

# **Diasporic Identity in the Select Poems of Meena Alexander**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The present topic is concerned primarily concerned with this analysing some poems composed by meena Alexander who is considered one of the prominent South Asian American migrant women writers. From a migrant perspective, we shall focus on recurrent themes in Alexander Writing: Diaspora, Identity, Alienation and the other themes, Straddlingbetween cultures and countries. From India, through Sudan, England and America, is a poignant experience initiating multiplicity and dislocation in Alexanders past and present and consequently reframing both her life and writing career. Against a backdrop of dissimilar geographical territories, Alexander depicts several migratory experiments to convey numerous literary language expressions of hybrid languages expressions of the hybrid condition.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

### **Indian English literature**

Indian English Literature refers to the body of works by authors in India who write in Englishand whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora. Indian writing in Englishhas come into force only in the last couple of decades or so, as far as literature goes.

### **History of Indian English Literature**

Indian English literature is also called Indo-Anglican Literature. It is a term used for Indian writers who write in English. Those writers are called Indo- Anglian writers.The tavel's of Dean Mahomet' was the first book that was written by an Indian in English. It was written by Dean Mohamet and published in England. Rajmohan's wife' was the first novel written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who was an Indian and was published in 1864.'Kisari MohanGanguli' who is credited for translating Mahabhorat in English.

The Dawn of Indian English writing arrived with sake of Dean Mahomet (1759-1851). Hewas a traveler, surgeon, and entrepreneur who introduced the Indian curry house restaurant on Britain, and was the first Indian to have written a book in English.

His fame chiefly lies with his work, the travels of dean Mahomet I an eigh tenth centuary journey through India Indian English literature refers to the body of work by writers in india who write in English language and whose native and co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of india. It is also associated with the works of Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Agha SahidAli, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie who are of Indian descent.

Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Bankim Chandra Chatopadhyay inspired the millions of Indians to strive for freedom. In later ages the influences of British English built the track for Indian English writing.

Tagore's translation of Gitanjali which earned him a Nobel prize for literature set theficker for English writing which in turn burst into flames.

#### Writers:

1. Bankim Chandra Chatopadhyay
2. Raja Rao
3. R.K Narayan
4. Mulk Raj Anand
5. Rabindranath Tagore
6. Adita desai
7. Salman Rushdie
8. Nirad C. Chaudhuri
9. Ram Nath Kak
10. Nayantara sahal

The first Indian English novel is Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay's Rajmohan's wifepublished in the year 1864.

Toru Dutt, first Indian poetess, who often referred to as the Keats of Indian English literature. Indian poets writing have succeeded to nativize or Indianize English in order to reveal typical Indian situation.

Henry Louis Vivan Derozio is considered as the first poet in the lineage of Indian English poetry followed by Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Toru Dutt among others.

It's a literature which for me opens the mysterious and decisive doors of imagination and understanding . to see the Why others see, to think the way other think. And above all to feel.

-Salman Rushdie

## **INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY**

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) is considered the first Indian English poet. *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828) are his published volumes of poetry. Derozio was influenced by the British romantic poets in theme, imagery, diction and sentiment in his shorter poems. At the same time, a little bit of influence of the neo-classical poets like Alexander Pope was also evident in his poems.

On the other hand, influence of Byron was visible in his satirical verse and long narrative verse. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is a long narrative poem written on the plight of a young Hindu widow Nuleeni. On the verge of her jump into the funeral pyre, she was rescued by a young leader of a robber group. Her rescuer who became her lover soon lost his life in the battle fought by her relatives to reclaim her. Nuleeni breathed her last in sorrow.

The striking feature of the poem is its use of different metres for various occasions. Another noteworthy feature of Derozio as a poet is his burning nationalistic zeal. "To-India-My Native Land", "The Harp of India", "To the Pupils of Hindu College" etc. are some such poems where we can observe an unmistakable authenticity of patriotic utterances.

Indian English poetry came to the mature phase with Toru Dutt (1856-1877). Her *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) is a translation of 165 French lyrics into English. Even her sister Aru Dutt also translated a few lyrics. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) was published posthumously. The poems of this volume carry discernible influence of Keats. Ballads of Sita and Savitri—two most prominent archetypal figures of Indian woman are included in the collection. Toru Dutt was the first Indian English poet who extensively used Indian myths and legends in her poetry. It was remarkable that her poetry was virtually free from imitation. Rabindranath Tagore's fame as an Indian English poet certainly lies on *Gitanjali* (1912)—a collection of songs which were translated from Bengali into English and for which he got the Nobel Prize for literature.

