weave tales, to chisel out a personal space and her works always attempt to locate and relocate the migrant space which is colored by hybridity both in form and content. Alexander's poems with their intense lyricism convey the fragmented experience of the traveler, for whom house is both everywhere and nowhere. The landscapes she evokes, whether walking on a city street or reading Basho in the Himalayas, holds echoes of otherness. Place becomes a palimpsest composed of layer upon layer of memory, dream, and desire. She has written poems of love, war and the rippling effects of violence, and dislocation of love and its aftermath. Alexander's poetry is uniquely attuned to life in a globalized world and serves as an apt guide, bringing us face to face with the power of a single moment and its capacity to evoke the unseen and unheard. Her poetry initiates movement towards a new perception of women and a romantic

reconnection with the feminine unconscious as an agency of restoration. Generally Alexander distils her poetry out of the present, but the present is constantly inflected by multiple dislocations. Uma Parameswaran has rightly commented upon the interconnectedness of the past and the present in immigrant imagination, and the intermingling of imagery drawn from one's immediate, actual landscape. Alexander draws imagery from varied migrated cultural landscapes: childhood in Tiruvella, Allahabad and Pune, and adolescence in Khartoum and adulthood in Nottingham, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Manhattan. Multiple migrations in Alexander's life have also resulted in a poetic vocabulary that is a palimpsest of various languages. In her childhood it was a burden for her to learn English, colonial language, but in later years she has fused it with the rhythms of her mother tongue Malayalam. As Rebecca Sultana observes that —Alexander's periodic return to the Indian landscape as a backdrop is hard to dismiss and is an indication of the significance of India in her varied cultural recollections (242). Actually the cultural bases of her poems are unmistakably Indian but when she tries to define her Indian identity, she is mistaken to be Native American. Alexander's poems inevitably deal with dislocation and are deep-rooted in India and her childhood travels.

Alexander considers the collection of poems, *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988) as a kind of genetic bench mark in her writing. Alexander in this collection of poems has drawn on the influence of family in order to create an artistic vision. She has drawn grandmother figure from her memory and dream, and she is made to empower Alexander to speak in an alien landscape. Alexander reflects her interlocked relationship with her origins, to be more specific, about her ancestral home in Tiruvella and her grandmother in —House of a thousand doors:

This house has a thousand doors

The sills are cut in bronze ... at twilight as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast.

The roof is tiled in red...

In dreams waves lilt, a silken fan in grandmother's hands

shell colored, utterly bare as the light takes her.

She kneels at each of the thousand doors in turn paying her dues.

Her debt is endless. (1-21)

Alexander tries to reorient her true self by welding her forgotten native roots against an agitating history of displacement in a highly active transnational world. In *River and Bridge* poem

Alexander raises thematic and ideological issues about the return to Indian roots in pure forms, the marginal self who interweaves through both Indian and foreign locations, and the crucial issue of assimilation into American culture. Problems of the containment of the Indian imagination in an alien landscape are sounded out in the poem —Relocation|:

Scraping it all back:

A species of composition routine as crossing streets
or taking out the garbage nothing to blow the mind

The mind held in a metallic fork— its sense inviolate, the questions of
travel scored by icy borders, the imagination ordering itself. (1 - 21)

The Storm is a poem of five parts, in which Alexander's poetic voice seeks accountability to a history of migration and dislocation as it affects so many ordinary people, whose anonymous stories are evoked in —*The Travellers*|:

Migrant workers stripped of mop and dirty bucket,
young mothers who scrub kitchen floors in high windowed houses with immaculate carpets,
..... Tired chowkidars seeking their

Pennies out in a cold country, students, ageing scholars,
doctors wedded to insurance slips, lawyers shoveling guilt
behind their satin wallpaper. (137 - 151)

Alexander in her poem *Night Scene-The Garden* (1992) considers the construction and the reconstruction of the self as an ongoing process and the violent pain of the —barbed wire| is vividly picturized. Alexander's invocation to the muse is expressed in highly charged words in —No Man's Land|:

My back against barbed wire
I stand at the garden's edge
in the middle of the night

.....

That out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me
I may claim
my heritage. (60-116)

Alexander's diasporic consciousness longs to harmonize the past and the present and move towards progress. According to Alexander poetry acts as the source of reconciliation that synchronizes the past and present and encourages us to proceed in order to bring forth a positive change. Thus Alexander in —River and Bridge observe that the idea of birth is accepted and a new identity is won with difficulty in the case of rebirth. A new life – choice from a rebirth of identity is projected in hopeful, positive terms in these lines from the same poem:

Thus Alexander's consciousness recalls her old cultural identity through resources of memory, language, story, and myth and her poetry expresses a new birthing of identity from her value domain as diaspora's daughter of India.

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