## Indian poetry

### Evolution of Indian English Poetry

- Roja Rammohan Roy

Though directly he is not connected with Indian English writing we read him because he was called the Father of Bengal Renaissance. He wrote Some essays in English and was the founder of Hindu College Kolkata

#### A Henry Louis Derozio

A lecturer in Hindu College. His father was on Indo-portugal and mother was a British. So, he was an Indian poet born in kolkata. He published two famous volumes of poems. They are

- The Fakeer of Jungheera
- A Metrical late and Other poems.

He was influenced by British Romantic poets and wrote Sonnets and also wrote Some patriarchal works.

#### Romesh Chunder Dutt

He used to write novels in Bengali language and after that

he worked on some historical works especially Rigved. He also translated Ramayan and Mahabharat.

#### Sri Aurobindo

He had a long poetic career. He used to write religious type of poetry which was called Narayan Darshan. He wrote Lyrical, Narrative, philosophical and Epic poems in his career. His famous poem was **Savitri**

#### Rabindranath Tagore

Mahatma Gandhi called Tagore, the "Great Sentinel". He was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, Composer, painter and thinker, educationalist, Nationalist and Internationalist. Before 1912, he used to write bengali

After reading some of Tagore's self translated poems, W.B. Yeats was instrumental in getting the collection published. Perhaps most importantly, Yeats wrote the Introduction to Tagore's Gitanjali, which first appeared in 1913. and also received Nobel prize which was recommended by yeats. Then he understood the value of writing in English.

## **Treatment of nature**

### ❖ **Sarojini naidu**

Her mother was Bengali poet. Sarojini Naidu was influenced by English Romantic poets like John Keats, Lord Byron. She is called the 'nightingale of India'.

### ❖ **Keki N. Daruwalla**

He was a police officer by profession and he published his twelve Volumes of poetry.

### ❖ **Toru Dutt**

She studied at France with her sister. She believes that French language is her mother tongue. She wrote her first volume of poetry in French.

She passed away in 1977 because of Tuberculosis at a very young age, but she left a deep mark in English literature. In Indo-Anglian literature she is compared with John Keats as her talent is like Keats and also her death.

## **Feminism and female imagination**

### ❖ **Eunice De Souza**

She taught English at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. Indian English Language poet, literary critic and novelist. She is one of the most famous confessional poets of the second half of the twentieth century.

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### ❖ **She wrote in both Malayalam and English languages.**

She was well known after receiving Asian Poetry Prize in 1963. She wrote about feminism and also involved autobiographical elements in her works.

### ❖ **Imtiaz Dharker**

She is a Pakistan-British poet, artist, and video film maker. Won Queen's Gold Medal for her English poetry and was appointed Chancellor of Newcastle University from Jan 2020.

## Memory Musice

### ➤ AK. Ramanujan

He was an Indian poet and Scholar of Indian literature and Linguistics. He was also a professor of Linguistics at university of Chicago. His poetry was philosophical. He won Padma Sri award in 1976.

### ➤ Agha Shahid Ali

He was born in kashmir and immigrated to the United States. He was a finalist for the National book Award in 2001. He also wrote about the partition of India Pakistan.

### ➤ Jayanta Mahapatra

He is an Indian English poet. He is the first Indian poet to win Sahitya Akademi award for English poetry. He was a physics teacher. He started his writing career lately.

## Diasporic Identity in the select poems of Meena Alexander

In this chapter I would like to give an account of the elements that can be considered as the elements of diasporic identity in the works of Meena Alexander. Particular in a few poems that were written by Meena Alexander. In her works we will come across the dislocation and alienation she felt. Alienation in all sort of things like alienation from the homeland land which can be seen in her works, she look back for a imaginary homeland, and how she felt being alienated in the new home.

In order to give an account of the elements of diasporic identity in the Poems of Meena Alexander, I will take some of the poems in which I can be able to trace the elements of diasporic identity. For that purpose I would like to select five poems and trace out the diasporic identity. The poems are :

## Muse

The poems "Muse" reflects the world of personal loss of meditated by memory and exile. The composition of poems in the early age saves the poet from burning and she turns into the molten thing.

"Each thing rings it's turn"

Meena Alexander uses this line in her poem "Muse" to talk about her past life and she says, each thing that happened is still clear and fresh in her memory. We can sense the nostalgia in the line. This we can consider as an element of diasporic identity.

"Girl was penne, hair drawn back,

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Pusthakam pages parted

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Spreading fire in a tree marram".

In the above lines she uses some words like penne, pusthakam and marram. These are the Tamil words and in this poem she uses some words in Tamil. This mentioning of the Tamil word can be considered as an element of diasporic identity, as she felt alienated from her mother tongue. This is also a key element in diaspora which is alienation from the mother tongue.

" Girl was penne, hair drawn back, Gleaming on the scalp"

Here, in these two lines in the poem, we can get an image of a typical school-going girl in India. Hair drawn back, which means she tightly braided her hair back and the other line gleaming on the scalp, this means that the girl oiled her hair and then braided her hair back. This image exactly reflects the image of a school-going girl in India. This also gives the picture of her nostalgia. She remembered all the things of her childhood.

" Write in the light Of all the languages."

In these lines the poet is talking about her own identity. As she know many languages through her travelling. This we can interpret as she is not able to write in her mother tongue but she writes in other languages, she says write in light of all languages.

Eventhough she is not able to write in her own language she writes in the light of all languages.

" Dressed like a convent girl-White socks, shoes,  
Dark blue pinare, white blouse."

These lines describes the accessories or the things that are worn by Indian students and she describes about her friend in her school. By this description we can assume that as the poet is describing her, she might be her good friend from her childhood when she studied in Kerala. This we can be considered as the nostalgia of her past.

" Write in the light Of all languages

You know the earth contains Youmurmur in my ear."

Through these lines we can connect the life of Meena Alexander, as she travelled to many places and learnt many languages and her works also published into many languages. In these lines she says that write in all the languages that earth has.

In the poem "Muse" Meena Alexander laments the ruin of 'Our language' and the sense of having 'no home.'

The poem is about how the poet came across her muse in childhood while she was staying in Kerala, India and who made her familiar with the world of creativity. So, we can say that the poem includes the diasporic elements like nostalgia of her childhood and we can also observe the language she uses is also Tamil which is her mother tongue.



## Conclusion

Meena Alexander is better known as a poet, but she has touched other genres of literature also. Her poems have been translated into several languages such as Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, Persian, Italian, Spanish and German. She is internationally recognised, well known and reputed poet. She is one of the prominent diasporic poets of South Asia. In her poetry she expresses or reflects her own diasporic life. She is well known to be having rich multi-cultural experience. Her poetry revolves around uprooting, alienation, migration, trauma, separation and loneliness all the way from India to Sudan and USA.

Her poems are well composed and have minimum words. Meena Alexander's poetry is marked by diasporic sensibility which is highly emotional, consists of sensual expression, lyrical and metamorphic in language. She has undergone multiple identities in multiple places. Her poems express the places in which she lived and her experiences. She asks herself : Who am I ?, Where am I ?, When am I ?. These are the questions which all diasporic writers incorporate in their works. In modern world, the biggest challenge for a creative writing to make a real integration between one's personal, history and the experiences of alien countries.

As she travelled from one place to another, her sense of feeling of belonging "no where" can be seen in her poems.

In many of her poems, we can see the burden of English in one's own language. Although she is a polyglot and knows many languages such as Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French, and English, but she felt that the language in which she writes that is English had alienated her from what she was born to. The language of intimacy. In the poem "Muse" she laments the ruin of 'Our language' and the sense of having 'no home'.

Meena Alexander tells how migrant memory shaped and gave birth to her poems.

Meena Alexander's poetry represents her old cultural identity through story, myth, language and memory. In her poetry, she reflects vital issues such as identity, belonging and racism that she felt whenever she tries to locate herself. Alexander mingles her past to reveal the complexity of her memories. Her poems convey the fragmented experience of the traveller, for whom home is both everywhere and nowhere.

Her poetry is a complex interweaving of the Indian and immigrant experiences. Her poetry seems to be a self-searching. It represents her personal experience, disposition, feelings and judgements. Her writing revolves around the theme of establishing an identity.

Language in Alexander's poems liberates, empowers and eventually becomes a place in which to live and thus "a short incantation" ends up becoming a "long way home."

In her poems we can find her struggles to make a position of her own. The personal journey of the postcolonial diasporic writer and traveller can be seen in her poems. The poems show Meena Alexander's journey of practical border crossing. Cultural experiences from childhood to maturity along with her traditional homely experience.

#### REFERENCES:

##### **Some writers about Meena Alexander**

" Underlying her fiction is uprootedness, nostalgia for a past which is itself a fiction. Her mind moves back and forth between India and rooms, hotels, streets in New York, never really at home."

" Alexander's power comes from poems resonating upon each other within a volume or as her work is followed from book to book. She has written about phenomenology and women in the self, especially the famine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad."

-Bruce King

" Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted."

-Maxi Hong Kingston